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FULL METAL PANIC!

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VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS

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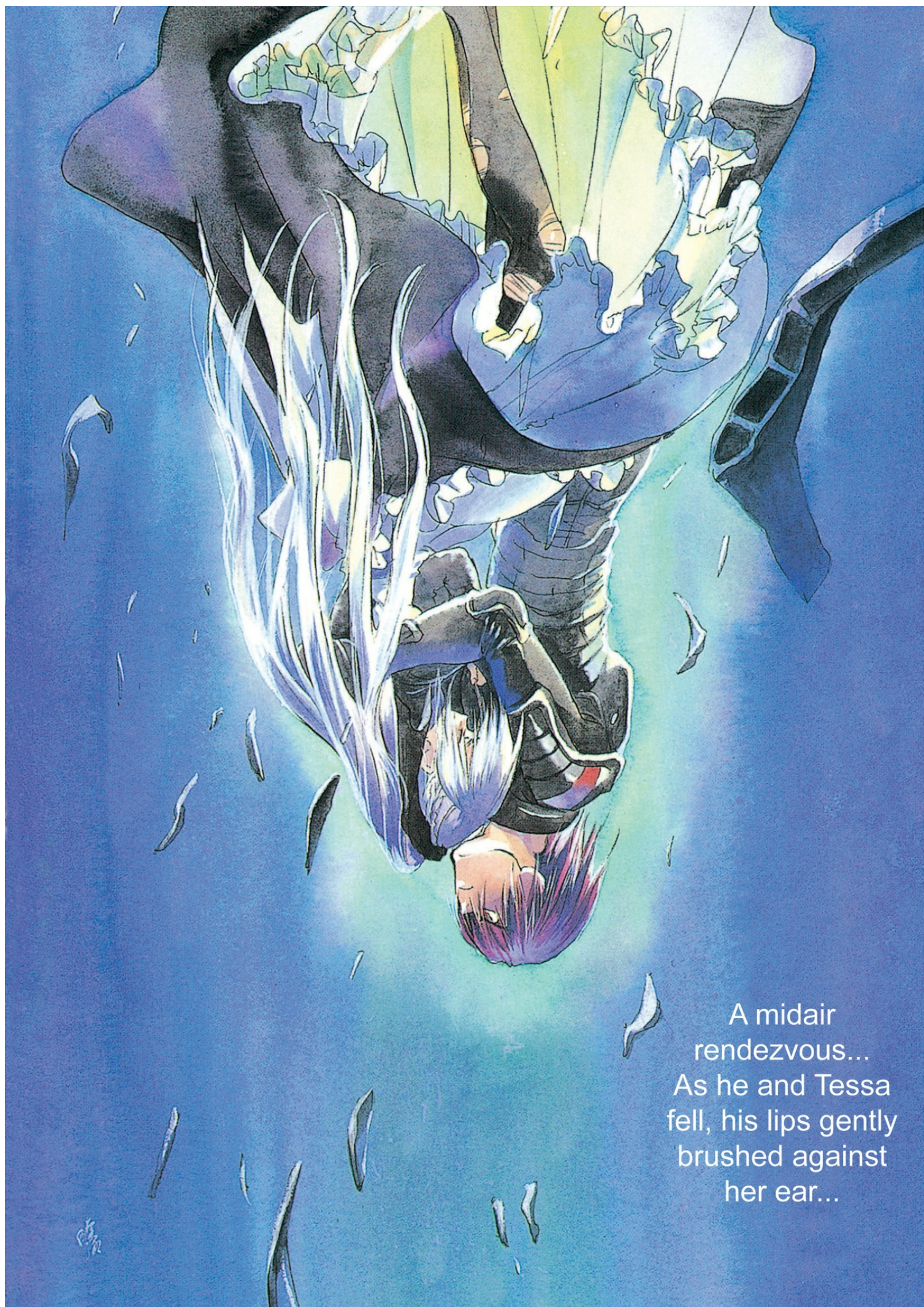
DANCING VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS

"We are cold-hearted terrorists, and this ship is now ours!" said the masked man with the tight frown.
"Again?!" the Jindai High students shouted in unison.





What a Christmas! "You've
ruined my youth, and my
17-year-old Christmas Eve!"



A midair
rendezvous...
As he and Tessa
fell, his lips gently
brushed against
her ear...

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Prologue

“We can’t turn down such a fine invitation, Ms. Tsuboi,” the representative from the Board of Education, accompanied by some PTA officers, insisted to Principal Tsuboi Takako. “I know this is all very sudden. But your second-years will be diving into test preparation when they return from their holiday, which means it’s now or never. And losing their big field trip must have been an awful blow to their spirits...”

“Of course...” Principal Tsuboi responded without enthusiasm. She was a middle-aged woman dressed in a no-nonsense suit, and though she was just over fifty, the waves of trouble that had rocked her school ceaselessly since the year began seemed to have aged her considerably.

“The field trip is an important memory for young people to have,” the BOE representative insisted. “To lose out on that... to a *hijacking*, of all things. The emotional scarring must be incalculable. Please, allow me to offer my deepest sympathies.”

“Very much appreciated...” Principal Tsuboi wheezed again. It was the polite response, but as far as she knew, none of her students had had the decency to feel particularly traumatized by the incident. None of them seemed bothered in the slightest; in fact, they practically bragged about it to the upperclassmen and students from other schools. It was as if their scheduled tour of battle sites in Okinawa had been replaced by nothing more than a visit to some strange theme park.

Deep down, Principal Tsuboi felt that *she* was the one who really deserved sympathy, being tasked with the education of students like that.

The BOE representative continued. “Anyway, Mr. Kaneyama of the Mishima Memorial Educational Foundation—who was heartbroken when he heard the story, by the way—has prepared a little something special. He wants to gift a trip to the students of Jindai High, so that they can make a new memory.”

He passed her a pamphlet across the conference table. It featured a picture of

a huge, beautiful passenger liner, cutting through an emerald sea beneath a clear blue sky. The ship was dotted with windows and stacked high with an intricate arrangement of decks. Waves crested before its curved prow. “The Pacific Chrysalis. It travels all around the world, and it’s scheduled for a one-night cruise out of the Port of Yokohama on the 24th.”

“And he wants to host my students on this... luxury liner?” the principal asked skeptically.

“Yes, he says they’re all invited. Of course, I wouldn’t go so far as to call it a luxury liner; cruise ships are growing more accessible all over the world. They won’t even have to dress up. Honestly, it’s more like a floating theme park... Even as far as pocket money goes, I’m told they won’t even need more than they would for a domestic trip.”

“Right...”

“Think of it more like a visit to Tokyo Disneyland,” the BOE representative said placatingly. “Best of all, the point of departure is Yokohama, just a short train ride away. They won’t even have to board a plane. What do you think, Principal Tsuboi? This is a very generous offer that the Mishima Foundation is making. We hope you’ll consider it swiftly and earnestly.”

Principal Tsuboi fell into silent thought. It really *wasn’t* a bad offer at all; she had heard of the Mishima Memorial Foundation before, and everything she’d heard was positive. They were a philanthropic organization with a focus on fostering international goodwill. They were known for providing medical support and cultural exchanges with impoverished countries—including North Korea. Given the role that that country had played in the hijacking, then, it didn’t seem odd for them to extend an offer like this one.

The BOE representative had also said that there might be a small article about the trip in the newspaper’s local section. She wouldn’t accept her school being used for large-scale advertisement, but a single, minor article was probably tolerable. And there *had* been some grumbling among the student body over the fact that the field trip had been called off, with nothing planned to replace it... “Well, then,” she said at last, “I will give the offer serious consideration.”

“Excellent! I knew you’d say that.”

“But the decision is not mine alone to make,” Principal Tsuboi insisted firmly. “I need to discuss it with my teachers. It could affect our event schedule, after all.”

“Of course. Discuss it all you wish,” the BOE representative told her. “We just wanted you to know that the Board of Education is fully on board. The rest is up to Jindai High.”

The PTA officials, who’d spent the entire meeting silently flanking him, now voiced their agreement.

“We feel the same way, Ms. Tsuboi,” one of them put in.

“We hope you’ll go and enjoy the trip,” said another.

There wasn’t much Tsuboi could do to oppose such a hard sell from both the BOE and the PTA. A few days later, at a teachers’ conference, it was decided that they would take any interested students on the proposed trip.

One week later, class 2-4 took a break from finals preparation to hear the announcement.

“Okay! Everyone listening? Have a good look through this!” said their homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, as she passed a paper around to the students. “This is a little last-minute, but we’ve decided to hold a special event, to make up for how your class trip turned out. It’ll be just the night of the 24th, coinciding with the end-of-term ceremony.

“A charitable foundation and a travel company are collaborating to take our second-year students on a Christmas cruise,” she went on excitedly. “Isn’t that incredible? Look at this big, beautiful luxury liner! All-you-can-eat high-class cuisine, and all kinds of things to do: pools, athletic facilities, shopping centers, arcades... plus exclusive events like concerts and musicals, movies, a gift giveaway, and more! Of course, attendance is totally free!”

“Wow!” the students breathed in amazed chorus.

“Participation is voluntary, so you’ll need to fill in the forms I just handed out, then have a guardian sign them. Now, what I’m about to say is very important...” Eri launched into an explanation of the details: *By next week,*

provide a copy of your insurance card, a letter of consent from your guardian, and a photo for the ID card you'll be using on board; only students in proper uniforms will be allowed on-ship; those with chronic conditions and allergies, be sure to speak with the ship's doctor beforehand—things like that.

Chidori Kaname barely listened to the explanation as she gazed at her form blankly, and Tokiwa Kyoko, from the seat next to hers, spoke up in a whisper. “Hey, Kana-chan. Are you going?”

“Hmm? Ah... I’m not sure. I mean, it’s free, so I guess so?” Still, her eyes were fixed on the date of the trip. December 24th—that would be Kaname’s 17th birthday.

Some might find the idea of being born on Christmas Eve romantic, but Kaname had always found it to be more of a problem than anything. While her little sister, born in May, would get discrete Christmas and birthday presents, Kaname’s were always conflated. It had been a real source of friction between them when they were younger.

Of course, any arguments about this always ended the same way, with Kaname being told, “You’re the big sister; endure it.”

Apparently, said sister was planning to spend this Christmas with their father in New York, where he worked. Kaname’s relationship with her father wasn’t the best, so she couldn’t pretend it wasn’t easier not to see him, but...

While Kaname was thinking, Eri was wrapping things up. “That should just about cover it. Any questions?”

“I have one.” Immediately, a male student sitting in a seat by the window, Sagara Sousuke, raised his hand. He was wearing his usual sullen expression, with his mouth set in its usual tight frown—and amid a student body uniformly excited about the unexpected event, he was the only one sporting a wrinkled brow and troubled eyes.

“Sagara-kun,” Eri acknowledged him. “What is it?”

“This consent form is insufficient,” Sousuke said, waving around the paper she’d passed him. “It talks about precautions in case of accidents occurring during the trip, but it says nothing about what the school has done to prepare

for a terrorist attack.”

“What in the world are you talking about?” Eri asked him incredulously.

“I thought we had learned our lesson back in April,” Sousuke shot back.

“Don’t even suggest something so awful. It’s not as if the exact same thing could happen twice! If we had to prepare for every minuscule possibility, no school would ever be able to go on a trip!”

“It’s dangerous to make light of it,” Sousuke said gravely. “We got off easy the last time, but we might not be so lucky again. Think of the 1985 seajacking of the Italian cruise ship, the Achille Lauro.”

“I... I don’t even know what that is...” Eri was forced to admit.

“The passengers were mostly defenseless old men in wheelchairs,” Sousuke explained. “Yet one hostage was shot in the chest and the face and thrown into the sea.”

Eri just stood there, stunned.

“In addition,” he went on, “the terrorists made three hostages hold grenades with the pins removed, with the rest of the hostages gathered around them. Their fear must have transcended language—one careless moment could lead to the deaths of everyone around them. These deaths would be painful, too: brains and organs scattered everywhere. Fear and chaos are a terrorist’s MO; it’s important to remember that.”

A leaden air hung over the room. The class, which had been humming with excitement over the opulent proposal, was now dead silent.

“But don’t worry. This time, as aide to the student council in charge of safety and security, I intend to protect you all,” Sousuke promised. “I therefore request permission to bring a submachine gun, C4 explosives, and directional mines on board. With proper armaments and planning, I will dispose of the seajackers one by one, drown them in their own blood, and—”

Smash!! Kaname was there in a flash, and sent Sousuke flying with a kick. He crashed through multiple desks before landing in a heap on the floor.

“What are you doing, Chidori?” he groaned.

“Shut up!” she told him angrily. “You saw how excited everyone was! *Maybe* you could try not to ruin that?!”

“But the alarm bells of tragedy—”

“No one wants to hear about alarm bells of tragedy!!”

“But the Achille Larou—” he began, trying to defend himself.

“Shut up! You stupid... little...!”

“That hurts, Chidori. It’s painful.”

“Being around *you* is painful!” Kaname kept kicking Sousuke until her classmates, unable to watch any longer, finally pulled her off of him.

1: Unfixed Schedule

21 December, 0135 Hours (Local Time)

Spratly Islands

It's an awfully extensive facility for such a remote island... Sagara Sousuke allowed himself to be impressed, momentarily forgetting the similar nature of his own force's base.

His machine's night-vision sensors made the sea around him look green. The island in question towered over it, a mere two kilometers across at its widest. The main mass was a rocky mountain dozens of meters high, which grew thick with grass and a small handful of trees. It was a common sort of topography, here at the edge of the Spratly island chain.

But that wasn't all that he saw.

A variety of radar antennas topped the mountain's highest points. Foot soldiers patrolled, equipped with night vision goggles. Electromagnetic-sensitive mines floated on the water, effectively preventing the approach of mini-submarines. It was impressive security for a pirate stronghold; most squads wouldn't even be able to get close.

Most squads, that is.

The arm slave Sousuke was operating, the ARX-7 Arbalest, had just arrived on the north shore of this "pirate island." According to the pre-mission briefing, the south shore was home to a small harbor and dock. The dock was apparently where the pirates moored the high-speed craft they'd been using to raid passing commercial ships for the past few months. It also hosted the warehouses in which they stored their supplies, ammunition, and plundered goods.

The north shore, meanwhile, was a treacherous cliff constantly pounded by

waves. Sousuke was supposed to climb the rock face here, to ambush the base on the south side from behind. Any flesh-and-blood soldier who tried to scale the cliff would surely end up dead, dashed by the waves against the jagged rocks. Only the humanoid weapons known as ASes could handle a secret landing in terrain like this.

It was night, and the only light available came from the moon glowing faintly through the clouds. The Arbalest, painted a dark gray to blend in with the darkness, released the faintest of whines from its electromagnetic muscles as it scaled the rocky cliff.

Once he had gotten beyond the reach of the sea spray, Sousuke activated his machine's ECS-enabled invisibility mode. The armor opened in places, revealing lens-shaped devices. These projected a hologram screen that enveloped the machine, and caused it to disappear into thin air.

Just then, he received a transmission from an allied machine. "Uruz-6 to 7. What's the holdup? We've been waiting forever," Sergeant Kurz Weber complained. He was in a sniping position on the south side of the island, where the waves were much calmer.

"Uruz-7 here," Sousuke replied briefly. "I'm not there yet. Remain on standby."

"So what's the holdup? You've got a wire gun, right? Get up the damned cliff already."

"If I knock any rocks down, the enemy foot soldiers will hear my approach."

"Then shut 'em up with your taser. Just—"

"Transmission over," Sousuke said, cutting him off, and then grumbled to himself. He'd worked hard to get this far unnoticed. A more mediocre operator would already be out of the fight after having triggered a mine, or he'd have ruined the whole mission after being discovered by a foot soldier.

《Alert message. You are fifteen minutes behind the expected attack time. Move to waypoint Foxtrot swiftly.》It wasn't just Kurz; the Arbalest's AI was also hurrying him on.

"Shut up," he snarled back.

《Roger. But first, a word of caution: statistics suggest that a sense of impatience doubles one's potential for error. Singing is recommended to calm your mental state. I have prepared fifty of the latest hit songs. If you have any requests—》

It would have been one thing if he'd said it in a joking fashion, but Al's voice remained matter-of-fact, and it just made Sousuke more annoyed. "I didn't order you to prepare songs. Don't waste your storage space without permission."

《It is no issue. It's a mere 1.2 gigabytes.》

"Delete it all, or I'll destroy it myself, for the good of the mission."

《I interpret this message to be a joke. Joking is also an effective countermeasure. I have prepared fifty jokes designed to make humans laugh. If you have any requests—》

"It's not a joke, it's a warning."

《Excuse me.》 Al said nothing more.

In the cockpit, Sousuke shook his head irritably, and the Arbalest mimicked his motion. Who ever heard of such a pointlessly "helpful" AI, anyway? Imagine a machine's control support system telling him to "sing," of all things...

In the two months since Hong Kong, his AI's behavior had gotten stranger and stranger by the day. It was making small talk regularly now, and lack of any obvious signs of malfunction made it all the more annoying. According to the maintenance crew, they'd hooked "him" up with FM radio and BS TV input on AI's request, and he seemed to be receiving shows—now, Sousuke wondered if he should have stopped them.

The Arbalest used its manipulators and foot spikes to carefully scale the cliff. The machine's ECS was working smoothly. He had to make countless stops to let foot soldiers on the cliff above pass by, and had a few close calls where he almost went plunging... but at last, five minutes later, Sousuke reached his designated location, and informed the team leader: "Uruz-7 to Uruz-2. I've arrived at waypoint Golf."

A reply came after a pause. "Uruz-2, roger that. Let's get the party started.

Ready? Set your ADM to presets. All units run final checks, then give verbal confirmation.” It was their strike team leader, Second Lieutenant Melissa Mao, who showed no inclination to scold him for the delay.

“Uruz-6, no problems here.”

“Uruz-7, ready.”

“Gebo-3, ready.”

“Gebo-4, ready.”

After Kurz and Sousuke, the two “Gebo” responses were from transport helicopters, which were hovering on standby about a klick from the base. Thanks to their newly-integrated sound reduction systems, the Arbalest’s audio sensors could only barely make out the sound of their rotors and engines. The helicopters carried twenty infantry apiece, who would storm the island and lock it down after the ASes had finished their initial assault.

“Okay. Ahem.” Once everyone had reported in, Mao cleared her throat and shouted, “Then, attack commence! Go, go, go!”

“Al,” Sousuke ordered. “Drop ECS and switch to military power and combat mode.”

《Roger. ECS: Off. GPL: Military. Master Mode: 2.》

The ECS shut down, allowing all power to be diverted to combat functions. Blue sparks popped and hissed against the purple-black sky, and the white machine appeared, standing at the top of the rocky mountain.

A pirate dozing in a nearby watchtower stared in disbelief as he witnessed the phenomenon for the first time. He hesitated over whether to reach for the machine gun switch, the alarm, or both, but ended up collapsing with a howl before he could reach either of them. An electric pulse from the taser in the Arbalest’s hand had knocked him out cold.

“Starting up,” Sousuke said, without sparing the fallen man so much as a glance.

《Roger.》

Sousuke’s arm in the cockpit moved, and the Arbalest’s arm moved to match

it. It pointed its Boxer shotcannon, made by the Italian OTO Melara corporation, directly at the pirate base right below. There were all kinds of targets to choose from: the control room, ammunition depot, old-fashioned ASes, SPAAGs...

He set his sights first on the roof of the depot and pulled the trigger. It hit hard. The 00 HEAT fired by the Boxer blew off the roof and set the ammunition ablaze. An explosion boomed out, and a pillar of flame raked the sky, acting like a starting gun for full hostilities.

《E3 destroyed. *Great Balls of Fire!*》

“Stop talking now,” Sousuke ordered, thinking that Al was sounding almost as flip as Kurz. Sousuke clicked his tongue and took aim at his next target.

The first few minutes of combat would all but decide the outcome.

Their surprise attack had taken out the pirates’ control room, ammunition, and moored high-speed craft, which threw them into pandemonium. And as for the old-style Soviet ASes set up in the back of the base, the Rk-89 Shamrocks—Sousuke had no idea what they were doing on an island like this—they were instantly dispatched by shots from Mao’s machine, before their operators could even reach them.

Mao’s AS, the M9 Gernsback, was still in the ocean, making its way slowly toward the pirates’ dock while waist-deep in seawater. Mao was getting sniper support from Kurz, in position behind her, and from Sousuke on the mountain above.

“Whew. Just like a shooting gallery!” Kurz laughed over the radio.

“Uruz-6, keep your guard up. We haven’t taken out all the foot soldiers. And you know it’s when we get cocky that we—” There was a roar. Before Mao could finish, a pillar of water burst up, just to her right. Something must have exploded nearby. “What was that?!” she shouted, panicked. “It didn’t come from their base!” Sprays of salt water dashed against her M9 as she whipped it around, using its head-mounted radar to scan the area.

“Uruz-2! Three o’clock, distance four! Eight enemy HSC!” Sousuke had a better vantage point than Mao from on top of the mountain, so he gave her the

verbal warning, while AI wordlessly used the machine's high-speed advanced data modem to distribute their sensor information to all allied machines.

Eight high-speed craft were approaching, coming around from the island's west side. It was a blind spot from Sousuke's point of view, which was why he'd been slow to spot it. They were probably returning from a raid—the worst timing possible.

Their speed was forty knots—about 74 kilometers per hour—and despite their small size, each was equipped with 20mm machine cannons and infantry rockets. The eight boats kicked up a sheet of water as they unleashed their weapons on Mao, who cursed at this new wave of concentrated fire. “Yeek! I mean... dammit! What the hell?! Intelligence said they only had what was in the dock! Where'd the reinforcements come from?”

“It's the usual: bad intelligence. I wish they'd give us a break, for once...” Kurz muttered.

“Stop bitching and do something!” Mao screamed at him.

“I am! ...That's two down!” Kurz's 76mm shots had hit their targets, taking out two pirate boats in a fiery explosion.

“Only two?!”

“Hold your horses! They're far, and they're pretty damned fast. Wish I'd brought a Hellfire or a Versile...” Kurz said, sounding a little panicked. The Hellfire and the Versile were kinds of guided missiles used by ASes. The position assigned to Kurz for back-up sniping was the perfect distance for safely taking aim at stationary targets, but it was less useful against targets moving at 40 knots. It was a testament to his skills that he'd been able to take out two already.

Six boats remained. They raced through the water around Mao's M9, peppering it mercilessly with shells and rockets. Her head-mounted machine guns blazed and filled another boat with holes, but that still left five remaining.

“Ugh, so annoying!” she wailed. “Guh... this is really bad!”

The M9 sloshed awkwardly through the heavy water, taking evasive maneuvers. Even with the M9's armor and maneuverability, it couldn't endure

such a fierce assault for long.

《Sergeant. Uruz-2 is in danger. We must open fire at the enemy HSCs,》 Al told Sousuke, who was simply watching from the mountaintop without firing any support shots.

“Inefficient at this distance,” Sousuke said dismissively. “We don’t have many shots left.”

《Shoot the high-speed craft. There is no other choice.》

“No choice, eh? I disagree.” Sousuke promptly took the Arbalest a few steps down the mountain, judged his timing, and launched into a starting run.

《Sergeant. This angle is—》

“Shut up and help me!” Immediately, he dove off the edge of the rocky mountain, and leaped the Arbalest over the ocean. Wreathed by the silver moon, the slender silhouette hung in the air. Just as it reached the apex of its arc and began to descend, Sousuke fired off his arm’s wire gun. When the anchor pierced one of the high-speed craft racing around down below, he immediately retracted the wire, closing the gap between the two in a flash.

The Arbalest landed on top of the boat with a scream of metal and a spray of seawater. The deck buckled beneath its feet, and it sank so far it nearly capsized. In human-size terms, the effect was like falling several stories to land on a pedal boat.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Kurz shouted in surprise.

The men aboard the unfortunate HSC had fallen on their backsides in shock. As they gazed up at the Arbalest, it plunged its monomolecular cutter into the deck to regain its balance, then let loose with its head-mounted 12.7mm machine guns. The shots shredded the boat’s armaments and engine, effectively taking it out of the fight.

“Get the gist?” he asked Al. “Let’s jump to the next one.”

Kicking its way off of the now-smoking boat, the Arbalest jumped. Sousuke shot off the wire gun in its left arm again, this time at a high-speed craft racing just ahead. Then the high-powered motor quickly retracted the wire, and...

Landing achieved! Sousuke sprayed machine gun fire across the violently rocking boat, taking out its engine and gun turrets.

The Arbalest's sensors quickly scanned its surroundings. The closest pirate boat had just fired a rocket in his direction; its red light was closing in. With a grunt, Sousuke jumped a third time, managing it just before impact. The rocket hit the boat he had just been standing on, and exploded. His machine twisted through the air, backed by fire.

The Arbalest roared down from the sky, aiming for the enemy boat currently bathing him in cannon fire, and successfully completed his third landing. The pirates practically climbed over each other to escape, evacuating into the dark sea around them.

《Sergeant. Such tactics were not anticipated. They are nonsense.》

“Are they?” Sousuke said, manipulating his machine. “Tell me the definition of nonsense.”

《Impossible, reckless, irrational.》

“You really are just a machine,” Sousuke told him, as the Arbalest shot a Boxer shell into a now-empty gun turret and the engine section.

The battle thereafter was completely one-sided. All of the high-speed craft were destroyed, and the pirates in the base were in a rout.

Mao's M9 made landfall and went around taking out their remaining defenses. With her external speakers on, she called for surrenders in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Vietnamese. Any who kept up their resistance got a zap from her taser.

Their transport helicopters landed, and their ground forces poured out. Decked out in thick body armor, carrying bulletproof plastic shields, and under the cover provided by Sousuke and the others, they swarmed into the structures that the ASes couldn't enter.

Before long, each team had announced that they had secured their designated area. Several minutes after that, the pirates that had surrendered were chained up and gathered in the dock. Their mission was effectively

complete.

“Yeesh. That was rougher than I expected...” Kurz’s machine, too, had moved from its sniping point to join them, striding through the smoke to eventually make landfall. The M9 Gernsbacks that he and Mao were operating had similar silhouettes to the Arbalest, with long limbs, slender waists, and gray armor that dripped with seawater.

“Let’s just be glad that no Venoms showed up,” Sousuke said, returning the shotcannon to the Arbalest’s waist hardpoint. It was standing next to a group of pirates, seated and stripped of their weapons, and the allied ground forces who were watching over them. The pirates were sulking as if they’d lost a game to a cheating opponent. They didn’t seem to like that their ‘impenetrable stronghold’ had fallen so easily to the weapons known as ASes.

“Uruz-9 here. All ground squads have secured their areas; just two light injuries on our side, and no compromise to mission performance. Pirates have eight dead, four badly wounded, ten lightly wounded,” reported Corporal Yang Jun-kyu, the infantry team leader, over the radio.

Apparently they’d had to kill some resisting pirates—but then, these were people who had attacked any number of shipping vessels and killed their crews, as well. They were already being generous by employing tasers and tear gas and giving them a chance to surrender; it was the pirates’ own fault if they chose to die instead.

“But did we really have to come all this way just for some crummy pirates?” Kurz muttered, surveying the hostages with his M9’s head-mounted sensors.

“These are the Spratly Islands. It’s a jumble of spheres of influence: North and South China, Vietnam, Taiwan... That by itself makes it difficult for any national military to perform large-scale exercises here. This was explained in the briefing,” Sousuke said.

Kurz’s M9 waved its left hand in annoyance. “C’mon, I know that much.”

“Besides, this mission wasn’t just about taking out pirates,” Sousuke went on. “The name of the island is important, too.”

Badamu Island—that was the name of the isolated islet that the pirates had

taken as their base. It had many names, as many as there were countries that claimed control of the Spratlys, and as many as there were languages that the Westerners who had once controlled the island spoke. This name, its Mandarin one, was similar to ‘Badam,’ the keyword that Gauron had passed to Sousuke in Hong Kong.

If it had just been the name alone, with nothing else distinctive about it, Mithril likely would have paid the island no mind. But the fact that it was also a stronghold for pirates causing trouble around the Spratlys made it a different story. Intense investigation and recon work suggested that there was little chance that the island was connected to Amalgam—but at the same time, they couldn’t be sure that it wasn’t.

“Uruz-8 to all,” Corporal Speck, the one investigating the pirate base’s storage block, said over the radio. “All I’ve got here is ammo and heroin. There are containers of vanadium, too... but they’re probably plundered. From the Peruvian vessel they raided a few weeks ago, I’d wager.”

“Vanadium?”

“It’s a rare metal, used to make that M9 you’re piloting now. It’s skyrocketed in price in the last few years thanks to the Soviet Civil War and uprisings in South Africa and such. It’s not as valuable as heroin, but... well, that’s a pretty high bar.”

“Oh? You know a lot about it,” Kurz muttered softly.

“I’ve been playing the stocks lately. Read an economics magazine now and then—When you make fighting your whole life, you get stupid.”

“Shut up, you gambling addict.”

Sousuke interrupted Kurz and Speck’s discussion. “Was there anything else that stood out? Any complex machinery, or AS parts?”

“Nope. It’s your standard pirate base, top to bottom,” Corporal Speck confirmed. “Nothing to connect it to those Amalgam guys.”

“We can’t be sure yet. We need to interrogate the base commander first,” Mao said. Her M9 had moved to the summit of the rocky mountain, where she was keeping watch over the surroundings.

“Uruz-9 here. Ah... about that...” Corporal Yang said. “The commander doesn’t seem to be among the hostages. Though that doesn’t mean he isn’t in the base somewhere...”

“Uruz-7 here. He could be hiding among the rank-and-file. Or he could still be somewhere on the island—” Sousuke got that far, then stopped as he realized something. The Arbalest’s sensors gave him a view of the rocky slope, and he could see a person moving around on the rock face that looked out over the harbor. The smoke and the darkness made it hard to see precisely, but it looked like the man had an anti-tank missile on his shoulder. No... he definitely did. The missile was pointing down at him from above. But by the time Sousuke realized it, the man had already fired.

“Sousuke, one o’clock—”

《Warning! ATM!》

Kurz’s and Al’s warnings came at the exact same time.

It was a close-range shot, but well within the range of what the Arbalest could dodge. Still, he knew that dozens of hostages and allied infantrymen were right behind him—in other words, right in the missile’s path. If Sousuke dodged, the missile would fly smack into the middle of those unarmed men.

He made the decision in a split-second: Sousuke didn’t dodge, but faced down the charging missile. There was a flash and a roar, and the anti-tank missile struck the Arbalest’s upper half.

“Dammit!” Instantly, Kurz’s M9 let loose with its 12.7mm head-mounted machine guns on full automatic. Bullets the size of Tabasco sauce bottles rained down in an instant, shredding the man who’d fired the missile, along with the rock he’d been standing on. “Sousuke?!” Kurz whipped around.

As the smoke cleared, the Arbalest could be seen, completely intact. It hadn’t moved from its arms-crossed position, but there wasn’t a single dent in the armor. Normally, a direct hit from a missile like that would have blown it to pieces.

“Not an issue,” Sousuke said at length. An invisible wall that had formed in front of the Arbalest had blocked the missile’s explosion—and the missile itself

—dispersing the shockwave harmlessly.

“Uruz-2 here. What happened?! Status report!” Mao spoke nervously.

“Uruz-7 here,” Sousuke replied. “I was attacked by a remaining enemy soldier, but Uruz-6 took him out. No damage on our side.”

A small sigh of relief came out over the radio. “Uruz-2, roger. Be careful, okay?”

The transmission ended, and Sousuke stood his machine up. Kurz’s M9 was staring at him and the Arbalest. “Sousuke. Did you just...”

“Yeah,” he answered. “Did you register it?”

“I... I think so?” Kurz answered, flummoxed as he fiddled with the unfamiliar device.

“Al. It worked, didn’t it?”

《Affirmative. No damage to machine detected. Main capacitor voltage is stable, as well.》

“Good. Store the 120 seconds’ worth of data before and after into high-compression file Zulu-1.”

《Roger.》

Sousuke felt like he was starting to get the hang of this; together, he and the Arbalest were learning how to use the lambda driver.

“It’s a hell of a thing, though,” Kurz breathed. “Seeing it up close... You know that was a direct hit from an ATM, right? And you freaking brushed it off. That device scares the crap out of me.”

“I thought the same thing the first time I saw the ECS’s full invisibility mode,” Sousuke responded. “Don’t think too hard about it. It’ll seem completely natural, soon enough.”

“Well... maybe, I guess,” Kurz said over the radio in a thoughtful tone. “But I feel like when we brush this stuff off, we’re forgetting something important... when we start to think of the most out-there tech as being ‘completely natural,’ I mean. Even these things we’re in now... the ASes. There’s something really off

about 'em, when you think about it.”

Sousuke just looked at him, non-comprehending.

“Ah, I’m just rambling. Anyway...” Kurz began, then changed his tone. “Uruz-6 here. You said you hadn’t found the base commander, right? Round him up quick and get him questioned. I’m ready to head back and get some shuteye.”

“Uruz-9 here... Um, according to the hostages, the commander is—” Corporal Yang spoke into the radio from where he was standing in front of the hostages. A few of them had gotten his attention, and were pointing in the direction that the missile had come from minutes earlier.

“What the hell is it? Spit it out already.”

“The commander was the guy with the missile that Kurz just gunned down.”

“Huh?” There was a long pause, and then, “Ah... I see,” Kurz said awkwardly.

Mao burst in. “What did you say? Gunned him down? You killed him? Why didn’t you use your taser?!”

“Use my taser?!” Kurz protested. “I was kind of in a hurry, y’know!”

“Shut up!” she screamed back. “How could you do this? We were just talking about having to take the commander in alive! You’ve completely ruined my debut sortie as a lieutenant!”

“Sh-Shut up! He’s an asshole who’s killed countless defenseless crews! He deserved that .50-caliber justice!”

“That’s not the damned point! We can’t interrogate a corpse!”

“He fired a missile at Sousuke!”

“Oh?!” Mao cried out, with mock concern. “And how’d that go for you, Sousuke?”

“Not an issue,” Sousuke told her.

“Ah, you asshole!” Kurz put in.

“See? This is your fault!” Mao lectured at Kurz. “You’d better write up one hell of a report! God dammit, Ben is gonna give me hell for this when we get back... Why’d I bother busting my ass to become an officer if I still have to deal with

this crap?! I've made up my mind: next time we go out drinking, everything's on you! Because of your short-sighted, simple-minded—"

"Shut up! Quit yelling at me!" Kurz yelled back. "You're the one who blew away a hostage target-board with a 40mm shell last week at practice! That was —"

"Yeah, well, that was practice! This is real life!"

Sousuke interrupted the tedious exchange. "Excuse me. I would appreciate it if we could set questions of responsibility aside and begin making preparations to leave. If we head back now, I could still make it in time for my classic literature makeup exam. Mr. Fujisaki is very strict, and I'm in danger of failing —"

"Stay out of this, part-timer!" The two screamed in tandem over the radio.

Sousuke fell quiet.

《I agree, Sergeant. It would be wise to keep our silence in this case.》

"Al, I told you—"

《Forgive me. I'll stop talking.》

For just a moment, Sousuke gave serious consideration to killing the AI while he could.

21 December, 0351 Hours (Local Time)

250 Meter Depth, West Pacific Ocean

1st Briefing Room, Tuatha de Danaan

"So, well..." They were finishing up the debriefing for the pirate stronghold mission, and Melissa Mao was awkwardly explaining how the Arbalest had gotten into a game of chicken with a missile. "In that instant, something bad and something good... basically happened all at once, I guess."

"Start with the good," First Lieutenant Belfangan Clouseau, leader of the SRT ground forces, requested. Up to this point, he'd been listening silently. He was a

tall black man in his thirties, dressed in fatigues, with tense eyebrows and a masculine face.

Mao responded, “The Arbalest’s lambda driver activated, and blocked the ATM’s explosion. Gave us tons of data, too.”

“That’s excellent. Well done, Sagara, even if it wasn’t quite intentional. Just try to deal with them before they hit you next time,” Clouseau advised. “It’s an unnecessary risk.”

Sousuke, also in fatigues, sat in his chair and nodded silently.

“So?” Clouseau asked next, attempting to move things along. “What’s the something bad?”

“The pirates’ commander was the one who fired the missile, and Kurz blew him away. He unloaded his machine guns’ 12.7mm rounds... um...” Mao looked down at her clipboard. “...54 times in all, leaving no trace behind.”

“Ahh...” It sounded like he’d seen that coming, and he wasn’t exactly surprised... but Clouseau still closed his eyes, a vein in his forehead throbbing. “Wonderful. So, Weber, how do you propose we interrogate the man you just blasted into a fine red mist?”

Kurz Weber, sitting in the seat next to Sousuke, laughed hollowly. “We can’t. Well, we could ask an itako from Mt. Osore, maybe. But we’d need one that can speak Chinese.”

“I was being sarcastic, Sergeant,” Clouseau growled.

“I’m aware of that, Lieutenant.”

Clouseau and Kurz glared balefully at each other, and Mao let out a small sigh. The two men really didn’t get along; to say that they’d gotten off on the wrong foot would be a vast understatement. They’d had a few sorties together since their disastrous first encounter, and she was genuinely surprised that Kurz had never “accidentally” shot Clouseau in the back.

“Ah, excuse me,” Yang Jun-kyu spoke up hesitantly, as if to fill the silence. “If you don’t mind my saying so, it really was the only option at the time. Kurz’s M9 was just at the limit of taser range, and the smoke there was pretty thick, so

that probably wouldn't have worked. There was no guarantee the enemy didn't have a second shot prepared, so he really had to dispatch him as quickly as possible." Yang was the traditional mediator in these situations.

Clouseau took that in, then surveyed the room. "What do the rest of you think?" Everyone present, including Sousuke and Mao, signaled passive agreement, and Clouseau seemed to respect their judgment. "Very well. Maybe it was unavoidable, then. I'll report this to the major—I think it's clear that that pirate base has no connection to this Amalgam organization, which means we're back to square one. We're no closer to finding their base of operations than we were before."

"Anything turn up in the analysis of the Venoms and the Behemoth?" Mao asked. Mithril had recovered a number of remains of Amalgam-made machines from previous battles, including the Behemoth from six whole months earlier. It was expected that if the research and intelligence divisions analyzed them in earnest, they could identify where the parts had been made and any corporations involved in their creation.

"Most of the core elements from the remains are 'origin unknown,'" Clouseau answered. "The non-proprietary electronic bits have a variety of origins, including some made in Western Europe, and some in Japan."

"No way," she protested. "There can't be many factories capable of building specialized machinery like that, can there?"

"Not many *Western* factories, anyway. They're still reviewing particulars and commonalities between the designs, but for the Venoms, at least, the pervading theory is that they're modeled on the Soviets' next-generation AS."

"The Shadow?" Mao questioned. The Zy-98 Shadow was the codename for a next-generation AS made by the Soviets' Zeya Experimental Design Bureau, the successor to the Rk-92 Savage. Western militaries had only become aware of its existence a month ago, and not even Mithril knew its full particulars, but it was said to have a full electromagnetic propulsion system powered by a miniature high-output palladium reactor, and specs on par with the M9's.

In other words, Clouseau was saying that the Venom was a modified Shadow. "We can't draw conclusions just yet," he cautioned them. "All we know is that,

in terms of basic structure, the Venom is to Zeya's new model as the Arbalest is to the M9. At any rate, we're going to focus on that 'Badam' keyword that Sagara heard. Although... we still can't be sure that that wasn't some nonsense Gauron was spouting just to mess with us."

"I'm certain there's something to it, sir," Sousuke insisted. Clouseau's feeling was understandable, but for some reason, Sousuke couldn't convince himself that what Gauron had told him in Hong Kong meant nothing.

"I know. Though it could also be a trap... best not to let our guard down, either way," Clouseau mused in response, then shook his head dismissively. "Well, anyway, our job isn't information analysis; it's pest control. On any mission where there's the slightest possibility of encountering a Venom-type AS, we always have to be on the top of our game. Major Kalinin feels the same way. Remember that."

The group voiced a variety of, "rogers" and, "yeah, yeahs."

"Now, I want a report from all of you by seven in the morning," Clouseau instructed. "Weber, you'll handle the watch over the three pirate lieutenants we captured." They had brought the prisoners they'd taken on Badamu Island on board, where they were bound and blindfolded. The minute they arrived at Merida Island, the men would be interrogated by operations HQ staff.

"Huh?! Why do I have to—"

"That's an order," Clouseau said, cutting him off. "Pick PRT members to serve as the watch team and tell them what they need to know. Got it? This is all on you now; I don't want a repeat of the Perio incident."

"Roger," Kurz responded after a second. He sounded surprisingly earnest about it; perhaps he was remembering what had happened to Clouseau's predecessor, McAllen.

"All right, dismissed," Clouseau finished. "Good work today, everyone."

The soldiers stood up and left the briefing room, chatting.

"Hey, Ben," Mao said to Clouseau, once the others were gone.

"Yeah?"

“Why’d you make Kurz do it?” she wanted to know. “I’d be happy to run the watch.”

“He needs a little more proper NCO experience. I’m teaching him responsibility.”

“Oh, I get you.” Mao nodded as if in perfect understanding.

“And it’s more than that,” Clouseau went on. “I spoke with Major Kalinin and Colonel Testarossa. Now that you’re a lieutenant, we need to promote someone from the SRT to master sergeant: the only options are Sagara, Sandraptor, and Weber. But Sagara is too young and he’s a part-timer, and Sandraptor’s not cut out for command. Plus...”

“Plus...?”

“That girl, Chidori Kaname, told me that McAllen’s last words to Nguyen during the Perio incident were ‘Call Weber and the others.’ At the time, the major was off-ship, and you were wounded—I guess the next name that came to mind was Weber’s. I think Senpai might’ve seen something in him.”

Mao remained quiet.

“I don’t like the man, but he has potential, and he cares about his comrades,” Clouseau admitted. “I thought I’d put him through his paces a while and see how he takes to it.”

“Hmm...” Mao hummed, her lips curving up into a smile.

Clouseau answered her pleased expression with a scowl. “What now?” he demanded. Once Clouseau was alone with her, he returned to talking like an NCO.

“Nothing,” she protested innocently. “I was thinking, ‘you’re so responsible.’”

“Get off my back. The major isn’t here most of the time,” Clouseau growled back. “Who’s going to do it if I don’t?”

“Fair enough. We’re all counting on you, Ben.”

“Darn it...” Tucking his file case under his arm with another scowl, Clouseau left the room.

After returning to the SRT duty room, Sousuke opened his laptop and began composing his report. Kurz had gone off to run hostage watch (grumbling all the while about unfairness), and that left the room quieter than usual.

Sousuke was thinking that he would polish off his paperwork, and then, once they surfaced, he'd take a helicopter to Tokyo. There were more than a few members of the crew who didn't like the idea of an NCO like Sousuke getting this sort of preferential treatment, but he didn't care. His grades were on the line, and he'd gotten the clause "can charter transport whenever reasonable" added to his contract (though the fuel costs still came out of his paycheck).

His report was about 80% finished when he felt his stomach rumble. *If I go to the mess, he thought, I might find something left over.*

"Where are you going?" Mao, who was fooling around on her laptop as well, asked him as he stood.

"To eat," Sousuke answered her shortly.

"Ahh... gotcha. See you later."

"See you." As Sousuke left the duty room, he caught a glimpse of Mao reaching quickly for the on-board phone, but he didn't pay it much mind. Instead, he just climbed the nearby stairway and walked down the passage beyond.

As he made it up to deck two, he ran into the submarine's captain, Tessa—full name Teletha Testarossa—coming around the corner of an otherwise unoccupied hall.

"Ah... Sagara-san," Tessa said. She was a petite, slender girl with ash blonde hair done up in a braid. Tessa was about Sousuke's age, and wore the rank of colonel on the shoulders of her khaki-colored uniform. For some reason, she sounded out of breath.

"Colonel." Normally, Sousuke would come to attention and salute... but he had recently learned that she hated being treated that way, so he just offered her a casual greeting, instead. "Are you taking a break?" he inquired next.

“Yes, now that we’re underway... I was a little bit hungry, so I left command to Mardukas-san.” Tessa then turned her eyes up to meet his, and said, “Would you like to share a meal with me?”

“In the galley?”

“Yes. Escort me, if you would.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he responded. “I was intending to.”

They walked side-by-side down the corridor and soon arrived at the mess hall, which was pitch black. Nobody was present in the middle of the night, and there didn’t seem to be any food left.

“Please sit there,” Tessa insisted, running into the galley. “I’ll cook.”

Sousuke quickly started, “Colonel, please. Let me—” but managed to stop himself mid-protest.

Tessa was glaring at him reproachfully. “Are you suggesting that I cannot prepare food properly?”

“No, certainly not.”

“You always eat what Kaname-san prepares,” she pointed out, and Sousuke fell silent. While he groped around for an answer, Tessa giggled. “It’s all right,” she said. “But please, try my cooking for once.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’d be happy to.” In the past, nerves and awkwardness would have overtaken him, and he’d have said something like, ‘No, I really should make it myself,’ or ‘allow me to assist you, at least,’ but... *Well, maybe it’s not so bad*, Sousuke decided, and then sat down at a table.

“It sounds like things were difficult on Badamu Island,” Tessa called out from the galley.

“Not at all,” Sousuke replied. “It was an easy mission.” He heard the refrigerator door open and close, followed by the sound of cooking tools being pulled out and placed back.

“But you used the lambda driver, didn’t you?” Tessa wanted to know.

“My apologies,” he answered. “If I’d been more careful, things wouldn’t have

come to that.”

“All’s well that ends well. Are you growing accustomed to the Arbalest, then?”

“Yes. But Al’s turned into a chatterbox, and I don’t know what to do about it,” Sousuke admitted ruefully. “He just says one useless thing after another... I’ve never heard of a control system like it.”

“He’s not a control system,” Tessa clarified.

“What?”

“Didn’t I tell you before? The Arbalest is an extension of you,” she explained. “Al... Al is how you might have turned out, if you had been raised in a different environment.”

“That’s a horrible thing to say,” Sousuke objected with a grimace, then heard the chopping on the cutting board suddenly come to a stop.

“Oh. I’m sorry,” she called back, with a note of surprise.

Sousuke cringed, realizing he’d said something rude in the heat of the moment. “No, *I’m* sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s all right,” Tessa said reassuringly. “After all, you were speaking to me like you would to Melissa and Weber-san.”

“I was?”

“Yes. I found that rather pleasing.” She giggled.

“It feels... strange, for me,” Sousuke admitted.

“And for me as well. Very strange.” Regardless, Tessa sounded delighted.

The food preparation went on for a while. Sousuke heard something get mixed together in a bowl, something boiled in a pot, something fried up in a pan...

This had been the tone of their interactions for about six months now. Tessa, who had once seemed like an otherworldly being, was now someone Sousuke felt quite close to. He couldn’t claim he didn’t enjoy her attentions, either—Tessa was a very appealing girl, and he liked that she was willing to engage him this way. And in moments like these, with her eyes pointed down studiously as

she focused on her cooking, Tessa reminded him of Kaname.

“It’s finished.” Tessa came out of the kitchen, carrying a large dish of pasta. “It’s spaghetti carbonara,” she explained. “I frequently make it for myself after work.” Tessa piled the pasta onto a small dish using a fork and spoon. The steaming dish was coated in thick cheese and cream sauce, and fragrant with pepper and garlic.

“It’s quite easy to make,” she went on. “I find it easier than Kalinin-san’s borscht, at least... I’m sure you’ll like it.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Sousuke said pointlessly, before bringing a forkful of pasta to his mouth. Suddenly, his eyes opened wide. *It really is...* “Very good.”

The moment he’d said so, Tessa scrunched up her shoulders and flashed a V-sign. “Ah... all my training paid off. Now Kaname-san’s lost her sneaky advantage...” she whispered to no one in particular.

Sousuke stared up at her suspiciously. “What?”

“Oh, nothing... Go on, eat up!”

“Ahh...” Though still dubious, Sousuke continued downing the pasta. His empty stomach helped.

Tessa watched him eat for a while, enraptured. Then she said, “Sagara-san, would you like more?”



“Please.” Sousuke typically didn’t stuff himself, but he found himself holding the dish out for more.

If they had had a mission coming up, he might have refrained. They weren’t supposed to fight on a full stomach; it slowed your reaction times, and raised the chances that a bullet to the gut would prove fatal. But they were currently on board their submarine, so that was probably unlikely. *As long as Kurz doesn’t make some stupid mistake on watch duty, at least...*

“Is it very good?” Tessa asked again, interrupting his thoughts.

“Yes,” he told her. “It’s... very good.”

“I’m so glad!” Tessa grinned.

Is that what people mean when they say, ‘a radiant smile’? Sousuke wondered idly. He felt warmed by the sight, and at the same time, slightly guilty.

“Hey... did you know that next week is Christmas?” she asked hesitantly, changing the subject.

“I’m unfamiliar with the specifics,” Sousuke answered. “But it does appear that way.”

“Do you know what the 24th is?” she asked curiously.

“I’ve heard it’s a custom known as Christmas Eve.” Sousuke knew that Christmas was a Christian custom, but as someone who had fought with an Islamic mujahideen, it had little meaning to him. He was actually much more conscious of Ramadan, which was beginning three days before it this year. To Sousuke, Christmas was primarily a period when the alertness of his enemy in his Afghani days, the Soviets, was reduced... and nothing more.

Why is she bringing up Christmas? Sousuke wondered, and found himself tensing up a bit. He was fairly certain that Tessa was a Catholic, and while he didn’t think that she was about to engage him in a religious debate, the topic still made him vaguely uneasy.

“I see. You really don’t know...” she mused.

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Well, Sagara-san...” Tessa said hesitantly.

“Yes?”

“On the 24th... the squadron is going to hold a party together, you know? And I was going to hold a smaller, secondary celebration in my room afterwards, with Melissa and some of the others. Would you like to join us?” Tessa’s eyes, brimming with sincerity, now gazed into his.

“On the 24th?” he clarified.

“Yes.”

Sousuke fell silent. He felt uncertain, because that was the day of the school’s make-up trip. He’d just finished declaring that he’d take all measures necessary to ensure the class’s safety.

Then again, he also didn’t get many chances to deepen his friendship with Tessa, who was typically a very busy person. These last few months, he’d vaguely become aware of her affection for him; it might be cruel to dismiss her invitation out of hand.

She spoke into the silence. “I suppose you’re too busy with school?”

“No, it’s not that... It’s just a bit...” As Sousuke struggled to form a response, he suddenly heard hurried footsteps in the corridor outside.

“Hey, hey!” Sounding panicked, Mao burst into the mess. The last time he’d seen her, she’d been using her laptop to investigate something, so he assumed it must be related to that.

“What is it, Mao?” Sousuke asked.

“Sousuke! You speak Persian, right?”

“A bit,” he told her. “The Afghani dialect, anyway... What about it?”

For some reason, Sousuke’s response caused Mao to groan. “Then why didn’t you catch on sooner?! Sheesh!”

Sousuke tilted his head questioningly.

“That ‘badam’ thing you mentioned... I’ve been looking into it,” Mao explained impatiently. “I was running it through various languages Gauron

might know, given what we know about his history. Do you know what the word romanized as ‘badame’ means in English?”

Sousuke was a bit taken aback by the suddenness of the question, but he did offer a word he knew, “I think it means... almond?”

“No, that’s B-A-D-A-M. What if you add an ‘e’ at the end?”

“I don’t know,” Sousuke admitted, feeling a bit bad about his answer. When he’d lived in Afghanistan, he’d used Tajik and Farsi—the Afghani dialect of Persian—daily. He also knew some conversational Pakistani Pashto. Afghanistan was a country of diverse cultures, after all.

The reason Sousuke knew so many languages wasn’t due to any particular talent in that regard; he’d just lived in that region during the age when the brain was open to learning such things, and he’d just naturally picked them up. Still, his Farsi had gotten very rusty by now, and he’d never been able to read or write it. He could only write in English, Japanese, and a tiny bit of Russian.

“So, what does it mean if it’s ‘badame’?” Sousuke asked suspiciously. Tessa, who could speak close to ten languages fluently but didn’t appear to know Persian, stared at Mao as well. She mainly looked hurt about the fact that her dinnertime had been so rudely interrupted.

“Chrysalis,” Mao burst out. “It means chrysalis!”

“Hmm?” Sousuke asked.

21 December, 1537 hours (Japan Standard Time)

Jindai High School, Tokyo

“Hey, Sagara-kun.” After school was over for the day, Sousuke’s classmate Tokiwa Kyoko approached him. “Did you know that Kana-chan’s birthday is the 24th?” Her question was met with silence. “Hello? Earth to Sousuke!”

“Oh, that’s... right,” Sousuke responded awkwardly. He wasn’t in the habit of celebrating birthdays, so even though he’d seen Kaname’s noted in her profile prior to his infiltration of the school, it had completely slipped his mind. He’d

also ended up making plans with Mithril for that day.

Ignoring Sousuke's sudden discomfort about his oversight, Kyoko continued. "You're coming on that cruise with us, right? I figured we'd put together a big surprise for Kana-chan, to wish her a happy birthday." She cast a glance at Kaname, who was on the other side of the classroom, clapping erasers out the window. "See, I think she's not expecting to get anything this year, so the timing is perfect. I was thinking we'd all buy her flowers. You want to chip in?"

"Chip in?" Sousuke questioned.

"You don't know what that means? Um, it means we all put in a little money for the whole," Kyoko explained. "In this case, 300 yen each. Please?"

"I see. I'll pay the money," Sousuke promised. "But..."

"But...?"

Sousuke hesitated, gripping his wallet. "I'm sorry, but I won't be going on the cruise. Something else came up."

"You won't be coming?" Kyoko asked in shock. "But you were all worked up about it! You said you were gonna come loaded for bear this time!"

"Ah. Well, I..." Sousuke dissembled.

"Plus, it's Kana-chan's birthday!"

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I've made other plans."

"Jeez... Kana-chan's gonna be crushed, y'know," Kyoko told him.

"It's unavoidable," Sousuke said shortly.

"What'll you be doing instead?"

Of course, Kyoko didn't know about Mithril—none of the students of Jindai High did. "I'm very sorry, but I can't tell you."

Just then, Kaname strolled up to them. She lay down the erasers on the blackboard nearby, then started arranging the chalk. "What's going on here?" she asked, casually.

"Huh? Ah... nothing! Ahaha..."

Kyoko's protestations just made her more curious. "Seriously, what is it?"

"N-Never mind. But did you hear, Kana-chan? Sagara-kun isn't coming on the cruise! Sucks, huh?" Kyoko said, fists balled, as she forced a change of subject.

This announcement caused Kaname to suddenly cease her chalk arrangements. "Oh, really?" she said coldly.

"There are mitigating circumstances," Sousuke said, trying to explain himself. "I'm sorry."

"Hmm... I wonder why you feel the need to apologize to me..." Kaname mused.

Sousuke's eyes opened in surprise. "Um, well, I—"

"I mean, it sounds good to me," she went on. "Things will be quieter with you gone, anyhow. I guess it's some kind of mission or whatever, so merry Christmas and all that. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine."

"Actually, I just—"

"You just what?" The power of Kaname's side-eye caused Sousuke to falter. He couldn't bring up Mithril with Kyoko standing right there.

"Wow," she went on icily. "Something so important you can't even tell *me*, huh? Well... I'm sure it's none of my business, anyway. Bye, I guess. Don't expect a souvenir, okay?" Then she strode out of the room.

Kyoko, watching the exchange, let out a deep sigh. "I told you! See? You totally bummed her out!"

"It does... appear that way," Sousuke said, feeling greasy sweat rise on his temples. "But I don't understand. Why was she so upset?"

"Why do you think?" Kyoko retorted. "It's her birthday. She's sad that you won't be coming. She just won't admit it because she's stubborn and full of herself. C'mon, it's not that hard!"

Sousuke understood every word in Kyoko's statement, but its meaning as a whole remained elusive. "I don't quite understand," he admitted. "Are birthdays that important?"

“Um, yes! And you’d better not forget it!”

“Understood,” he said, acknowledging the point. “But regardless, I’m not free that day. I’m sorry.”

Kyoko’s pigtails drooped. “Okay... got some party to go to, huh?”

“Party... I suppose so,” Sousuke reflected. “It is a party, in a sense. My party plans became another kind of party.”

Kyoko shot him a curious look.

“Ah, it’s nothing,” he said hastily.

After class, Kaname headed alone for the shopping street near Sengawa Station. She entered a teen-oriented shop that sold cute stuffed animals and such, and while she was hunting for Bonta-kun goods, a nearby man approached her. He looked like a white-collar worker. “Hello, my dear. Would you like to join me this evening?” the man asked, somewhat awkwardly.

“Get lost, asshole.”

“Don’t be like that. I’ll treat you to something nice.”

This line, too, was said entirely without commitment. It caused Kaname to snort in derision. But she still said, “Good, you remembered the password.”

“Couldn’t you pick a less awkward line and location?” the man asked, his voice low.

“This is fine,” Kaname told him. “It means I’ll never mistake you for someone else.”

“But it’s so unnatural,” the man complained. “The things my bosses would say if they knew we were making contact like this...”

“Don’t tell them,” Kaname suggested flippantly. “Then they won’t find out.” She cast another glance at the man, who was an agent with Mithril’s intelligence division. His codename was Wraith, and his mission was the monitoring and protection of Kaname (though she had her doubts about the ‘protection’ part).

He seemed to be a master of disguise, and looked different each time she saw him: sometimes a well-to-do older woman; sometimes a young freelancer; sometimes a middle-aged white-collar worker; a 40-something housewife; a construction worker; an insurance salesman... anything you could imagine. Kaname didn't even know for sure if "he" was really a man.

"But... I gotta say, this is another awesome disguise," she told him. Kaname found Wraith's disguise skills extremely impressive; he could even change his voice at will. "Why not ditch the whole 'lonely spy' racket?" she suggested. "I bet you could make real money in show business."

"Butt out." Wraith slumped over, seemingly annoyed by her comment.

"Ah, sorry if that struck a nerve." Maybe he really had tried to make a life in show business at some point? But the world had proved too harsh a mistress, and his dreams had been shattered, and he'd been reduced to living the life of a spy for a shady organization. Kaname found herself imagining it, unprompted, and gave him a sympathetic look. "I didn't mean to be insensitive. Really..."

The spy sized her up suspiciously. "Are you imagining something very offensive right now?"

"Of course not," Kaname protested. "Everyone has their circumstances. Cheer up!"

"For some reason, I don't like your tone..."

"Besides, you get to do some artistic expression in this job, too," Kaname nattered on.

"I told you," he finally burst out. "I don't want to be in show business!" This was more or less how all of Kaname's interactions with Wraith had gone lately. No matter who she was dealing with, be they mercenary or spy, she seemed to have a real talent for disrupting another person's rhythm.

Kaname called on Wraith whenever she wanted to know something, and sometimes just when she was bored. He and Sousuke hadn't actually met yet; Wraith had stubbornly insisted against it, and they'd reached an agreement that she wouldn't call him out when Sousuke was nearby. From the way each of them talked, Kaname had a vague idea that some bad blood existed between

Wraith, of the intelligence division, and Sousuke, of the operations division.

“So, did you look into it?” Kaname asked, broaching the subject she’d had in mind.

“Somewhat. I’m not privy to everything that happens in the operations division, so I can’t be sure, but... the Tuatha de Danaan battle group currently have no operations scheduled around Christmas that we know of,” Wraith told her reluctantly. “Though they do appear to be preparing for a party of some kind.”

“Hmm... I see.” Kaname’s mood plummeted. She’d thought maybe the reason Sousuke wasn’t coming on the cruise was because he had a mission with Mithril, but if there was nothing scheduled...

Had he canceled their trip to go to some party with his squad, then? It was understandable that he’d prefer to spend his time with the people he faced danger with daily—and with *her*. She could have just questioned him about it, of course... but with their relationship in an awkward place right now, Kaname had found that she couldn’t lay into him as aggressively as she once had.

“What kind of party is it, I wonder...” she mused, mostly to herself.

“How should I know?” Wraith retorted, sounding surly. “You should be more concerned about this make-up class trip of yours.”

“Did you look into that, too?” Kaname asked next.

“Yes. According to our analysis, the ship should be safe,” Wraith confirmed. “Its background is clean. Though there’s no guarantee the enemy won’t try a repeat of Sunan...”

“A seajacking, you mean?” she clarified.

“Yes, but the chances of that are extremely low. I believe the enemy organization has learned its lesson about the incredible mobility, power, and covertness of the TDD. They probably won’t try to abduct you like that again. But the trade-off there is...” Wraith paused.

“Is... what?”

“Well... it means that you’re that much more likely to be targeted in your

everyday life,” he admitted reluctantly.

Kaname said nothing.

“But they haven’t come after you yet,” Wraith went on. “So we can assume they’re biding their time. They may be confident that they can dispatch both myself and Uruz-7 any time they want to, and abduct you then.”

“You seem very unconcerned about that,” Kaname observed.

“I’m just stating the facts.”

“You guys are biding your time with me too, right?”

Wraith fell silent, as he always did when this subject came up.

Trying to restrain her nervousness, Kaname spoke again, her words pointed. “If you ask me, you intelligence division guys are as shady as ‘the enemy.’ And outside of Sousuke and Tessa, the operations higher-ups seem pretty questionable, too.”

“Your doubts are understandable, Chidori Kaname... I hope you can trust in my good faith, as well,” Wraith sighed. “I would be in deep trouble if the top brass knew I was contacting you one-on-one like this.”

“I appreciate it,” Kaname told him sincerely. “You should drop by my house sometime, by the way. I’ll whip up a little thank-you meal. You like hot pot?”

“I love Korean hot pot... Wait, did you hear what I just said?!”

“Yeah, yeah. ‘Don’t call unless it’s an emergency,’ et cetera. I get it, okay?”

“Heaven’s sake...” Wraith let out another sigh. Then he turned and began to walk away from Kaname. But he paused once more on his way and said, “Anyway, be careful on the trip. I’ll be infiltrating the passenger roster just to be safe.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks,” Kaname said, while wondering what ‘he’ would be dressed up as this time. As she watched Wraith leave the shop, she tried to imagine the cruise without Sousuke. *I guess he does find Mithril more important than me...* Now in a melancholy mood, she left the shop without buying anything.

The air outside was cold, and her breath came in white puffs. These were the shortest days of the year, and the sky was already pitch black, but the shopping street was still bustling. Christmas songs played, and the place was lively with chatter and laughter.

“Ah...” she exclaimed softly, as she caught sight of Sousuke, standing in front of an old shoe store across the street from the shop she’d just left. He slowly walked toward her through the throng. Her first thought, rather than consider that he’d seen her meet with Wraith, was to wonder if he’d decided to go on the cruise after all.

“Wh-what were you doing over there?” Her response came out curtly despite herself.

“I was waiting for you to come out. A suspicious man entered the store and then left... but it appears you were unharmed,” Sousuke said.

“O-of course I was,” she retorted. “Put that stupid gun away!”

“Hmm...” Sousuke returned the gun he was holding, hidden behind his bag, to the holster under his jacket. He hadn’t recognized Wraith, then—or perhaps he had suspicions, but nothing more.

Of course, Sousuke wasn’t stupid; Wraith’s disguises were just a cut above. Kaname had been getting the better of him lately, but he appeared to be quite an excellent agent otherwise. He really did seem to disappear into a crowd. Even Sousuke, who was very sensitive to hostile intent around him, seemed to have a duller antenna when Wraith wasn’t behaving with active malice.

Kaname started walking, and Sousuke followed her from behind.

“Chidori,” he began.

“What?”

“Are you hiding something from me?”

“Um...”

“Ever since Hong Kong, I’ve had the sense that... No, perhaps it’s my imagination.” Sousuke seemed to have a nebulous idea that Kaname was keeping something from him, and in fact, she was: both her meetings with

Wraith and her encounter with the young man, Leonard, two months ago while he was gone.

Kaname did intend to tell him about Wraith when she had the chance. She'd been halfway serious about her offer of hot pot earlier; she wanted to get Wraith and Sousuke to sit down together so she could show off her cooking. Wraith didn't seem like a bad guy, and things could only get better if he and Sousuke would make peace.

There was no way she could tell him about Leonard, though. She had explained about the assassin attacking her in the hotel district, and told him that someone else had finished the assassin off. She'd also brought up the robots she'd seen then. But what she and that "someone else" had talked about, and what he'd done to her... those were things that Kaname could never bring herself to say.

So far, Sousuke hadn't pressed her about it, either. Today was the first time he'd voiced his suspicions. The near-miss with Wraith might have really made him nervous.

"You think I'm hiding something?" she asked innocently.

"Well... perhaps it's not *hiding*, exactly... but are you keeping something to yourself?"

"No. You're the one keeping something from *me*, right?" For some reason, Kaname couldn't keep the comment from sounding barbed.

"Me?" Sousuke asked.

"About Christmas," she clarified. "Why aren't you going on the make-up trip?"

"I have a mission."

You liar, Kaname thought. *You're going to a party with Mithril. You'll all have fun while things get serious between you and that girl, right? I didn't think you were such a liar... but I guess eight months living in Japan was time enough to learn how to be a snake...* "Yeah, okay," she said out loud. "A mission. Everything's a mission. Why don't you go marry Miss Mission, then?"

"I don't understand that," Sousuke told her, sounding genuinely confused. "If

you have something to say to me, can't you explain it in more concrete terms?"

"Are you being serious right now?!" Kaname glared at Sousuke. "You think... you think you can always get out of things by playing dumb?! Well, you're wrong! Because I know everything!"

Sousuke was baffled. "I don't understand. But I wanted to tell you something that—"

"Oh, shut up!" she yelled. "I don't want to hear it!"

"Chidori—"

"Stay away from me! I'm sick of you!"

"This is so typical!" Sousuke fumed. "Why do you—"

"I said this conversation is over!" Kaname said brusquely. Then, brushing through the crowds, she strode away from Sousuke.

That night, it was needless to say that Kaname regretted her words, as usual. But even repeating their exchange in her head dozens of times, she couldn't stop being angry. *What the hell is his problem?* she kept thinking. And, as usual, that was where her thought process stopped. All of his charms, which usually came to mind easily, disappeared, leaving only negative thoughts behind.

After all, he's completely inconsiderate, and the way he thinks he can play dumb to get out of trouble proves that he thinks I'm stupid, Kaname reasoned. *Actually, when I really think about it, he can't really be that stupid, can he? Maybe that was just a character he's been playing from the start. If that's the case, he's the biggest creep ever! The absolute worst! I can't believe I fell for him, even for a second. I'm so glad I didn't confess to him in the heat of the moment!*

Every single man is a con artist, anyway. Every word out of their mouths is a lie to make themselves look good. They're crafty, evil, super-energy beings, and you can't trust them for a second!

Yeah, there's no way I'll ever date a man, she told herself fiercely. *Especially not him! I hate you, Sousuke!*



Over the next few days, Kaname barely spoke to Sousuke. He'd approached her reluctantly a few times, but Kaname wouldn't give him the time of day. He sent her emails on her PHS, but she deleted them without a glance. He'd ask her, "Did you see my email?" and she'd say, "Yeah, I saw it. Go away now," and brush him off.

It wasn't unusual, as far as fights between them went...

But this time, their quarrel would cause a minor panic.

2: O Noisy Night

24 December, 1401 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

Port of Yokohama, Yokohama

It was a five-minute bus ride from JR Sakuragimachi Station to Shinko Pier. Situated next to a seaside park packed with couples at twilight, this was where the Pacific Chrysalis was currently docked. Its hull was glittering white, an array of artistically curved funnels and intricately layered passenger decks.

The Pacific Chrysalis was massive. At 272 meters long and 100,000 tons, it was one of the largest cruise ships in the world. Outside of a handful of Caribbean luxury liners that were even larger, there were few in the world that rivaled this one for size. Mithril's amphibious assault submarine, the Tuatha de Danaan, was about the only ship on this scale that Kaname had ever been on, and the Pacific Chrysalis seemed to dwarf even that. It was like an entire city set afloat.

Since that military vessel was Kaname's only prior seagoing experience, the amenities of the Pacific Chrysalis now seemed unspeakably extravagant. The interior, too, was vastly more spacious than the submarine's had been, with cabins and corridors reminiscent of a hotel.

"Certainly fancy in here..." Kaname whispered idly, as she laid her luggage on the bed of her cabin.

Her roommate, Kyoko, responded in excitement. "Yeah, it sure is! Did you see that lobby we passed through when we boarded? It was so big and beautiful, I couldn't believe it! And the captain, and the live music there to welcome us... that was really something else!"

They had just come aboard with their classmates and teachers. Most of the crew that had greeted them as they came up the gangway were foreigners. They seemed friendly and courteous, and Kyoko and the teachers all seemed to find it thrilling, but Kaname couldn't help but feel like something was off. She

couldn't shake the sense that a few of the crew seemed to recognize her in some meaningful way. Their expressions seemed to say, "Ah, she's the one," as if they'd known she would be here—or rather, that they knew what fate was in store for her here. It was subtle; just a slight tension in their faces, followed by an exchange of glances, and then cheery smiles, as if nothing had happened.

No, you're being stupid, she decided. After all, their last field trip had been in the news, and she stood out even among her classmates as "the last one saved." Of course the captain and crew would know about her.

"Hey, Kana-chan," said Kyoko, interrupting her thoughts.

"Hm?"

"Let's hit up topside before we leave port. They say the observation deck has a great view of the Minato Mirai wheel."

"Sure," Kaname agreed. "Actually, I'm pretty hungry, too... You bring any snacks?"

"Ah, sorry," Kyoko told her apologetically. "I ate with Shiori-chan and the others while we were waiting to board earlier. I heard Mayu-chan brought Pocky, though. Maybe get some from her?"

"Oh, yeah? I'd better confiscate it; she's been putting on weight lately!"

"Wow, mean!"

Kaname left Kyoko behind, cackling.

There were a few female students hanging around in the brightly-lit corridor, chatting boisterously. *Ah, figures...* Kaname reflected. Their class weren't the only ones on board, and they'd been warned in homeroom several times not to make trouble for the other passengers. Yet here they were already...

Kaname's instincts as class representative took over, and she was about to scold the students, when—

"Give me a goddamned break!" came a man's voice. The words were in English, the voice deep and forceful in a way that let it easily boom over the girls' laughter.

A large Caucasian in a suit was chewing out a member of the crew, who was

looking a little put out by it all. Kaname found herself thinking the man looked a bit like Arnold Schwarzenegger when he did comedy movies. “You can’t stick me in a B-class cabin with these landlubber girls!” he objected.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the crew member apologized. “But the A-class cabins are all full—”

“Then get me a private suite, you ICBM dunderhead! Is this how you treat a commander in the United States Navy?!” the large man demanded to know. “Got something against me, do you? You’re with the Air Force, aren’t you?!”

“S-sir—”

“Stop this, Captain! You’re embarrassing yourself. This is exactly why your wife ran off right before you left for Japan!” A handsome young man of East Asian descent, apparently companion to the angry ‘Schwartzie,’ clung to the man to try to hold him back. He was wearing a suit, too.

“What was that, Takenaka, you incompetent XO?! You could show a little gratitude for my inviting you here in Eliza’s place!”

“How dare you!” Takenaka fumed back. “I was having the time of my life on Waikiki Beach when you dragged me off by force!”

“Oh, please!” the captain returned. “That curvy Japanese lady you were chatting up? She was probably crawling with STDs! You should be thanking me!”

“Damn you! I had a good thing going, and now it’s all down the drain!”

“Shut up! It serves you right!” spat the captain. “You can’t be off enjoying your vacation while your superior officer is wrestling with divorce! You should suffer with me!”

“That was your real motive, wasn’t it?” Takenaka said accusingly. “I bet it was, dammit!”

The men began to grapple in the hallway, right in front of the crewman. Another crewman ran up to assist, and with a combination of verbal coaxing and physical force, they eventually got the two into their passenger cabin. Then the door closed, and the corridor fell silent.

The students who didn't know English could only stare, dumbfounded. Having lived abroad for so long, Kaname had understood the entire conversation, but... "All kinds of people on board this ship, huh?" she whispered, then hurried off to find her friend's room.

24 December, 1855 Hours

Pacific Chrysalis, Near Miura Peninsula, Pacific Ocean

The cruise ship soon left port, and passed through the Uraga Channel on its way out of Tokyo Bay. The sun had already set, and a canvas of stars now hung over the quietly cruising white ship. The students had gathered on the quarterdeck to watch the scenery and enjoy some innocent horseplay. The cold, clear air was refreshing. The waves glittered around them, and the sight of fishing boats and merchant ships passing by were met with great interest.

"Wow. It's so pretty..." Kyoko said, leaning on the railing as she clicked away with her digital camera. "It doesn't feel right, though, huh? Not having Sagara-kun here with us..."

"Do we have to talk about that guy?" Kaname asked grumpily.

Kyoko winced at this predictable response. "Guh, typical Kana-chan. But for real... how's it going?"

"How's *what* going?" Kaname replied.

"You and Sagara-kun. Just spill it already! I swear I won't tell." She sounded pretty serious, and Kaname had a hard time saying no when asked this directly. Besides, it was hard to keep up her prickly demeanor around her best friend.

"Huh? Um, well..." Kaname said.

"Just say it. Go on." Behind her thick glasses, Kyoko's large eyes shone.

Kaname let out a small sigh, then gave up and admitted the truth. "I like him okay, I guess. But... there's really nothing between us."

"Really?"

"Yeah. We've had a few close calls, but that's really it," she insisted. "I mean,

can't you tell? Today's my birthday... and he's off with someone else."

Sousuke, as promised, had skipped the trip. Everyone in the class teased him the day before, "Aw, but you said you'd handle security!"

To this, he had responded with utmost gravity, "I'm afraid I have an irreconcilable conflict." But then, he'd offered this advice: "If a seajacking does occur, don't resist. As long as you're peaceful, the terrorists won't hurt you. Understand? Just do everything you're told." The words seemed pregnant with meaning, but Kaname had just sat in a corner of the classroom, indifferent to the exchange. They were still fighting, after all.

"You'd think he'd come with us, right?" she asked now. "If he were serious about me, he wouldn't skip out."

"I see... Well, maybe you're right," Kyoko admitted.

"I know I can be stubborn about a lot of things, and I know it's not right, but I really don't think he cares about me that much," Kaname told her friend gloomily.

"Maybe not... or you might just be paranoid."

"I *so* am not!" Kaname retorted. "I just think there's another girl he likes better."

"Aw, really? Who is it? Anyone I know?" Kyoko suddenly looked extremely curious.

"Yeah. Remember the girl who did a stint at our school, start of second term?"

"Oh, Tessa-chan?" Kyoko asked.

The students of Jindai High School knew Tessa quite well. The Tuatha de Danaan had taken a lot of damage during the Perio incident, which had put it in drydock for several weeks starting from the end of August. Tessa had decided to use that time to take a long vacation... which she'd opted to spend at Jindai High School in Tokyo. Perhaps, Kaname had thought, she'd wanted a taste of ordinary high school life.

Thus, she and Mao had barged their way into Sousuke's apartment, joined

class 2-4 under the pretext of being exchange students on a study abroad, and spent two weeks turning student life upside-down. Obviously, no one had brought up the fact that Tessa was really a colonel with Mithril...

“She’s in Australia now, right?” Kyoko went on. “I guess they’re still in touch? Then the party Sagara-kun went to is...”

“Yeah,” Kaname said. “I think he went to be with her.” That was her assumption based on Wraith’s testimony, at least; Sousuke’s claim about a mission was just an excuse. She sighed as she imagined the grand party probably unfolding on Merida Island right now. All the crew would drink and sing and party, and things would start to get romantic between Sousuke and Tessa, and... Kaname realized her mood was plummeting. “Oh, who cares! Subject closed!” she shouted to the night sky.

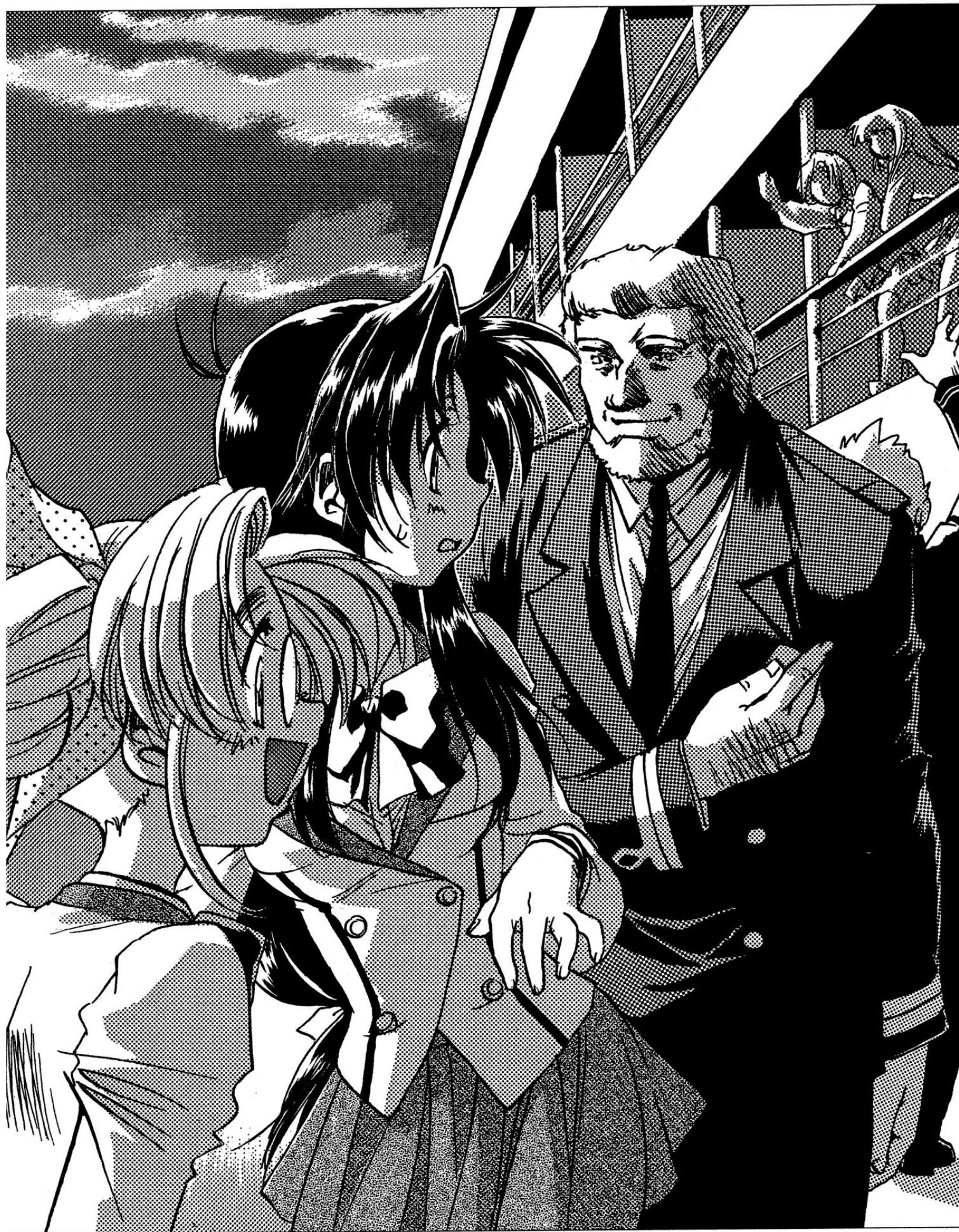
“Um, sorry,” Kyoko said awkwardly.

“Hey, it’s not your fault... But c’mon, *we’re* here, right? Let’s forget that jerk and have fun!” Kaname paused, realizing something. “Actually, you got a watch? How long until the big banquet thing? I’m seriously starving.”

“Didn’t you get a snack from Mayu-chan?”

“It was all gone by the time I got there... ugh.” Just then, she heard a voice address her from behind.

“Excuse me. Chidori Kaname-san?” It was a member of the ship’s crew, a Caucasian man, a little over forty. He had a nicely trimmed beard, and wore a stark white uniform and hat. His posture was ramrod-straight, but he didn’t seem pompous; he had exactly the amount of dignity you’d want to see in the crew of a luxury liner.



“Huh? Yeah?”

“So it is you. I saw you from a distance and wondered... Oh, let me introduce myself,” the crew member said in fluent Japanese, with barely a trace of an accent. “I’m Steven Harris, the ship’s captain. A pleasure.” He comported himself like the proverbial gentleman officer—compared to him, the de Danaan’s senior staff all seemed exceptionally plain.

“The captain?” Kaname and Kyoko said at once. Kaname remembered, now, seeing his face on the pamphlet they’d gotten before they left. She also thought she’d caught sight of him among the crew that had welcomed them on board...

“Um... thank you very much for having us. Could I maybe ask how you know me?” Kaname started with the natural question.

“When we met with your teacher last week, she brought pictures of your class and showed us yours. See? It was the same picture on your ID card.” He pointed to the ID card pinned to her uniform, which had her name and portrait printed on it, just like every other student aboard. “You’re the ‘leading lady’ of the hijacking incident, the one we were all praying for, start to finish. So I was a bit curious to meet you.”

“Ahh, I see...” Kaname said.

“Of course, I didn’t expect you to be so beautiful in person,” Captain Harris went on. “I couldn’t be more pleased. Oh... and your friend is charming too, of course.”

“Thanks. Ahaha...” Kaname and Kyoko both flashed him ingratiating smiles.

“So, what do you think of my ship?” he wanted to know. “Are all your needs being met?”

“Oh, totally! It’s the picture of luxury,” Kaname gushed. “It’s big, it’s beautiful, and the sailing is really smooth.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Captain Harris told her. “If you need absolutely anything, please let my staff know, and we’ll deal with it at once. You’re an important guest, after all. Yes... a very important guest.”

Kaname froze in silence. His words were perfectly polite, but she couldn’t

help sensing something off about them. There was something kind of coaxing... almost wheedling about his tone. The captain's eyes were those of a man gazing at prey in a cage and asking, "Now, what shall I do with you?" *What is it about him that makes me think that?* she wondered.

"Kana-chan?" Kyoko said.

"Huh?"

"You drifted off for a minute. What's up?"

Nothing. You're overthinking it. Just jumping at shadows, Kaname told herself, then gave an awkward laugh. "Oh, it's nothing. Um... we appreciate it, Captain."

"Well, then, I hope you have a fine stay. Enjoy your voyage." Captain Harris said, and then left them behind.

"Whew..." Kaname and Kyoko exhaled after they watched him leave.

"Boy, talk about nerve-wracking..." Kaname muttered.

"Yeah," Kyoko agreed. "He's really handsome, though, right? Strength and elegance in one. Major 'captain' vibes."

"Yeah, true. Totally different from another captain I know."

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing," Kaname said dismissively. Just then, they heard a clamor in the distance.

Captain Harris had been heading back into the ship when a female cabin crew member had bumped into him, then tripped, and turned over a mop and bucket. "Sorry, sorry..." the crew member apologized fervently. She wore a frilly skirt accented by a white apron, black tights, and a hard plastic headband over her hair. *Ash blonde hair, done in a neat braid...* Kaname thought, but she couldn't see the girl's face from her current position.

They were too far away to hear the conversation, but Captain Harris seemed to chide the petite crew member, who bowed emphatically back to him. Then she picked up the cleaning implements, ran towards the prow in a panic... then tripped and fell spectacularly again. Kaname watched the scene unfold, her suspicions churning.

“What the heck. What a clumsy maid...” Kyoko muttered.

Meanwhile, Kaname’s suspicion grew to a near surety, and she found cold sweat rising on her back. *There’s no way. I mean... what would she be doing on this ship?*

That wouldn’t be the only suspicious sight she would see. It had gotten cold outside, so the girls went back in to tour the various on-board facilities. In the corridor in front of the bar lounge, she saw a young bartender hitting on a group of female students. He was a handsome young man with long blond hair tied in a tail, and thin-rimmed glasses over his blue eyes. The pretty boy was speaking in fluent Japanese, “—Yeah, I mean it! I was raised in Edogawa, Tokyo. I know a great soba place, so if you just give me your phone number, I’ll call you when I’m off work.”

“Aw, c’mon...” the girl giggled noncommittally.

“Hey, new blood! Don’t hit on the passengers!”

“Ah... fine, fine,” the young bartender muttered, the veteran crew member’s scolding returning him to the work at hand.

As she watched him walk away, Kyoko whispered, “There’s something weirdly familiar about that guy...”

“R-Really?” Kaname asked, her tone growing more and more awkward. “You’re sure you’re not imagining it? Most foreigners look alike, anyway. N-Now, let’s go somewhere else...” They walked for a while and peeked into a casino hall. They’d only just left port, but the passengers with a mind to gamble were already gathered around the roulette wheel.

The dealer was a beautiful East Asian woman. She looked to be in her mid-20s, with a slender face and short black hair. She was wearing glasses, too.

“Okay, place your bets! Place your bets and no regrets!” she sang out. “Place ’em fast or your time has passed!” It felt less like roulette and more like a period drama’s game of odds-and-evens, but most of the customers were laughing and placing their chips on the board nonetheless.

“I feel like I’ve seen her before, too...” Kyoko said.

Paralyzed, Kaname just responded, “L-Let’s go.” She didn’t know what else to say. *What’s going on on this ship?* she wondered. Maybe after she and Kyoko parted ways, she’d pull one of them aside and give them a full grilling. *Yeah, that’s what I’ll have to do...*

But just as they left the casino and she’d made up her mind, their homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, came running up to them. “Hey, you two! Didn’t you hear the announcement? It’s time for dinner! All Jindai students, meet up in the grand ballroom!”

Kaname suddenly realized that the students and passengers who’d previously been swarming the ship’s halls were now nowhere to be seen. “R-Right...” *No choice*, she decided, following after Kyoko and Eri, to head for the grand ballroom where the banquet would be held. The grilling would have to wait.

After his personal greeting to Kaname, Captain Harris spent a little time looking around, making sure everything was ship-shape. It was, of course; this was his ship, and he was very scrupulous about safety.

He didn’t want any problems or malfunctions happening here... especially tonight, with such an important event coming up...

“Captain.” The engine room chief caught up with Harris in the hallway. He was Colombian, just past forty, with a black beard. “Señor, that Japanese girl you spoke with; was that her?”

“Yes,” Captain Harris confirmed.

“When do we take her to the vault?” the engineer wanted to know.

“Late at night, I think. Wait until all the children are asleep.”

“You think she’ll come quietly?”

“Of course she will. We’ll have all her school friends hostage, after all.” The corners of Captain Harris’s mouth turned up. “We’ll throw her four-eyed friend off the side first, to make a point. That should bring her into line.”

“The ocean’s very cold in December, yes,” the engineer observed.

“It’s such a tragedy when people fall overboard,” Captain Harris continued.

“On Christmas Eve, Chidori Kaname and her friend will go missing.”

“What about *those* people—Mithril?”

“We’ve already left port. They can’t touch us,” Captain Harris predicted. “This will make Mr. Gold happy, and I’ll regain my standing with the organization.”

It had reached the time for him to give his speech at the banquet—an annoying ritual, but it was part of his job. Harris straightened his tie and began walking towards the grand ballroom.

The grand ballroom, where the Jindai High students were gathered, was about the size of a school gymnasium. Lines of huge tables filled the cavernous space, covered in a feast stacked high on silver platters. Fragrantly spiced meat; mountains of seafood in wide varieties; whole roast turkey and roast beef that sparkled like amber; lobster halves glistening with juice. The dinner was buffet-style, and every bit of it was all-you-can-eat. The other passengers were apparently eating in other halls, with this space reserved for those related to and serving the students of Jindai High. Most of the students’ dining-out experiences were limited to hamburgers, gyudon, ramen, and soba, so naturally, the anticipation had them on the verge of tears.

“Not yet!” the principal rebuked them, as the drooling students prepared to leap at the food. She was standing on the ballroom stage, gripping the microphone and glaring at them. “We must hear the captain’s opening remarks first! Listen to me, everyone. I told you before we boarded: Do not embarrass Jindai High School! There are other passengers on board, you know. Be discreet, and do not cause any trouble. Remember how you all spent the hijacking playing card games and bothering the stewardesses, and it was in all the magazines later?! I mean, your ideas about appropriate behavior are simply—” Principal Tsuboi continued to lecture them for what turned out to be a little over three minutes. “...That is all. Do I make myself clear?!”

The hundreds of students responded with an unusually forceful, “Yes, ma’am!” Their eyes glinted as if to say, “We get it, so let us eat!”

“Good,” Principal Tsuboi finished grimly. “Then let’s have a few words from the captain of the Pacific Chrysalis. Give him a round of applause, everyone!”

The bearded captain strode up onto the stage. The students gave him a rockstar welcome, clapping and whistling.

“Students of Jindai High. Thank you for your great patience. I’m the ship’s captain, Steven Harris,” he said into the microphone. The students were impressed by his fluent Japanese. “Welcome to the Pacific Chrysalis. I’m so honored that you all accepted my invitation. I understand your last field trip turned out to be quite an ordeal...” He cleared his throat once for effect. “But don’t worry. I promise, there are no terrorists on board my ship.”

The students laughed.

“Better not be!” one of them called out.

“Appreciate it, Captain!”

“Not like that would happen to us twice, right?”

After allowing the students to settle down, Harris continued. “I appreciate the confidence, but I want you to know that I’m serious. Bringing smiles to my passengers is my number one priority. I take pride in guaranteeing you a perfectly safe and pleasant voyage, so please know that my crew will do everything in their power to... hm?”

Harris paused in confusion as one of the servers climbed up onto the stage. He was dressed in the standard black-vest-and-bow-tie uniform, but for some reason, he was also wearing a face-covering balaclava, and carrying a shotgun.

“Er...?” Captain Harris ventured, unsure of what was going on. With several hundred people watching, the man pointed the shotgun at the ceiling, and fired off a shot. With exclamations of surprise, Harris, the principal, and all of the students froze.

“Nobody move!” the man proclaimed. He had some kind of device attached to his throat that made his voice low and raspy. A familiar, tight frown was visible beneath his face-covering mask. “Second-year students of Jindai High School,” he continued. “Listen to me closely. We are a ruthless terrorist organization known as the Determined Revolutionaries. This symbol of the imperialistic exploitation class, the Pacific Chrysalis, is now under our control!”

His statement was followed by a long, long silence. Then...

“Again?!” The students shouted in unison.

The masked man responded indifferently to their shared heartfelt groan. “Unfortunately, yes. Control of this ship is now in the hands of...” The man looked up at the ceiling. “Ahh... Control of this ship is now in the hands of...” He then looked to the foot of the stage, as if seeking assistance.

A bartender, who had arrived at some point holding a rifle, whispered something back to the man. He was similarly masked, but bits of blond hair could be seen sticking out here and there from his hood.

“Ah... that’s right,” the first terrorist continued uncertainly. “Control of the ship is now in the hands of, er, the Discriminating Red Army.”

“That’s not the name he gave before...” someone observed.

“Hey, I think he’s struggling a little...”

“I’m not sure he knows what he’s doing...”

While students whispered to each other, the terrorist looked down, and took another deep breath. “The point is, we’re cold-hearted terrorists who will gladly kill anyone, even women or children. Resistance means death! I’m sorry to say that my shotgun only contains rubber bullets, but anyone who resists will be shot until they cry uncle and—”

“No! Real bullets!” the masked blond man hissed to him.

“That’s right,” the first man agreed, without skipping a beat. “Deadly slugs. One hit will prove lethal; I’m not lying.” Then, he pointed to the doors.

“Naturally, you won’t be allowed to leave this ballroom. Look!”

The students turned around and, as expected, saw an array of armed, masked terrorists blocking the ways to the corridor and the kitchen. Most of them were men dressed as cleaning staff and servers, but for some reason, there was a petite woman among them. She had ash blonde hair, and was dressed in a maid’s uniform, carrying a submachine gun. The lower half of her face was hidden by a scarf, the top half by RayBan sunglasses.

“Those people are all highly skilled, trained in Libyan terrorist camps,” the first terrorist told them. “Don’t even think about trying to fight them unarmed.” The

terrorists blocking the exits all took an imposing step forward. The masked maid attempted to do the same, but she tripped over her high heels and face planted on the spot.

“Colonel?!” the first terrorist shouted in alarm.

The masked maid picked herself up unsteadily, then proudly but weakly hefted up her submachine gun as if to say, “I’m fine.” An awkward silence followed.

The terrorist cleared his throat, then continued. “Anyway, that’s the situation. Now, Captain Harris, please come with us. As murderous terrorists, we have some negotiations to run down with you. Hmm? What is it?”

Harris was staring, dumbfounded, and the terrorist followed his gaze. Chidori Kaname was stalking up the stairs towards the podium.

“Stop, woman. Stop, or I’ll shoot.” The terrorist pointed his shotgun at Kaname.

She didn’t stop.

“I told you to stop,” he tried again.

Kaname still didn’t stop.

“Your foolhardiness will be your undoing. Obey, or see your friends and teachers blasted into—”

Wham! A right straight punch from Kaname sent the terrorist slamming to the floor. The microphone went flying, and crashed to the stage with a deafening screech of feedback.

“You know, Sousuke, you are *really* something else...” For better or worse, the mike didn’t pick up her voice. Kaname lifted the ‘terrorist’ up by the lapels.

“Now, come with me,” she finished ominously.

“Wait... Chidori! I can explain—”

“Just come with me!”

“Listen to me!” Sousuke begged.

“What part of ‘come with me’ don’t you understand?!” Kaname snarled,

stalking off the stage, half-dragging the terrorist with her. For some reason, his allies didn't try to stop it. They actually looked a bit abashed about the situation, which is why the terrorist guarding the ballroom doors simply withered beneath her glare and stepped aside. The door slammed closed behind them, and silence returned.

A buzz of whispers started among the Jindai High students.

"K-Kaname-chan..."

"Not even terrorists scare her..."

"She's so brave..."

"I'm so impressed, Chidori-san!"

"I think she's just touchy because she's hungry."

"But there was something familiar about that dynamic..."

As the conversations continued, another terrorist took to the stage. This time it was a tall woman, dressed as a casino dealer with a checkered vest, a bowtie, and a tight, knee-length skirt. She was wearing large sunglasses, and carrying a famous German-made submachine gun on a strap over her shoulder. "Sorry about that," she said with an awkward laugh. "Um, so, anyway, you're all going to stay here in this hall. That girl had gotten pretty worked up, so our colleague *escorted* her to the infirmary." It looked a lot more like it was Kaname who had dragged the terrorist away, but the woman sounded confident in her version of events.

"Fortunately, you've all had experience as hostages, so I won't waste time with all the dos and don'ts," she continued. "Just find ways to kill time like you did last time—You'll be back home safe tomorrow."

"I feel like I've heard that voice somewhere before..." Kyoko muttered to herself.

"So, um... any requests?" the terrorist asked. "We're happy to indulge, within reason."

"Excuse me, but we're really hungry!" one of the students ended up shouting.

"Ah, that's right. Sorry about that—Go ahead and eat," she told them. "I'll

check back in later.” While the students rushed for the mountains of food, the terrorists walked off the stage with the pale-faced captain in tow.

1930 Hours

Bridge, Pacific Chrysalis

Those Mithril squad members who had infiltrated the ship as employees, and those who had landed in the ECS-camouflaged helicopter—a little over thirty in all—had broken into teams of three or four to swiftly lock down the ship. The machinery room and the crew cabins, the entertainment facilities, the communications infrastructure and temperature control systems, the storage rooms and the pantries... The simple presence of guns was enough to intimidate most of the crew and passengers into total submission. Each team precisely reported the number of hostages they’d taken, then gave an overview of their current status to their commander, Lieutenant Clouseau.

Clouseau was currently on the bridge of the Pacific Chrysalis; he’d entered with two other PRT (primary response team) members a few minutes earlier. The navigator, pilot, and other on-duty crew surrendered immediately in the face of their rubber bullet guns. Clouseau wasn’t happy about putting innocent people at gunpoint, but those were his orders; he’d had no say in the matter.

“Uruz-8 here. Area D4 secured, 32 hostages. Zero casualties.”

“Uruz-5. Area A8 secured, 18 hostages, zero casualties. No resistance.”

“Uruz-8. C-1 secured, uninhabited, zero casualties. Heading for C3 next.”

Zero casualties, zero casualties, zero casualties... One of the PRT soldiers plugged the information into a nearby laptop as the reports came in. Most of the passengers and crew on the ship were already secured.

“Uruz-9 here. D13 secured, three hostages taken. Zero casualties. We did meet slight resistance.”

Clouseau heard the report of Uruz-9, Corporal Yang, over the radio. “Uruz-1 to Uruz-9. What constitutes ‘slight resistance’? Explain.”

“A cleaning lady threw a mop at me,” Corporal Yang replied. “Now, she’s giving me an earful.”

Clouseau said nothing. When he listened closely, he could just hear a middle-aged woman’s voice through the receiver, shouting things like “for shame!” and “get a real job!” He closed his eyes, a vein throbbing in his forehead. “We’re terrorists,” he reminded his subordinate. “You don’t have to listen to her.”

“But she’s right,” Corporal Yang said guiltily. “It’s not right to threaten people with guns, even if we do have a good reason. She’s saying, ‘remember the faces of your family back home, remember Christmas as a kid,’ talking about home-cooked meals around the family table... She’s got my team all tearing up and questioning their life choices.” Yang’s voice was cracking a bit too.

“Well, don’t start bawling, now,” Clouseau ordered. “I’m unhappy about this as it is.”

“Sorry, Lieutenant. But it just doesn’t feel right, doing terrorism on Christmas... It’s a day when the whole world should be happy, you know? I’m missing my mom’s cheesecake.”

“Just secure your other assigned areas as quickly as you can,” Clouseau told him. “Got it?!”

“Uruz-9, roger...”

“Heaven’s sake,” Clouseau muttered after turning off the radio. “I know why we’re doing it, but this plan is still absurd...”

But why *were* they doing it?

If not for Gauron giving them the keyword “badame,” they’d have never suspected this cruise ship. Mithril’s intelligence division had investigated it in advance and given it the green light, but it seemed they’d been wrong to do so. There was something more to this ship, and the invitation extended to Jindai High School had simply been a trap set by Amalgam, or by someone involved with them. This operation was their squad’s way of getting the drop on them.

The mission was to be carried out almost entirely independently. They hadn’t told the intelligence division, naturally, but they also hadn’t told most of the operations HQ staff that the Tuatha de Danaan was going to take control of the

cruise ship. They leaked different information to different departments, so by watching how Amalgam responded, they might also expose any moles in their ranks.

They still didn't know exactly what the ship was hiding; that's what they were here to find out. This plan would let them ensure the safety of the students and Chidori Kaname, while also letting them investigate a suspicious section of the ship. As a way to strike back at the enemy when they least expected it, the plan made perfect sense.

Clouseau hadn't initially been much in favor of the plan that Sagara Sousuke and Kurz Weber had concocted. He and the de Danaan's XO, Lieutenant Colonel Mardukas, were against the seajacking from start to finish, finding it "ludicrous" and "irrational." But in the end, Colonel Testarossa and Major Kalinin steamrolled them by way of passive assent.

I'm a first lieutenant, after all. I'm close to being promoted to captain. It's about time I started learning to play politics, he'd decided. After all, they trained daily for dealing with this kind of terrorism, so they knew how to play the other side of it, but...

"Though Lieutenant, I have to say, it's fun to get to play the terrorists for once. Great way to relieve stress," one of the PRT sergeants said happily, his submachine gun pointed at the navigator.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," Clouseau said with a disgruntled expression. "And call me by my call sign in front of the hostages." It was then that he got a report in from Mao, who'd been sent to secure the grand ballroom and surrounding area. "Uruz-1 here," he began.

"Uruz-2, reporting in," Mao told him. "First hall secured. We have 324 hostages including students and teachers, as well as 28 kitchen staff, including the cooks. Zero casualties. I decided to let them eat their dinner for now. We've also taken the captain into custody."

"Roger," Clouseau replied. "How is Ansuz doing?" 'Ansuz' was the call sign for the commander-in-chief of the Tuatha de Danaan battle group, Colonel Teletha Testarossa. It was only used during maneuvers in which she was outside of the submarine.

“She left the ballroom after Uruz-7 and Angel,” Mao told him.

Hearing that, Clouseau scowled. “Angel left the hall? I thought she was going to lay low with the other students.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll call them back soon,” Mao said reassuringly. “How are the other teams doing?”

“They’re about 80% finished,” Clouseau told her. “Zero casualties. We took the machinery room earlier and hijacked their communications systems. Some of the crew were apparently armed, and we did meet some minor resistance from them.”

No ordinary cruise ship would have armed security on board; those people must be soldiers in cahoots with the enemy, which meant they really were guarding something important.

“I see,” Mao observed. “So, should we continue as planned with the captain?”

“Yes, take him in,” Clouseau decided. “And... be gentle.”

Kaname walked swiftly, away from the ballroom full of students triumphantly tearing into their feast. When she finally reached an unoccupied smoking area, she gave Sousuke a hard kick in the rear.

“What are you doing?” he complained.

“Shut the hell up!!” she screamed at him. “It’s fine if you didn’t want to come on the trip! I don’t care if you have a party at your base, either! And I won’t ask what kind of dirty business you people get up to all day... But now you’re attacking our *school*? Seriously?!”

“Well, we’re not exactly attacking your school—”

“Like hell! And take off that mask, you...!”

“Ah... don’t pull it so hard,” he begged. “It hurts...”

Kaname yanked the balaclava off of the struggling Sousuke. “What the hell were you thinking?! Explain yourself!”

“Wait a minute, Chidori. Didn’t you read the emails I sent you?”

“Uh... well, actually...” Kaname hesitated. Things between her and Sousuke had been so strained lately that she’d deleted everything he’d sent her without a second glance.

“I wanted to tell you what was about to happen. But you wouldn’t let me speak to you, so—”

“F-Forget the emails!” One of Kaname’s deepest character flaws was her inability to just admit fault and apologize at times like these. “Th-There’s nothing you could say that could make seajacking okay! I thought you were the guys who *fought* terrorists! This makes no sense!”

That was when she heard a new voice just behind her. “Untrue. It makes perfect sense.” Rushing towards her now was the masked, ash blonde, submachine gun-wielding maid. In a way, her appearance was far more disturbing than that of a normal terrorist.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Kaname asked, slumping over.

In response, the masked maid—Tessa—smiled confidently. “Heh heh heh... I’m the brilliant leader of the Highly Discriminating Liberation Front, AKA, the HDLF.”

“That’s not what he called it before,” Kaname pointed out.

“Never mind that! The point is, I am the very evil leader of a highly-experienced terrorist cell. We spare neither women nor children!” With that, Tessa made a ‘pow-pow’ shooting motion with her gun.

“You’re the child here. See?” Kaname snatched the sunglasses off the other girl’s face.

“Ah! P-Please give those back...” With her face now uncovered, Tessa’s saucer-like eyes filled with tears, and she started flailing in panic. Feeling she’d proved her point, Kaname returned the sunglasses, and the other girl breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness. These tough-guy glasses are the only thing keeping me from breaking under my guilty conscience...”

“Or you could just not commit terrorism?!” Kaname demanded irritably.

Tessa looked crestfallen. “You’re right... But this seemed like the safest and

most reliable option. I truly am sorry for the fear and inconvenience we've caused the passengers. Putting on these sunglasses and comporting myself like a gang leader is the only way that I can maintain psychological balance..."

Kaname watched her skeptically for a moment, then said, "Gimme," and snatched away her sunglasses again.

"Ahh... G-Give those back! Without those, I... I..." Tessa looked like she might cry.

"This is really hard on you, huh?"

"That's what I'm telling you!"

"Chidori, stop," Sousuke ordered. "Give them back to her."

Sousuke's chiding caused Kaname's temper to flare anew. "Ngh... What's that supposed to mean?"

"Give them back!"

"No way. Hmph!"

"You're distressing the colonel! And I've been trying to explain things to you."

"Explain *better*, then!"

Sousuke shook his head, exhausted by her continued hostility. "Enough, Chidori. Your hard-headedness has exceeded rational limits this time."

"Well, excuse me!" she retorted. "I *am* an annoying brat who never listens, after all!"

"That isn't what I said," he told her placatingly. "I just don't understand why you always—"

"Give them back!" Tessa tried again.

"Oh, you shut up, too!" Kaname snarled.

"Just give them back to her and listen to me!" Sousuke said.

"Don't order me around! This is such typical you!"

"Because you're always so stubborn!"

"So are you!" Kaname replied. "You *always* act like you're the one in charge!"

Who do you think you are? I think—”

“Just give them back to her!”

Kaname was unmovable, Sousuke was annoyed, and Tessa was panicking. Nothing was being achieved at all. That’s when a new voice joined in over the din.

“Enough already!!” It was Mao. She was heading toward them, prodding along the captured Captain Harris with the muzzle of her submachine gun. This scolding from a fourth party brought all three to silence.

“Yeesh... What’s all this damned yelling about?” Mao demanded to know. “Also, Sousuke! Why is Kaname mad at you? You told her what the deal was, right?”

“Er... affirmative,” he hedged.

“This is such a big mess. I managed to feed an excuse to the other students, but it’s probably going to make her look really bad! This was your idea, remember? So it was up to you to get it done right,” Mao lectured. “Take responsibility and see your mission through, Sergeant!”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to write this up in my report,” Mao sighed.

“Acceptable. It was my mistake,” Sousuke admitted freely, without saying one negative word about Kaname. His behavior now was entirely noble, in a total reversal from his earlier bickering.

It inspired a pang of conscience in Kaname. Really, if he were the kind of man who would have blamed this on her, she wouldn’t get so stubborn and bothered about it at all. Ironically, it was his straight-shooting nature that made it harder for her to be forthright.

“Well, it’s fine,” Mao decided. “But I’d better get you an explanation. Follow me, Kaname.”

“Huh? Where to?”

“The vault. Isn’t that right, Captain?” Mao said with a grin to Captain Harris, who was standing in front of them. The man kept his eyes pointed down, his

face pale and drawn.

“Um, Captain?” Kaname asked. As the captain of a seajacked ship, she would have thought he’d want to say something to a passenger like herself—reassure her, maybe. But instead, he just glared silently at her, without a single sympathetic word.

Just before the seajacking occurred...

Commander Killy B. Sailor of the nuclear submarine Pasadena—part of the United States Navy’s SUBPAC—was standing in the cruise ship’s telephone area. Most of the passengers had already moved to the dining halls, which meant he was alone.

Sailor, who had come to Japan for Christmas break, was locked in an argument with his wife, who had just gone home to California.

“...Darn it! I call in to check on you, and this is what I get?! Well, I... you idiot, I keep telling you! I had a mission! But I worked hard to get home the night before the trip to Japan, and... shut up! Huh? Then what was I supposed to do?! Are you saying I should go up to the subordinates and engineers working up all night to fix a problem in the machinery room and say, ‘My wife’s mad at me, so I’m leaving’?! You think I can— what was that?! You mean you and that kid Smith... aha! I see! Well, I’m having a nice time, too! With a real hot little number! ...Shut up, Takenaka’s in Hawaii!” Commander Sailor shouted into the receiver.

The man had black hair in a crew cut and blue eyes, prominent features, high eyebrows, and a square forehead; in other words, he was the quintessential bodybuilder-type. He had the physique to match, too, with a body like some macho man Hollywood star. He was feeling distinctly out of shape lately, but for some reason, he’d developed no extra flab around his waist. It was probably a genetic thing, just the way his body was made. Most people meeting him for the first time, when they heard he was in the military, assumed he was Army, and he hated it.

Commander Sailor went on shouting at his wife, who was nattering on hysterically on the other end of the satellite line. “Oh, shut up! Stop shouting

about everything! The Navy is my life! If you don't like that... Fine, sounds great! Go suck that asshole off! It's not like you're— hello? Are you listening?!" Sailor tapped the receiver as her voice cut off. "Hey, Eliza! If that's the way you want it..." He scowled suddenly, questioning. There was no sound from the phone at all, not even static. She'd hung up on him.

"Well, screw her!" He slammed the receiver down and was about to curse again... but instead, he just sighed. There was nothing to be done, then. His marriage was over. This trip had been a last-ditch effort to salvage things, but even that had blown up in his face.

Ah, well. He'd paid a lot of money to come here, so he might as well enjoy it. After composing himself, Sailor decided to return to his table where a delicious banquet awaited him.

That's when something strange happened: a gunshot rang out from the ballroom. It was followed immediately by screams from passengers, and other sounds of commotion—dishes falling from tables, overturned carts, the barking of commands...

There was no question—that was a gunshot. A submachine gun? An assault rifle, maybe...

Commander Sailor looked around, panicked. Could it be... a seajacking? He could hear swift footsteps approaching from just ahead, on the other side of the double doors. The terrorists were coming his way. He was the only one in the corridor; beside him was the women's bathroom. He burst through the door, and heard the terrorists' footsteps fly into the hall a second later, right where he had been. They'd be checking the bathroom soon, too. He had to find somewhere to hide!

There was a maintenance door at the end of the row of stalls, probably for maintaining the pipes that ran up and down the ship. The mechanical workings that would have been exposed on a submarine were hidden behind wooden walls on this cruise ship. Sailor opened the door, stepped into the wall, and hid behind the thick pipes within. It was a close call; the men came barging in an instant later. They were checking the stalls one by one, their movements swift and sharp.

Sailor held his breath.

After making sure the stalls were empty, they finally opened the maintenance door to Sailor's hiding place. A flashlight's beam searched here and there around him. His breathing and heartbeat sounded deafening to his ears. But while he stood there, trying to hold his silence behind the complex network of pipes, the terrorist spoke up, reporting to someone on the radio: "Kaun-23. E10 secured. No one here. Zero casualties. Moving on to E12."

The maintenance door slammed shut, and the footsteps departed just as quickly as they'd come. There was no idle chatter; as far as Sailor could tell, these men were very well trained.

Silence returned. After savoring a moment's relief, Sailor came back out into the bathroom. Shoulders heaving, he put his hands on the sink and stared into the mirror. "Think!" he chided his reflection. "Think, goddamn you!"

The only reason he hadn't fallen to pieces or started weeping from fear was because he'd been through tight scrapes before, even if they had been in a totally different setting. He'd spent half of his life in a submarine, and he'd had a few near-death experiences. And even if most of it had come about accidentally, he had combat experience, too. It wasn't commonly known, but very few serving submarine captains had actually fired torpedoes at an enemy; maybe only ten in the whole world. Captain Sailor of the Pasadena was one of those few.

That's right, he reminded himself. I'm a veteran. I'm an old sea dog, ready to do what needs to be done. The radio call the terrorist had put in earlier... Kaun-23, he'd called himself. He didn't know exactly what the call sign meant, but it was worth assuming they were dealing with a large enemy force. However...!!

"Like hell I'm dying here!" he whispered to the bathroom mirror. Now, think. Remember your Hollywood movies. People who do hijackings and things on Christmas always end up stopped by some hero who happens to be there.

That's right. A hero. Couldn't the hero, in this case, be storied submarine captain Killy B. Sailor, coming here on a break to deal with his marital problems?! "Yeah, that's right," Commander Sailor told himself. "That's what it's gotta be!!" He could feel himself regaining his spirit.

That's just what this is, he realized. Tonight is my night! A great adventure, full of thrilling fights to get the blood flowing! A romance with a beautiful leading lady! A showdown with a despicable enemy! My problems with my wife, Eliza, will seem trivial! This was getting better all the time, really. The big boss will probably be cold, emotionless, and handsome, probably someone out of the Navy, just like me. The girl will be a passenger on the ship, an exotic dark-haired 20-something. And XO Takenaka, who came on board with me... well, he's probably the guy who gets shot by the terrorists in the action.

"Takenaka. Poor guy..." Commander Sailor let out a pained sigh. After convincing himself that his subordinate was as good as dead, Sailor moved into action. "But don't worry, Takenaka. I will avenge you! I'll let my rage over your death fuel me into a table-turning counterattack about sixty minutes in!"

First, he had to find a weapon. He'd start with a mop, clear out some weak enemies, then get a pistol, he decided. Next on the docket would be a machine gun. Sailor could almost see the medal of honor he'd get for all this. *Get ready to die, you damned terrorists!*

2021 Hours

In front of the vault, Pacific Chrysalis

"So? What's so special about the vault?" Kaname asked Sousuke and the others.

They were in the bowels of the ship now, a corridor tucked away in a section near the machinery room. The vault was at the end of a hallway, and Kaname and the others had stopped in front of the door, which was made of a thick special alloy. Cruise ships similar to this one were frequently home to large storage areas like this, designed to safely hold precious jewelry, valuables, and works of art that the passengers had brought on board. In a ship of this size, it was almost the size of a bank vault.

"Don't tell me you came here to rob the place..." she muttered.

"That's exactly what we did," Mao said casually, then beckoned behind her.

“All right, Captain. Step right up.” Sousuke prodded him in the back, and Captain Harris moved in front of the safe door. His expression was tortured. “Open it for us?”

“No,” Captain Harris protested. “There’s nothing for you terrorists here in our vault. You think you can get away with this? Touch one hair on my precious passengers’ heads and you’ll pay!”

“Uh-huh,” Mao said with a smirk, and brandished her gun. “Cut the act already.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Last October, this ship underwent a refitting at the Shin-Kurusu shipyards,” Mao said. “There’s nothing about it in the documentation, but it seems like they messed around with some things around the vault, here: adding more to the area by cutting into the space reserved for fuel tanks, making the bulkheads more durable... way beyond what a normal passenger ship could possibly need.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Captain Harris denied.

“And even though it hurt efficiency, you swapped out the workers daily,” Mao went on. “Was it so they wouldn’t realize what they were doing?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. The upgrades we ran last year were just about modernizing our fire prevention systems,” Captain Harris insisted staunchly. “Besides, I’m just an employee of the cruise company. I don’t have any control over ship alterations.”

“Not in any public capacity, no,” Mao agreed. “But there’s no way that you, as Captain, didn’t know about the armed guards, or about this section of the ship, right?”

The man remained silent.

“And we know that your company’s bigwigs got a big payoff from *someone*. There’s no paper trail connecting you to the foundation in question, but money can always be traced.”

It was like a scene from a crime drama. Mao was the detective, and Harris

was the culprit—which would make Kaname a random audience member struggling to follow along. “What are you talking about?” she asked.

Mao shrugged in response. “I think whatever’s in this vault is a lot more valuable than smuggled goods,” she said. “Probably something important to Amalgam...”

Harris’s shoulders tensed up.

“See? Written all over his face.” Mao grinned. “And then there’s the way you looked at Kaname earlier... You don’t really think of her as one of your ‘precious passengers,’ do you? It’s almost as if you knew about her ahead of time.”

Harris said nothing, his face now white as a sheet. His fingers and jaw were trembling, his eyes were opened wide, and sweat had begun to bead across his forehead and neck.

“I think you know by now, don’t you? Who we are...” Sousuke, who had previously been silent, now spoke up solemnly. “Sunan, Ariake, Perio, Hong Kong... You’ve always had us playing defense, but we’ve finally regained the initiative. Accept that, and cooperate.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know anything. This is all ludicrous,” Harris whispered, after emitting a deep sigh. Then, a split-second later, he was moving, throwing himself at the unsuspecting Kaname. He was holding a small knife in one hand, which he must have smuggled in under his uniform hat.

Frozen, Kaname felt her mouth drop open. He reached for her collar, but Sousuke was faster. He knocked Harris’s arm aside with his shotgun’s stock, then plunged a fist hard into his exposed solar plexus. Harris let out a grunt, then collapsed to his knees.

Sousuke then kicked him in the face, which sent him into a crumpled, coughing heap. “This is who this man really is,” he declared. On his hands and knees, Harris let out a whine. Even Kaname, who was always kicking Sousuke around, was stunned by this barbaric treatment.

“Boy, what a sad way to show your true colors,” Mao lamented with a shrug. “Thought you could take her hostage, huh? Too bad. Guess the jig is up on your

gentleman act.”

“That’s right,” Sousuke agreed. “It was your actions that were truly ludicrous.”

“Ugh...” Harris groaned.

Sousuke knelt down in front of the man. “I can imagine why you would want to get my school involved. You thought you could use our students as hostages to force Chidori to do something, correct?” He must have been right, because Harris gritted his teeth and glared at his captors.

“But remember this...” Sousuke grabbed him by the collar and pulled him in close, pointing the knife he’d stolen at Harris’s neck. “If you lay one finger on anyone from this school—not just Chidori—I will personally skin you alive and watch you bleed to death,” he promised solemnly. “Do you understand? I will subject you to pain and despair beyond your wildest imaginings. Don’t assume Mithril is some naive band of do-gooders. We know exactly how you people do things, too. Don’t forget that.”

Harris remained silent, his face ashen from fear.

Perhaps detecting the deadly aura radiating from Sousuke, Tessa squirmed nervously. “Sagara-san is rather frightening...” she observed.

“He *is* being weirdly intense...” Kaname agreed.

“Hunger must be making him cranky...” Tessa suggested in response.

“Yeah, he does seem a little pissier than usual...”

The whispered conversation was occurring right next to Sousuke, and his eyebrow twitched as he overheard them. “Chidori,” he said at last. “I am currently attempting to intimidate a hostage. Would you please be quiet?”

His request caused Kaname to snap again. Puffing out her cheeks, she said, “Why am I the only one you chewed out?”

“What? W-well, I—”

“She’s exactly right! You must discard your biases and scold me as well!” Tessa interrupted.

“Why should I—”

“You’re always on eggshells around me, Sagara-san!”

“That’s not the problem, is it?!” Sousuke demanded in exasperation.

“It *is* the problem!” Tessa insisted. “You always do it! Why am I always the one left out?”

“You know, Tessa—”

“Would you two please—”

As the three-way yelling started up again, Mao pulled a handgun from under her vest, then silently fired it into the ceiling. There was an ear-splitting clang, and dust sprinkled down on them. Silence reigned again as Mao returned her handgun to its holster and cleared her throat. “Look, you three. This conversation is going nowhere.”

“Right...” Kaname and Tessa responded in unison.

“Anyway, Captain,” Mao continued. “Please open the safe.”

“What? But I can’t open it...” Tessa protested.

“Not *you*, Captain! The other captain!” Mao fumed.

Tessa just tapped her fingers together meekly. “Oh... I was only... joking.”

“Sheesh...” Mao muttered, mussing up her hair to express her frustration. Kaname and Tessa decided to move a little distance away, to avoid another deflation of the needed intensity, as she and Sousuke resumed their attempts to intimidate Harris.

“Anyway, open it, please,” Mao said as she dragged Captain Harris over and sat him in front of the vault’s console.

“I... I can’t. I can’t open it,” Harris said, looking flustered as he read the screen display.

“Come on,” Mao scoffed. “Cut out the stall tactics, would you?”

“It’s true, though!” Harris insisted. “The safe’s electromagnetic lock has already switched to emergency mode. It won’t accept my passcode.”

“Oh, really? I guess I’ll have to drag it out of you, then.” Mao pointed her submachine gun’s muzzle at Harris’s right knee. “I won’t kill you right away;

we'll start with a little warning shot. Right, Sousuke?"

"That does seem appropriate," he agreed.

"I'll count to three."

Harris panicked and cowered. "P-Please believe me. I'm not—"

"One."

"I'm not lying. Once it's in this mode—"

"Two."

"L-Listen to me! There's nothing I can do to open—"

"Three."

As Harris desperately protested, Mao fired three muffled gunshots at his knee. Harris let out a falsetto scream and fell onto his backside. "Ahhh! Ah! Ahh! Did you shoot me?! You stupid bitch!"



“Now, the left one,” she decided, and began to adjust her aim.

“No, please! Stop! I can’t open it, I’m telling you! Dammit! I mean it! I mean it...” Mao and Sousuke exchanged a glance as they watched Harris, gripping his right knee and sniffing. They seemed somehow disappointed.

“Well, Sousuke?” she asked her compatriot.

“It doesn’t look like a performance,” Sousuke said, giving his opinion with cool-headed insight.

“I guess it’s not gonna be that easy, huh?” Mao asked with a sigh.

“Just as expected,” he agreed. “Let’s get to work.”

“Right. Have Speck and the guys bring the machinery in,” Mao said, making the order official.

“Roger.” Sousuke reached for the switch on his radio and contacted the team.

“Hey, big guy! You gonna sit there crying all day? Get up!” Mao said, kicking Harris roughly with her toes as he rolled around on the floor.

Meanwhile, the sound of the gunshot had brought Tessa and Kaname running from the other end of the hall. They protested immediately when they saw what was happening.

“M-Mao-san?!” Kaname exclaimed in shock. “I know he’s a bad guy, but this is too far!”

“Melissa? I understand that this is necessary, but at least treat his injury!” Tessa insisted.

Mao scowled at them. ““Treat his injury?”” she scoffed. “At the most, he needs some ointment.” They both looked at her, confused. “Look closer,” she suggested laconically. “Rubber bullets.” There was no blood on Harris’s shot knee. If she’d used a live round, there would have been a pool of crimson on the floor by now.

“It hurts, it hurts, it hurts!! A doctor... call a doctor, please!” The only one who didn’t seem to realize this, then, was Harris himself, who continued to writhe overdramatically.

Soon enough, the members of the other teams that had secured the Pacific Chrysalis began to wander up to the vault. Some of them seemed to recognize Kaname, and called out things like, “Hey, Kaname!” and, “How you doing?” But because they were wearing masks, she didn’t know who was who. Corporal Yang and another soldier led off Captain Harris, who was still whining indignantly about the pain he was in. They’d probably continue his interrogation in another section of the ship. Electronic devices large and small were rolled in on a cart; these were probably meant for opening the vault door.

“Are you gonna crack the safe now?” Kaname asked.

“Yep,” Mao told her. “We’ll just have to pick the lock. Directed explosives won’t even dent the bulkhead around it; it’s about on par with the reactor of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier.” Mao used a specialty tool to remove the console panel, then started fiddling with the electronics inside.

“Is that impressive?” Kaname wanted to know.

“Affirmative. A carrier’s nuclear reactor is designed to survive even a direct hit from an anti-ship missile unscathed. The metal they’re using here is close to that,” Sousuke said.

“I was hoping to show Kaname what was in the safe, but... this is gonna take some time. Why don’t you rejoin your friends for now?” Mao asked.

“Fine,” Kaname agreed. “But what’s in there, anyway?”

“We don’t know yet,” Tessa said. “But it’s clear that they were after you, so it’s most likely related to your nature as a Whispered. They probably want to put you into a TAROS, or some other research apparatus... We’re going to interrogate the captain, and break into that safe tonight. We’ll collect all the data we can, then withdraw from this ship.”

“Oh. So that’s why you’re here, Tessa?” Kaname finally understood. Tessa was quite capable as a submarine commander... but the minute you threw her out into the field, she became a useless klutz. It was one thing when trouble arose spontaneously, like in Ariake, but it was unusual for her to join a planned operation like this.

“That’s right,” Tessa agreed, puffing out her chest. “They’ll need my

intelligence to analyze what's inside."

"I think you just wanted to dress up as a maid and mess around," Kaname told her acridly.

Tessa slumped over.

Kaname was wondering if she'd gone too far, when Mao chimed in with agreement. "Kaname's right, Tessa. You can't complain about being seen that way, after how you've acted today."

"I—"

"Please don't trip up your soldiers in the field, all right, *Colonel*?" Ignoring Tessa's pouting in response, Mao plugged a few cables to her laptop, then spoke into her radio. "Uruz-2 to Kaun-6. Cut the power to C35."

All the lights in the ceiling suddenly flicked off, then turned on again. Mao gazed at her PC's holo-screen and clicked her tongue. "Ah, it's no use. Forget it... Put it back on," she ordered. "Knew it'd be an independent circuit... ugh. I'll just have to work my way through each security level. I'll need Dana's help, too. For connection... yeah, V-channels and G-channels are too slow. I'll need the wire. You brought the drum of fiberoptic, right? Call a turtle to the starboard side..."

Kaname and the others stood by silently, listening to Mao's jargon-laden speech.

"Yeah," Mao went on. "I want a wired connection to the turtle. Huh? The commander says no? Say it's Tessa's order, then."

Naturally, Tessa was annoyed at having her name used in vain. "Melissa! Do not arbitrarily invoke my authority!"

"Okay, fine," Mao said agreeably. "Can I have permission?"

"W-Well—"

"Kind of in a hurry, here." Mao waved her hand in annoyance.

Tessa hesitated for a second, then, with a sulky scowl, said, "You have my permission."

“Right, thanks.” With that, Mao turned her attention back to the job at hand. “Speck, is the ‘stethoscope’ ready?”

“Ready,” Corporal Speck reported, playing around with the machine that used ultrasonic waves to determine the layout of the blocked-off room.

“Then let’s try it out. Go on, Kaname, go rejoin the hostages,” Mao ordered. “Sousuke, make sure she gets there safe. Tessa, don’t loiter around here; you’ll end up tripping over the cables. Go somewhere you won’t be in the way. If you need something to do, you can get me a sandwich.” Ignoring Tessa’s attempts at protest, Mao clapped her hands together. “Everyone ready?! We’re short on time, so let’s get this done!”

The members of the safe-cracking team all shouted, “Let’s do it!” in response.

3: Two Captains

24 December, 2052 Hours (Japan Standard Time)

In front of the vault, Pacific Chrysalis

The safecracking looked like it would take some time, so on Mao's suggestion, Kaname decided to go back to her schoolmates. Sousuke hurried to accompany her.

"It's fine," Kaname told him stiffly. "I can get back by myself."

"No," he insisted. "I'll walk you."

Just then, Kaname realized that Tessa, who'd been sulking over Mao's patronizing treatment, was now glancing over at her. She couldn't explain why, but it made her feel guilty. The treatment she got from Sousuke really did feel special, by comparison. He was biased in her favor, and that wasn't fair at all. With that feeling nagging at her, she repeated, "I said it's fine."

"No, I'll walk you."

Sousuke refused to give in, so Kaname decided to give up on arguing and just start walking. Sousuke quietly accompanied her. The two walked away from the vault, then headed for the elevator that would return them to the upper deck.

I'm a pretty awful person, Kaname found herself thinking. Just an hour ago, she'd been saying all sorts of unfair things to Kyoko. "I don't care about that jerk," and, "He doesn't really like me at all." But now that she was seeing the bigger picture, she was realizing that she was the real jerk in this situation. And yet, she hadn't apologized even once. She'd been attacking him every step of the way, and she'd even behaved cruelly to Tessa.

She had been angry and sarcastic, and even though Tessa was in a much more difficult position than she was, Kaname had actually been jealous of her. *I really don't get it,* she thought in bewilderment. Why am I always like this?

"Maybe I'm just spoiled..." Kaname muttered to herself. *That could be it. It could also be that today's a special day. Or maybe I just don't feel right when he's not with me...*

Still, she rationalized. I can't let things stay like this forever. Isn't that what I learned on that rainy day two months ago? Besides, I'm not sixteen anymore. With all that in mind, Kaname decided to speak up.

"Hey," she said.

"Yes?" Sousuke inquired.

"Mm... nothing," Kaname mumbled, chickening out.

"I see."

Another long silence followed. They stopped in front of the elevator, pressed the call button to go up... and once more, Kaname forced herself to speak.

"Hey," she tried again.

"Yes?"

"Everything's kind of turned into a mess, but..."

"Yeah."

"I think I was... happy that you came, Sousuke," she managed, then gently took his sleeve. She wasn't yet ready to hold his hand.

A longer silence followed.

"Is... that weird?" Kaname asked. "Coming out of nowhere?"

"No... I don't think it's weird." This time, it was Sousuke's turn to stumble over his words. "I'm glad to hear it."

"R-Really?"

"Yeah... hmm?" Sousuke cast a glance at the corner that joined the elevator hall to the corridor.

"What is it?" Kaname wanted to know.

"Nothing... Not an issue."

Kaname tilted her head at him.

“It’s all right, I think,” Sousuke said reassuringly.

The elevator door opened with a ding. Once they were inside, Kaname got a second wind. “Um, say. You want to hit up the observation deck?” she asked, in an energetic voice. “There’s no hurry to get back to the others, right?” She held her finger over the topmost button, then waited to see his reaction.

“It’s true that there likely won’t be any more violence tonight, so it’s probably not an issue...” Sousuke pondered for a moment. “It will be cold outside, though.”

“That’s okay,” Kaname told him. “We won’t stay out too long.”

“I see. Wait just one minute.” Sousuke flipped his radio on and started a conversation with someone. It was all code names and jargon, and Kaname had no idea what any of it meant. At last, he said, “Uruz-7, roger. Thank you.” Then he shut off his radio and said to her, “Let’s go.”

Kaname broke out in a smile.

Corporal Yang of the SRT and Private Wu of the PRT walked along towards the crew quarters block, dragging Captain Harris along with them. It was a bare-bones corridor that went on and on. Since the area wasn’t used by passengers, it was full of exposed pipes and girders. There were no high-class furnishings to be found here, not even carpet.

“So, Corporal,” Wu was saying, “I told this little girl, ‘Listen, just because it’s Christmas, doesn’t mean you can go wandering around town at this hour. You never know what kind of scum might try to pick you up.’”

“Right,” Corporal Yang agreed.

“And, well... she was just eleven or twelve years old, you know? And she grins at me like Master Sergeant Mao...”

“She’s a lieutenant now, actually.”

“...And she pulls this huge revolver out of her bag. It’s a .38-caliber, five-inch barrel. She says, ‘Get lost, soldier boy. You’re getting in the way of my business.’”

“Wow...”

“It was an awful town,” Wu grumbled. “Makes a man doubt the existence of God. The only decent hospital was in my base, too.”

Yang and Wu were sharing Christmas memories.

“C’mon, Wu, don’t you have any more cheerful stories? This is just depressing... Hey, Captain. Can’t you walk any faster?” Yang said leisurely to Harris, who was moving sluggishly along, hands cuffed behind him, dragging his right leg.

“I got shot in the leg, remember? You could have at least prepared a stretcher!” Harris, still worked up about the shooting, snapped back at him.

“Listen to this needy old codger...” Wu put in. “Why’d we get stuck with this guy, Corporal?”

“No idea.” Yang sighed. “Darn it. I wish I was on Kurz’s team.”

“They get to go to a party full of teenage girls...”

While Wu and Yang were grumbling to each other, the masked Kurz Weber was standing on stage in the ballroom, singing passionately into the mike as he played the guitar. “Wow! Take me out trench! A fat cat in front of Maya says that! Yeah!” The Jindai High School students were cheering, clapping their hands and swaying to the beat.

“Wow! He’s really good!”

“Eee! That masked guy is so hot!”

“He sounds a little like a foreigner I met once...” Kyoko muttered, but nobody was listening to her.

“Thank you! Come on, everybody!”

Yang and Wu just sighed as they walked down the dark corridor, as if they really could hear Kurz carrying on.

“He brought a guitar, right?”

“Yeah, he knew he was gonna do it. That guy’s nuts.”

“And easy to flatter...”

“And always ready to show off...”

Just then, a noise came from a crew cabin nearby. It sounded like a pen falling to the floor, followed by a rustling of clothes.

“Uruz-9 to Uruz-1. Any friendlies in D30?” Yang whispered into the radio after a pause. He had already turned his submachine gun towards the cabin. It was loaded with nonlethal rubber bullets, but they would still hurt when they hit—a few rounds fired into someone’s face would feel like a pounding from a pro boxer. Wu pulled Harris in closer, while keeping an eye out in the other direction.

The number of hostages their teams had reported in was a match for crew and passenger rosters. There shouldn’t be anyone else wandering around in the ship besides them.

Lieutenant Clouseau responded immediately. “Uruz-9. Negative. Report your status.”

“We just heard a sound in one of the cabins,” Yang responded. “Investigating now.”

“No, leave that to someone else. Prioritize transporting the captain,” Clouseau ordered.

Yang clicked his tongue. “C’mon, they’ll get away by then... I’ll check it myself. If you don’t hear from me in one minute, surround the block. Out.”

“Wait—”

Yang turned off the radio, then signaled for Wu to stand by, and approached the cabin in question.

There was more faint rustling.

Yang took a deep breath, then opened the door, and stepped swiftly into the cabin. The only sign of life there was a white cat on the bed. Had someone brought it on board?

“It’s a cat,” Yang said after a long pause.

“A cat? Heaven’s sake...”

Yang slumped over, then turned back in the door to face Wu and the captain. Just then, he saw a large, muscle-bound man, holding a bucket over his head, appear behind Wu and Harris. “Wu, your six—”

His warning came too late; the bucket crashed down on Wu’s head, sending him stumbling and gurgling beneath the dirty water. “What?!”

“Wu?!” Though Wu and Harris were in his firing line, Yang didn’t hesitate to unload. They were just rubber bullets, anyway—they wouldn’t kill anybody.

“Ow, ow, ow!” screamed Wu, who was now wearing the bucket, while Harris hit the floor.

The attacker used Wu as a shield, then grabbed a wire hanging from the wall. “Take this, you damned terrorist!!” the man screamed, and pulled the wire with all his might. There was a metal clinking sound.

Yang was about to shout... and then another bucket fell down from the ceiling and landed straight on the top of his head. A limp crack filled the hallway.

Yang’s last thought before losing consciousness was, “I think I’ve seen this setup before...”

After giving a full beating to the be-bucketed terrorist—Wu, it seemed his name was—with his mop, Sailor cried out, “W-Well?! How do you like that?!” He then kicked the terrorist in the butt. The action was met with faint writhing and a moan.

“Hey, you! Are you the captain?” Sailor helped up the crew member, whose hands were cuffed behind his back.

“Ugh...”

“Don’t worry. I’m a friend. Killy B. Sailor, Commander, United States Navy. I’m the famous captain of the USS Pasadena, a tough-as-nails veteran who just happened to be on board. Once I get this all under control, I want you to introduce me to the media as, ‘the true patriot and iron man, Captain Sailor.’”

“R-Right...” Captain Harris agreed shakily.

Commander Sailor picked up the enemy’s machine gun and checked the remaining ammunition. *Yeah, this’ll do fine*, he told himself. *The bullets aren’t the same color as the ones I used in standard training, but a real sea dog doesn’t sweat the details*. “First, we need to make tracks. They’ll send reinforcements soon enough. You can walk, right? Actually, you’d better run.”

“W-Wait, sir,” Captain Harris managed to interject. “Could you take off my handcuffs, first?”

“Oh, for the love of... Fine, hold out your hands.” Commander Sailor pawed around the terrorist’s body, found a bunch of keys, and unlocked the captain’s cuffs. “Better? Okay, let’s go.”

“No, I need to find a radio and contact the outside,” Captain Harris announced bravely. “You should go on without me.”

“What are you talking about? You’re not safe alone,” Commander Sailor scoffed. “If you’re going for a radio, I’m coming with you.”

“I’m grateful for the sentiment, but no.” For some reason, the captain was adamant about going it alone. “This ship is like my second home; I know all the best hiding places. And we should avoid the chance of both of us getting caught at once.”

“Hmm...”

“We can meet up later,” Captain Harris suggested. “Do you know the shopping center? It has plenty of places to hole up and hide.”

“Understood,” Commander Sailor agreed gruffly. “Take care.”

“See you later,” the captain said. Then he turned around and started running. Sailor had no way of seeing the slight smile on his face.

Tessa returned to the vault from the corridor near the elevator hall. Mao, who was working busily on the lock, said to her immediately, “Hey, Tessa, quit hovering. I’ll call you once I’m in, so go somewhere and sit tight. Sheesh, you’re clumsy enough as it is...” She was so focused on the display, she didn’t even

spare Tessa a glance. None of the other subordinates present paid her any mind, either. They were all too focused on their own tasks:

“I’m sorry, Colonel. Please get out of the way.”

“Colonel, ma’am. You’re in the way, standing there.”

“Sorry, Colonel, you’re distracting me.”

That’s what they all said. It annoyed her at first, but after being treated that way again and again, Tessa eventually lost the will to protest. She really was clumsy, after all, and she didn’t know anything about picking locks. The maid outfit she’d found so charming when she’d showed it to everyone before the mission now seemed silly and childish.

She tried asking if she should make some tea, and the response was an indifferent, “Hmm, if you want.” She asked if they’d like chamomile, and the response was an indifferent, “Whatever you like.” She felt like an absolute nuisance.

With a stinging sense of loneliness running through her, Tessa slumped over and headed for the crew kitchen on the same floor. It was a few minutes’ walk away, and turned out to be completely bare bones. She looked around for a tea set, but all she could find were coffee mugs.

Tessa sighed in resignation as she pulled out the small tin of herbal tea she’d brought with her. She took off her sunglasses and rubbed her eyes. She wasn’t going to cry, of course, but she did feel miserable. *Come on*, she told herself, *We’re on a mission right now*. She was the one acting unreasonably, here. She needed to stop acting like they were on a picnic, and appreciate her subordinates’ focus.

Still... I just feel so invisible. Today is supposed to be my special day, yet even Sousuke... He just ran off with that girl. And then in the elevator hall, they—

As she was gloomily filling the kettle with water, she got a call through her small earpiece radio. “Uruz-1 to all units. We have a situation.” It was from Lieutenant Clouseau on the bridge. “Uruz-9 and Kaun-28 were attacked near B19. Injuries were light for both, but the captain they were escorting was kidnapped. Be on your guard. Uruz-3’s team has the area surrounded, but he

may have already escaped—”

Someone had attacked Corporal Yang and taken Captain Harris. Tessa cringed as she heard the announcement. Trouble had arrived. She had to cast aside her childish woes and get a grip.

Clouseau’s announcement continued. “—The attacker appears to be a passenger. Maybe he thinks he’s being a hero. Don’t kill him, or them. I repeat: do not kill the rogue element. The man who took Captain Harris is Caucasian, six feet tall, wearing a suit, with short black hair and a muscular physique. He stole a firearm, but it only contains nonlethal rubber rounds. I repeat. The attacker is Caucasian, six feet tall, wearing a suit—”

Tessa’s attention was snatched away from Clouseau’s communication. A man had just leaped into the kitchen. He was six feet tall, wearing a suit, Caucasian, with a muscular physique, and short black hair. On top of that, she had to say, he looked a bit like Arnold Schwarzenegger when he acted in comedies.

In other words, he looked just like the man from Clouseau’s report.

The man pointed a submachine gun (probably Yang’s) at her, and barked at the top of his voice, “Okay! Don’t you move, filthy terrorist!” Then he stopped and narrowed his eyes suspiciously at Tessa: a young girl, standing frozen in front of the stove, holding a large kettle and two mugs, and dressed as a maid.

“...Ah,” she said tactfully.

“Aren’t you part of the crew? What the hell are you doing here?” he asked, whipping his gun in various directions, with strangely exaggerated sweeps.

“Er... who are you?” Tessa tried again.

“It’s okay! I’m a friend,” Commander Sailor told her reassuringly. “Just a brave passenger who happened to be aboard. I just got done finishing off two of the terrorists!”

“What?”

“I also saved the captain, but he ran off on his own,” Sailor continued. “I’m a little worried... but eh, I’m sure he’ll make it out fine.”

He’d let Captain Harris—the Amalgam collaborator—run free? “Wh-What

were you thinking?" Tessa demanded to know.

"Oh, don't be a buzzkill. I've got the situation under control."

"No, I don't mean that—"

"Anyway, it stinks that my leading lady has to be a damned kid, but I guess beggars can't be choosers," Sailor grumbled to himself. "It's dangerous here. Follow me."

"Er... I don't understand what you're talking abo— ow, that hurts!" Tessa exclaimed in surprise. "Let me go! Wh-Where are we—"

Sailor began to march them along swiftly. "We're getting out of here!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "The terrorists are nearby! Good thing I found you first, or things would've gotten X-rated fast!"

"I don't think that's true. Um, please— ow, don't yank my arm!" Tessa begged. "Stop this! Are you listening to me? Ow, ow..."

"Toughen up! This is life or death, okay? Pain comes with the territory! Get running, sailor! Show some balls!"

"I don't have any balls!"

Tessa didn't even have time to grab the submachine gun or sunglasses she'd left in the back of the kitchen. Dragged unwillingly by the hand and tripping over her unfamiliar high heels, she stumbled along behind him. All she could do as they went along was continue to protest, with tears in her eyes.

“Did you wait long?” the man asked.

“Not especially,” the younger man replied. “What happened?”

“Admiral Borda’s secretary, Jackson—Mr. Zinc, as your people call him—has been captured. I didn’t tell him what my squad was doing, so he got sloppy.”

“Excellent work.”

“Was it? You could have helped him escape, if you had wanted to.”

“If I had, we’d be trying to kill each other right now,” the young man said jokingly, then sipped from his glass. “Still, I am tremendously honored that you agreed to meet me, Major Andrey Kalinin.”

“Leonard Testarossa-kun,” Kalinin observed thoughtfully, “I’ve heard all about you.”

The waiter brought vodka, and the two men raised a ceremonial glass.

Epilogue

The withdrawal went smoothly. Mao's team hauled out the machinery hidden in the vault's back room, carried it onto the helicopter, and then took off. Clouseau's team apologized profusely to the crew and passengers, then quickly left the ship. They'd thought about taking a few of Harris's co-conspirators from the security team with them, but decided against it; these men didn't know much about Amalgam.

The Pacific Chrysalis was taken in by the coast guard in the wee hours of the 25th, and then entered the Port of Yokohama early that morning. When the press rushed them with cameras flashing, the students of Jindai High shamelessly flashed peace signs, earning scowls from those with better sense.

The only person with serious injuries, Commander Killy B. Sailor, was saved "thanks to swift first aid by the terrorists," and quickly became a media darling. He asserted, "It wasn't the terrorists; it was the captain who shot me!" and cruise line representatives struggled for an explanation before eventually sweeping it under the rug as being an 'accidental discharge.'

An outraged Commander Sailor wanted to tell reporters about the mysterious girl he'd met and everything else, but the Navy brass stopped him: *Don't think about it. Just tell them "I did my best" and accept your hero title.* Sailor tried to refuse, but they threatened to 'promote' him from his beloved captain's chair to a desk job at the Pentagon, so he'd had no choice but to stay silent. The incident left a bad taste in his mouth.

Captain Harris, still missing, was savaged by the press. It was decided that, shaken by his "accidental discharge," he'd taken a boat and tried to escape on his own, before going down somewhere in the middle of the ocean.

Sousuke and Tessa were taken right to the Tuatha de Danaan after the helicopter picked them up. He didn't have time to return to the cruise ship and talk to Kaname.

Two days later, the squad held a late Christmas party on Merida Island, and

celebrated Tessa's birthday at the same time. She was genuinely surprised by the surprise party.

Mardukas, stoic in his party hat and Groucho glasses, handed her a bouquet. Kalinin, who arrived late from Sydney, gave her a red brooch, saying it was from an 'acquaintance.' Mao gave her Dior lipstick and said, "You're becoming a beautiful woman. Cheer up."

Tessa was delighted by her subordinates' plan... but a part of her remained melancholy.

After finishing his debriefing, writing his report and participating in the party, Sousuke finally returned to Tokyo three days after Christmas. They were called to school on the morning of the 28th, and naturally, the seajacking was all anyone could talk about. A good portion of the class hadn't taken part in the trip, so those who wanted to share their experiences didn't lack for a willing audience.

Perhaps because there were no casualties, the newspaper coverage had been relatively restrained. Apparently, that same night, a member of the US cabinet had been assassinated with a bomb, so that was taking the lion's share of the media attention. The students of Jindai High found that very upsetting.

Their homeroom teacher, Kagurazaka Eri, announced to the classroom, "Excuse me! Through some strange twist of fate, we ended up in another awful situation, but I'm glad you're all fine! If, knock on wood, this happens a third time, I urge you to refrain from flashing peace signs to the media! Is that understood?!"

"Yes ma'am," the students replied obediently enough.

"Fine. Have a happy New Year, then!"

The homeroom session lasted a little over ten minutes. "Why would you call us out here for that?" the students grumbled, and began noisily preparing to head home.

Kaname rushed out of the classroom to see to an errand, then returned ten minutes later to find everyone already gone—everyone except for Sousuke. He

was leaning against the wall by the window, as if he'd been waiting for her return. "Did you finish what you needed to do?" Sousuke asked, with a strange stiffness in his voice.

"Yeah," she said. "What about you?"

"I'm free at the moment. But... do you remember what I said on the ship?"

"Er... y-yeah..." she stammered. This was their first time seeing each other since the cruise. He'd said 'I want to talk to you when this is over,' and that was that. Kaname suddenly felt nervous all over. "So... what did you want to talk about?"

"Ah. Well..." Sousuke hesitated. "It's just... what I wanted to talk to you about is... well..." He looked around nervously, head bowed, then wiped at his forehead and let out a big sigh. There was a faint flush in his cheeks. "Damn. A day really does sap the determination..." he whispered as if to himself.

"So, what is it?" she asked insistently.

"Ah, sorry... The thing is, I know I caused a lot of trouble for you the other day. I know it's not the right time, but... this is for you." As if to force a change in subject, Sousuke reached into his collar pocket and produced an unset stone. It was a round, smooth oval, reminiscent of the sea with its deep blue color. A striking spiral of black ran through it, as if it had the sea currents themselves sealed inside.

"What is it?" Kaname wanted to know.

"A lapis lazuli," Sousuke said. "I got it when I was in Afghanistan. I want you to have it... if you'd like that," he said haltingly.

"Th-Thanks. But... you already gave me a Christmas present—"

"Actually... it's a birthday present," he clarified.

"Huh?"

"This was supposed to be the main event," Sousuke explained. "I've thought... for a long time... that it would suit you, I suppose." It had probably taken all of his courage to say that. Trepidatiously, he took her hand and placed the stone inside it. "I'm sorry it's late, but happy birthday." The cold of the stone and the

warmth of his hand made a wonderful contrast. “And... merry Christmas.”

“Uh-huh...” She couldn’t help but find his efforts terribly funny. “Thanks, though it is a little late. And a very merry Christmas to you!”

The End

Afterword

Sorry about all that. It's been two years, but this has been the latest *FMP!* novel, *Dancing Very Merry Christmas*.

I said this would feature some lighter content, but... the main characters didn't exactly get to have a merry Christmas at all, did they? I can't apologize enough. Well... I don't know if anyone wants to see Sousuke bouncing between multiple heroines like the protagonist of a typical love comedy, though I've thought about that.

To prepare for this story, I researched one of those luxury liners. I had to pay out of pocket, so it was the cheapest cruise available, a one-night one. It came with a suite, and it was chock full of luxurious food and concerts. I didn't go drinking in the lounge, but I took some digital camera photos as references for Shiki-san.

But more than the luxurious stuff they showed the passengers, I wanted to see the machinery room and crew blocks. I asked the person at the front desk (though I know that's not quite the right term) if I could check them out, but they refused me with a customer service smile, and said: "For week-long cruises, we offer a tour of such facilities, so you'll have to sign up for one of them." In other words, "Not this time."

But a one-night cruise already cost 40,000 yen, so there was no way I could afford a seven-night one. Left with no other choice, I took matters into my own hands. Late at night, I slipped into the crew block unannounced. It was like a solo stealth mission; I was wearing a suit with a mini-camera in one hand, and felt just like James Bond.

Then, while I was sneaking to take pictures of the machinery room, I heard crew footsteps approaching around the corner. That had me sweating.

Oh no, I'll be caught. What to do? Should I run? No, I should ambush them, break their neck, steal their clothes and ID cards? Those thoughts flashed in my mind for a second.

In actuality, I was discovered, scolded, and kicked out. Sadly, they didn't grab me and strap me to some weird torture device, or throw me into a pool with killer sharks.

Setting all that aside...

The series is now entering its second half. I'm thinking I might end it in three or four books, but I'm not sure. Part of me thinks I should speed things up (though I always think that)...

I do suspect this will be the last of the "episodic" volumes. The reason I haven't written side-stories about some great post-January events, like Valentine's Day or the cherry blossoms, is not unrelated to the structure of the novels.

See, when I talk about future volumes, I end up setting myself out to dry, like I did this time. I hope it turns out okay. Hmm.

Now, other *FMP!*-related stuff...

Thanks to everyone's support, the *FMP!* anime was a roaring success. (Much thanks to Chigira-san and everyone else who was involved.) We already have the next anime series in mind. This one will be a peppy comedy based on the short stories. The director is an up-and-comer, Takemoto Yasuhiro-san. He's a nice guy who really knows his craft. I've humbly accepted their offer to work on the scripts. Hooray!

Around the time of this book's publication, we'll hit volume 5 of the comic version, Nagai Tomohiro's *Full Metal Panic! Overload*. It's a hilarious series. There are a surprising number of readers who haven't read that, so I'm going to make a hard sell for it.

I think the collection for Retsu Tateo's *Full Metal Panic!* manga adaptation will be out soon, too. This one's also very fun, of course. They're popular enough that they're getting a Korean and Taiwanese release, too.

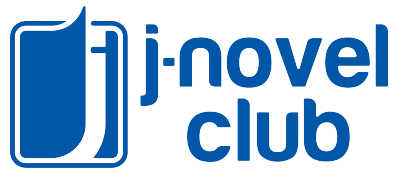
ORG-san's TCG "Full Metal Panic! Card Mission" is also popular enough to get booster packs. Even if you're not into the game, they have a lot of Shikidouji art you've never seen before. It's just packed.

Too much advertising, you say? I guess it is. As always, when it gets to the

afterword, I don't know what to write. Ah, well.

Anyway, thanks again for all the support. I can't thank you enough for your patience in sticking around with my talentless self. Thank you so much.

See you next time for another round of Sousuke in hell.



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Full Metal Panic! Volume 6 Odoru Very Merry Christmas by Shouji Gatou

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Illustrations by Shikidouji

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Ebook edition 1.0: March 2020