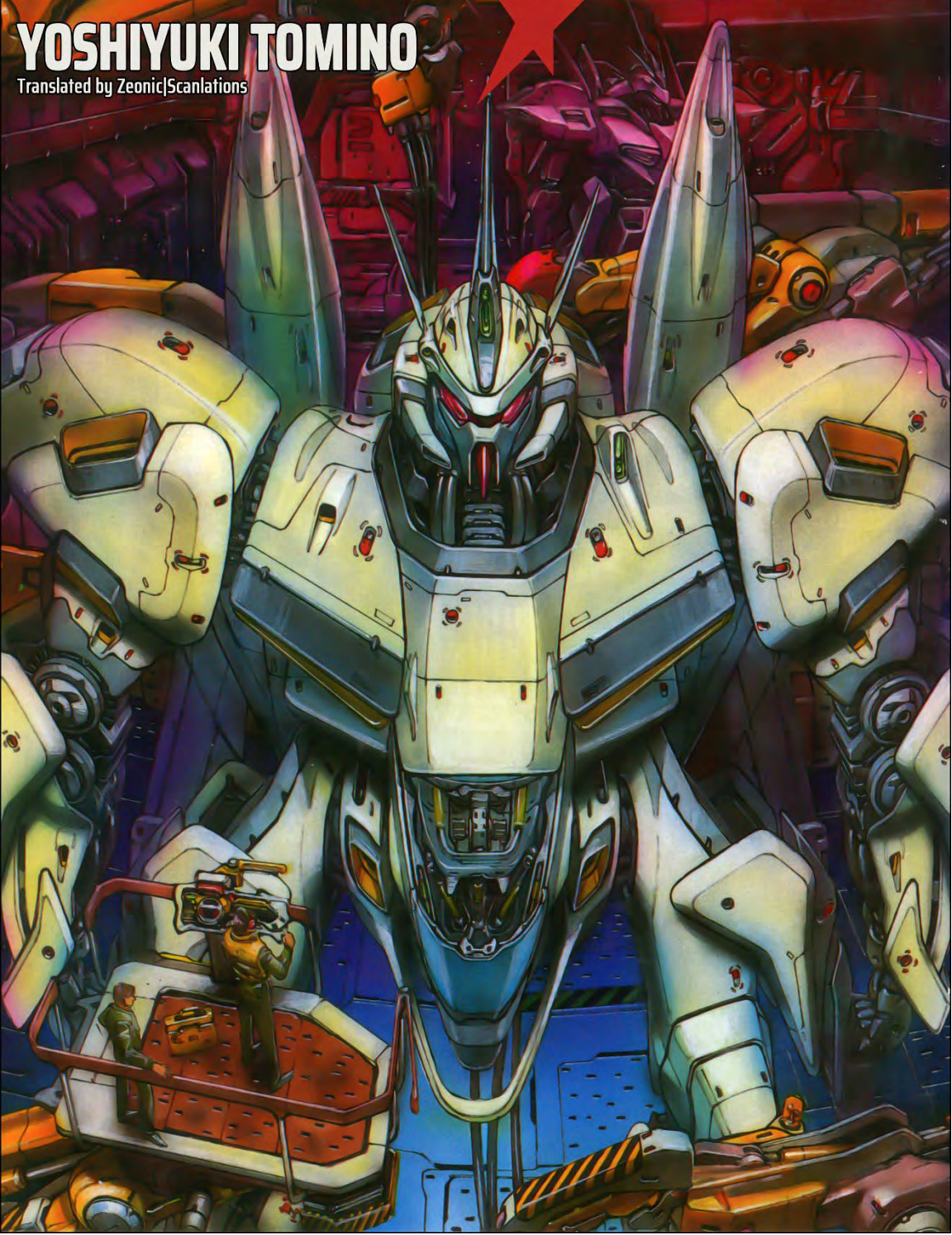


GAIAGEAR 2

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Translated by ZeonicScanlations



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Names, characters, organizations, places, events and incidents may differ slightly from official names at the time of translation. Updated versions of this will be made to reflect changes at a future date.

Kadokawa Bunko "GAIA GEAR VOL.2"
Released 1989.09.01

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Novel Translation and Book Layout by Zeonic|Scanlations

First Edition: September 2023

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1

The Side 2 space colony of Hellas.

The spaceship *Spasias*, having taken Affranchi Char aboard, planned to conceal the Zorin Soul, the humanoid machine he brought from Hong Kong in Asia, within the colony's industrial block. But upon seeing the young man Ul Urian, whom the *Spasias* had rescued, Affranchi put a halt to this plan.

To Miranda Howe, Captain Madras Caria, and the rest, his change of heart seemed like a command to be executed. For someone like him, who had lived an isolated island life until just the day before, the immediacy of their response was both startling and unsettling.

"This circumstance is not of my making... perhaps, it is the product of the resonances echoing within my mind," he mused in quiet reflection. From some point, he had started hearing peculiar sounds in his head—intermittent chirping noises or sometimes a continuous ringing. Yet, Affranchi didn't associate these with common headaches or tinnitus; they felt like signals emitted by some other "entity," resonating signals that felt more fitting as an interaction beyond normal human sensations.

"...but looking at it differently, that sound inside of me seems to have been implanted by this organization these people created... If that's the case, I can see why they follow me," Affranchi reasoned.

It made sense. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to live on a Southern Pacific island designated as a special nature observation area on Earth.

Now, in the era of space colonies, where two centuries have passed, and yet some islands remained unchanged for several centuries, it wasn't usual for ordinary people to reside. There must have been some deliberate orchestration. And the events since leaving the island gave enough credence to Affranchi's hypothesis.

Yet, if he was right...

"They aren't following me, but what's been planted inside my head. Then, who am I really?"

Such a realization was not easily accepted. On that island, Affranchi was just an ordinary man who loved Everly Key. He wasn't someone to be controlled by the inhabitants of a vast universe.

"I am Affranchi Char. My name represents a white man? That's absurd. I am who I am. Regardless of what symbolic meaning this name holds, it doesn't matter," he screamed internally. No one would willingly accept being controlled by memories they couldn't understand.

"Get in!" Krishna Pandent offered, stopping the compact electric vehicle, commonly known as elec-car, beside Affranchi, motioning to the passenger seat.

Meanwhile, Miranda Howe settled into the back seat.

"Thanks. I'd prefer the back," said Affranchi, unwilling to distance himself from Miranda. Since Hong Kong, her knowledge and background have been enlightening. It wasn't something he could easily part with.

"Fair enough..."

Without making a fuss, Krishna shifted, allowing Affranchi space in the back.

The elec-car moved on its guided rail, departing the bleak industrial block towards the elevator descending to the colony's inner wall.

It's a lamentable fate for vehicles without guide rails in areas devoid of gravity. Hence, such a system is utilized.

"The captain mentioned that that was to be taken outside."

"Outside?"

"Outside the space colony," Miranda stated nonchalantly.

"Oh..."

Though intrigued by this revelation, Affranchi felt as if his memories were still veiled, preventing him from delving deeper into the topic of the 'outside.'

"What did you sense from him?" Miranda inquired about Ul Urion.

"It's hard to explain... Are all things meant to have an explanation?" pondered Affranchi.

"Well, perhaps not..." Miranda replied, her smile hinting at uncertainty.

Ever since she recognized his likeness to Char Aznable, she was intrigued by his unique sensitivity, always attempting to glimpse into his eyes. And in those eyes, he perceived a color similar to Everly's.

The elevator terminal manifested as a section with the inner face of a cylinder about four hundred meters in diameter acting as the

floor. Elevators descended in all directions of the colony cylinder's inner wall.

Krishna directed the vehicle towards the corner leading to the Zhe district.

Shadows of people could be seen under the trees, but the afternoon hours painted a calm, serene atmosphere. Evergreen trees lined the walls, ivy creeping towards the skies, alleviating the stark industrial feel. In some spots, the opposite side's floor seemed inverted, a design decision to make the whole less discernible - a tactic to distract from the unsettling sensation of zero gravity. Throughout the wooded areas, bright kiosks stood with inviting interiors.

"What's he doing here?"

"Hmm?" Following Affranchi's gaze, Miranda spotted a young man in a flamboyant checked jacket, UI Urian, munching on a hotdog.

"UI?" Krishna called out with evident joy.

"Hey!" UI responded cheerfully, wiping his mouth with a napkin, which seemed to have been used to catch something that had slipped out.

"...?!"

At that moment, Affranchi noticed Krishna's shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

"It was Kreuzberg Alley, wasn't it?" she asked, recalling the street UI had mentioned earlier.

As UI wrapped the remnants of his hotdog, he moved beside the vehicle, confirming, "Right you are!"

He flashed a smile so charming both Krishna and Miranda, and even Affranchi couldn't help but be captivated.

"It's a shame our destinations differ," Miranda remarked, a hint of caution evident in her voice.

Affranchi smirked inwardly at her wariness.

"Is it? Let me accompany you on the elevator ride then. That wouldn't be a problem, would it, Ms Miranda?"

UI's tone was disarmingly gentle, making refusal difficult.

"Of course..." Before Miranda could fully respond, UI smoothly slid into the passenger seat, gracing Krishna with another enchanting smile.

"What is it about him?" pondered Affranchi.

He again felt no malice from UI.

The soft, gentle aura he exuded felt comforting, very human.

2

In the cylinder of the space colony, the fore and aft formed a slope with piled-up soil, resembling a mountain on earth at the central section of the cylinder, stretching a staggering one thousand and five hundred meters. People engaged in mountain climbing there, reveling in camping adventures and transforming it into a skiing slope. The elevator was constructed half-buried in the slope, traversing around fifteen hundred meters. One side of the elevator was graced with a window of transparent plastic, allowing occupants to overlook the city of Greneze constructed on the inner wall of the cylinder below the clouds accumulating in the central part of the cylinder.

Affranchi, looking at the urban landscape below where Ul resided, showed no outward signs of admiration. Yet, inwardly, the ascending cityscape left him in awe.

"Is it not greater than Hong Kong in its vastness?"

His amazement was justified. The inner surface of the cylinder was divided into six equal parts, alternating between human habitation sections and windows to let in sunlight. One residential area stretched about one and a half kilometers wide and nearly thirty kilometers long. In total, three of such sections boasted a population density rivaling the mega-cities of the previous century.

The windows, constructed from clear plastic, gleamed with the captured sunlight, and the space-dwelling inhabitants, the "Spacenoids," affectionately referred to them as "rivers." In fact, several bridges stretched across these rivers, connecting one residential section to the next.

"If this is reality, then there is potential for humanity..." Affranchi mused, sensing it deep within him.

"What are you pondering so deeply?" Ul inquired, peering through the gap between the headrests of the seats in front.

Caught off guard, Affranchi retorted, "Is it wrong to be lost in thought? About the fate of humanity, or the relationship between Earth and space?"

Rather than Ul's impudence, it was his own negligence that irked him.

"Sorry..." he muttered, his voice carrying a semblance of a smile.

"If you really are, then perhaps refrain from so brazenly prying into others' feelings. Focus ahead..." Affranchi's voice trailed off as he turned his gaze outside the elevator. The smooth curvature of a mountain had come into view, pushing away the urban panorama.

Withdrawing his face slightly, UI prodded further, "Why did you hold back on your words?"

"..."

Affranchi did not answer.

Krishna observed Affranchi's demeanor and then looked at him.

"Are there people who just tell everything that comes to their mind to someone they've just met?"

"Maybe..." Affranchi replied to Miranda's reproachful question. UI's response sounded provoking to Affranchi.

And simultaneously, he was convinced of his intuition that UI was indeed an adversary. Yet, he remained unshaken. To ensure UI wouldn't detect his sentiments, Affranchi pondered as UI had suggested, "What does it truly mean to be alive...?" He seemed to drift into a trance.

Ding! The gentle chime seemed to work in harmony with Affranchi's emotions, bringing them under control.

"Then, see you at seven at Udenberg!"

As UI uttered these words and swiftly got out of the elec-car, Krishna cheerfully responded, "Sure!"

The elevator doors parted.

3

Before the elevator stood a gate, and flanking it, the intimidating vista of a deep valley. But the overwhelming sound that engulfed them was the noise of the street.

Beyond the gate, the thrum of a crowd moved as if causing the earth itself to rumble.

"What?!"

Affranchi, who had somehow pictured space colonies as immaculate, orderly places, was taken aback.

UI swiftly passed through the pedestrian gate and disappeared into the sea of people.

"Good day!"

The elderly man at the toll booth seemed to consider this his duty. Krishna gave the man a polite smile, then suddenly sounded her horn.

"Really!"

Among the cacophony of vendor's cries, the ringing of bicycle bells, and horns clashing, Krishna maneuvered the elec-car forward, unfazed by the flow of people on either side.

"Watch out!"

"Watch where you're going, eh?!"

Such angry exclamations struck Affranchi's ears, and he felt it would take some time to regain his equilibrium.

"So this is Greneze?"

"Yes, it's always like this. Keep an eye on the kids. Even in your vehicle, if the sides are open, they'll reach right in."

Krishna flashed a smile, but only for a moment, her eyes narrowing as she honked and pushed forward.

"Kids?"

"Yes, the drifters are the ones to watch. Thieving's their trade..."

Miranda explained.

"Drifters?"

"Since long ago, people without a permanent residence were forcibly settled in space colonies, but that doesn't change their nature. Even now, some groups drift from colony to colony following their horoscope."

"Weren't they from Earth? Horoscopes?"

"Ah!"

Their small vehicle jolted, struck from behind.

"What was that?"

"Just the usual."

Miranda smirked, gesturing to the car behind. The driver of the offending vehicle, though maintaining a stern expression, wasn't apologetic. The car was overcrowded: four in the back, two in the passenger seat, and even more hanging off the bumper - young girls, all donning uniforms with red neckerchiefs.

"That's a private school bus."

The seemingly serious eyes of the girls in that vehicle were inscrutable. Their detachment mirrored the gaze of everyone on the street.

People from the southern islands seemed suspicious, likely an illusion caused by the contrast of their dark skin and the whites of their eyes, yet harboring no real malice.

However, the eyes of the city folk were different; there was a stagnation in their gaze, shared despite the varied ethnicities. A larger vehicle from the side nearly sideswiped Krishna's car.

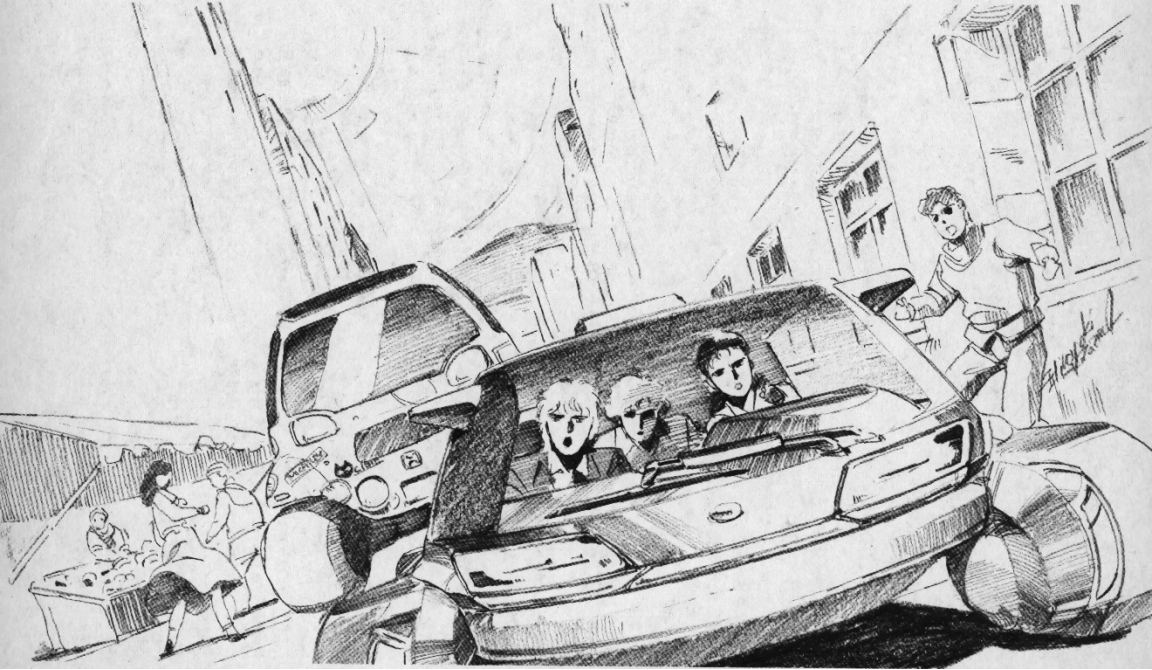
"Put your foot on the gas, lady!"

"You're the one driving recklessly!"

Krishna wasn't backing down.

Noting this, Affranchi thought maybe he should just accept this city's ways, thus stop worrying about it.

But that would prove to be a mistake.



4

The van was a sight to behold, decorated similarly to others on the road. Gaudy adornments of gold, silver, red, and green lined its window frames, and the body was plastered with stickers layered on top of one another. From its windows, several men leaned out, hurling vulgarities, taking aim at the car driven by Krishna. Just a bunch of street thugs, by the looks of them. Perhaps they had targeted Krishna.

"Ugh!"

As they collided yet again, Krishna's petite body jolted.

"?!"

In that moment, Affranchi sensed something unsettling from the man driving the van. A steely resolve. Meaning they weren't just randomly attacking the vehicle Affranchi was in.

"Krishna! Drive!"

Miranda shouted, gripping Affranchi's arm.

"Huh?"

"They're after us!"

"Why?"

"We can only assume our identities have been compromised."

Krishna incessantly honked, mounting the sidewalk to dodge a bread delivery van. Swerving back onto the street, she pushed the elec-car to its limits.

"Ah!"

A woman with a bundle on her head staggered, narrowly avoiding the car.

"Damn it!"

The van looped around, closing in rapidly. While Krishna's car had to dodge people and other vehicles, the pursuing van merely had to follow the path she cleared. It seemed the game was up.

"Move it!"

In desperation, Krishna steered the car down an alley. Chickens scattered. Laundry hanging outside caught onto the car. The van scraped the walls on both sides as it gave chase.

"What the hell? This isn't a road!"

A man, pressing his back against the wall, yelled.

Even though it sounded like a reprimand, Affranchi couldn't understand the language.

"Damn brats!"

Several children, who had hurled stones, darted into a side alley, letting the elec-car zoom past. Still, even amidst this chaos, Affranchi wondered why people transformed their ideal cities into slum-like dwellings.

"Gah!"

To navigate a ninety-degree turn, Krishna had to reverse due to the alley's narrowness. They barely made it. However, at that very corner, the van got stuck and came to a halt.

"Well done, Krishna," said Miranda, having finally caught her breath.

"But we've another problem. We're trapped."

"You know this place?"

"I used to live nearby. I'm not entirely sure, but I think it's a dead-end up ahead."

Krishna slowed the car, cautiously gauging her surroundings.

"What's the big idea?! Are you out of your mind?!"

A stout lady, seemingly of Russian descent, flashed her yellow teeth in rage.

"No car should be driving here!"

"Well, we're here now, aren't we?"

Krishna seemed to retort in Russian, a language Affranchi didn't understand.

"Affranchi!"

"Right!"

Miranda nudged Affranchi, signaling him to get out.

"Krishna!"

"Yes?!"

From the alley they just passed, furious shouts of men echoed. These cries were quickly followed by a dog's wail. The Russian woman swung her powerful arm, flinging dirty water towards the elec-car. Affranchi, though splashed by the spray, chased after Krishna.

The road, originally meant for two lanes, had now become lined with tents and plastic barriers, extending out as makeshift shops and rooms.

"Trying to run, are you?"

"Go around that way. We should be able to get ahead!"

The angry shouts of several men seemed to be closing in.

"Who are they?"

Miranda didn't answer.

Krishna took a sharp turn at one of the corners, pushing a thick green door that blocked the road. Another alleyway stretched deep beyond it. To Affranchi, the purpose of this door remained a mystery. Above this door or gate, a golden plastic statue of a naked woman stood prominently.

"We can get to the main street from here!" Krishna exclaimed, as if just recalling.

Though they quickened their pace, ahead of them were the shadows of the men who had been in the van were visible, running in several directions.

"We're surrounded!"

"Then!"

Krishna slipped into a gap between mixed-tenancy buildings. Such a narrow space that one had to move sideways to get through, their bodies scraping against grime, feeling sticky and smeared.

"This way!"

Emerging from that slit, they found themselves in a slightly wider alley, but it also branched into left and right alleys.

"From here..."

Krishna pointed to an emergency ladder overhead.

"What?"

Climbing a few floors, there seemed to be an indent leading into a building.

"Can we make it by climbing this?"

"If we can't, I'll break the door and get in," Krishna said, signaling Affranchi to help lift her towards the emergency ladder.

Affranchi grasped around Krishna's knees, pushing her up. With a pull-up move, Krishna hooked her legs onto the ladder, climbing swiftly like a monkey. The top of the ladder creaked. Krishna vanished at the third-floor level, soon beckoning both Affranchi and Miranda.

"We can get in!"

With Krishna's help, Affranchi helped Miranda onto the ladder, and then, using a belt Miranda had unbuckled for him, he managed to grip the ladder.

"Look for a gap! We chased them from both front and back. They can't simply vanish!"

A man's voice, eerily calm yet educated, echoed.

Affranchi felt a shiver; the grime from the ladder sticking to his hand felt unnatural. Unlike the dirt of the sea that could be easily washed away, this grime felt invasive, revolting even.

Krishna opened a door leading from the emergency ladder on the third floor, ushering Miranda in.

"Krishna..."

Affranchi ensured the coast was clear and slid inside. However, the doorknob seemed loose when he tried closing it.

"Really now..."

The words had an English tone but with an unfamiliar intonation to Affranchi.



"Can't we get through?"

Miranda's voice was sounded stern.

"Miranda!" Krishna urged, sounding anxious.

As Affranchi turned around, in front of Miranda and Krishna stood a middle-aged woman wearing a veil, blocking their path as if looking up from below.

"Hmph. Around here, the ones running are usually the guilty ones," she declared.

"Please let us pass. We're being chased by bad people," pleaded Krishna.

The woman, with tanned skin, chuckled deeply. Under her veil, murky eyes shimmered with an unusual allure.

"...?"

To Affranchi, those clouded eyes reminded him of one of the island elders.

"Is there another one with you? I smell a man."

The lady, pointing to a door, asked in fluent English, "Care for a smoke before you go?"

1

Though seemingly middle-aged, the woman had the weathered aura of someone who had seen many more years. Yet, her skin belied this, remaining strangely youthful. Astonishment escaped her as Krishna Pandent stepped into the room she had led them to.

"What is this place?"

"A necessary setting for my trade. It has to be just so, or it loses its charm," the woman replied, amusement dancing in her eyes.

Tapestries depicting the zodiac in gobelin weave covered three walls. A matte crystal ball crowned a circular table, surrounded by ambiguous statues - could they be dragons, unicorns, mermaids, or perhaps Buddhas? - their eyes intense, as if piercing the room's soul. Inevitably, guests found their seats here.

"In these parts, when people speak of astrology, my name, Ento, usually comes up." Her eyes, tainted by cataracts, shimmered in the dimness.

"Miss... Ento?"

A hesitancy washed over Miranda, reluctance evident in her posture.

"It's Ento Sismesia. Don't worry, dear... that chair doesn't have any lice or bedbugs. Sit comfortably."

"But that's not what I..."

Miranda began, but Affranchi silenced her with a reassuring hand on her shoulder, prompting her to sit.

"It's okay. Young people tend to be swayed by what's right in front of them. You might wander down the wrong path if you're not careful," the woman mused, stroking the crystal ball, her milky-eyed gaze settling on them.

"I'm grateful for the refuge you've provided."

Her thanks seemed hollow. So evident was her insincerity that even Krishna found herself sharing an amused glance with Affranchi.

"Words are treacherous. Those who rely solely on eloquence often muddy waters. Words mask truths... But you, young one, seem attuned to this."

Noticing her ragged shawl, the lady retrieved an old book from a dusty shelf behind her, supporting herself as she leaned away and propped the book up in front of the crystal ball. Its spine, seemingly made of sheepskin, was worn out, and its edges frayed, revealing the paper underneath. It was a sizable tome.

Miranda, with a downward gaze, tried to steal a glance at Affranchi, who responded with a gentle smile. However, his attention was elsewhere, his ears attuned to something outside.

"The senses given by our physical bodies make words tools that hide our true forms. Since the times of Babylon, human wisdom has clouded our perception. Do you know why, young one?"

"Eh?"

Affranchi queried.

The lady repeated her question without a hint of annoyance.

"Ah... perhaps it's to refine us?"

"For what?"

"To become light..." he ventured, guessing she had a penchant for symbols. Her astonishment was palpable.

"Light! Do you know the truth of Phos, young one?!"

"Phos? I'm not familiar with that term..."

Taking a moment to catch her breath, the lady said, "Nevermind. My intuition was correct. Whether you're aware of Phos' truth or not might be unfortunate for someone so young..."

The lady then gazed intently at a book on the table, its contents depicting the orbit of the stars, though it seemed she wasn't really seeing it. She appeared as tremulous as a young rabbit sensing something with its innate intuition.

"Young one..."

"Yes?"

"Do you know why you're without a star, whether you know Phos' truth or not?"

"A star?"

"When's your birthday?"

"I've heard it's on the 10th of August, but I'm not certain."

The lady gently caressed the crystal ball.

"An abandoned child?"

At the lady's assertion, both Miranda and Krishna looked at Affranchi.

Krishna's eyes widened in shock, a reaction to words she'd never fathomed before.

"Perhaps that day, the day I was found, was significant. But Gaba Suu... he raised me. He was my father... He always said that was my birthday."

"Hmm... I see. A man layered with countless stars. That's why you appear starless, and yet there's Nous."

"Nous'?"

"It's a term from Coptic, something like a divine spirit or wisdom... Well, the exact meaning of the word doesn't matter. The fact that such a spirit's existence is suggested, I couldn't have imagined it until today... Something called Archons?"

"I am Affranchi Char."

The lady suddenly stood. Both Miranda and Krishna questioned if she might be manic.

"Affranchi? It's a young name... I can't tell if it's a name of ill omen or good fortune. Young one... No, Affranchi Char. If you've come this far following the guidance of that name, brace yourself. That might be the only way to save your life."

"Isn't that the same for anyone, Madam Ento?"

"The name Affranchi Char is no trivial matter."

"I can sense that. History also speaks of the name Char Aznable."

"That's a different matter..."

The woman was about to say more, but she abruptly turned towards the wall behind her as a thundering sound, reminiscent of the earth quaking, echoed from the sky above.

"Affranchi?"

Both Miranda and Krishna jolted from their seats.

"What was that?"

"The sound of a Minovsky Craft..."

"Impossible..."

Even as Krishna tried to deny Miranda's words, her face stiffened with fear.

"Did you summon them? Affranchi Char! Have you now become our enemy? How pathetic! Even if you have power, if you don't demonstrate that power, you bring nothing but trouble!"

"But, Madam, it was you who kept us here."

"Yes, I've come to realize. Blind, I was! The key of Hermamene was mine to bestow upon the one possessing the unseen psyche!"

With the threatening sound growing closer, the lady, with hands outstretched on the table, let out a heart-wrenching scream. Even

without understanding the names, it was evident her cry was one of deep remorse.

"What's going on?"

However, Affranchi's question was drowned by a deafening explosion.

BOOM!

Two statues flanking the chairs toppled over, and the zodiac tapestry danced wildly as if ridding itself of age-old dust.

2

The carpet surged upwards, forming a protective barrier against the blast's wrath. By sheer fortune, they were spared from the deadly spray of glass shards.

"Ah!" A shrill cry erupted from the lady as she crumpled onto the floor, bathed in a harsh external glow. Within that luminosity, Affranchi's gaze picked up the floor's unkempt state, mottled with dust and stray threads.

"Here!" Affranchi's voice held a desperate edge. While reaching for the fallen lady, his eyes caught Miranda and Krishna's frantic struggle with the entrance. Beyond the shattered window, an eerie aircraft darted past, igniting a familiar unease in him, reminiscent of his departure from Hong Kong.

"MHA?" he whispered, sensing an invisible, watchful presence drawing near.

"Get up!"

"I can't... I just can't."

"You won't know if you don't try. We can rely on predictions and intuition later."

Releasing his grip from underneath the table, Affranchi heaved the lady upright while sneaking peeks out the window.

"Affranchi!"

Krishna's voice echoed from the corridor's mouth, holding the door ajar, an unspoken invitation to flee.

"Move!"

"I can't. I won't go with you."

The lady, wriggling and resisting, tried to break free from Affranchi's grip. But he persisted, nearly dragging her along the hall.

"Over here!"

Krishna's cry came from near the staircase, a dozen meters away. Panic painted the ashen faces emerging from adjacent rooms, all converging towards the exit.

Miranda was nowhere in sight.

Suddenly, a vivid red gash appeared on Krishna's face, bringing her to her knees.

"Krishna!"

Affranchi shouted, still dragging the lady, dashing toward Krishna.

"I'm alright!" she murmured, attempting a brave front despite the fresh rivulets of blood.

"Listen! Or else there'll be unnecessary casualties."

"Running, see? I'm running!"

Ento, holding her arms across her chest, sprinted down the stairs, trying not to fall behind Affranchi.

Though Krishna dominated his vision, the slow descent of her blood was a haunting backdrop.

"Affranchi, over here!"

Miranda's voice, laden with urgency, rose above the chaotic din from downstairs.

"On my way!"

Amid the raucous, Krishna's voice held its own, piercing the tumult.

Boom! Rat-tat-tat-tat!

Explosions intermingled with relentless gunfire, unnervingly close. Affranchi's hold tightened on the lady as he stumbled into Krishna.

"Ah!"

Krishna collided with a man in front of her and tumbled forward. As if on cue, a loud crash sounded as all windows facing the staircase landing shattered, halting the fleeing mob.

The air thickened with cries of terror.

It took a moment for everyone to regain composure. Krishna, Affranchi, and Lady Ento had to push through the slowed crowd to make their way down.

Ruthlessness overtook empathy.

Why?

If anyone questioned them, let it be known that in such situations, it's always every man for himself.

It's survival.

"For heaven's sake!"

Miranda chastised Affranchi and Krishna for their sluggishness before darting off.

"Stay strong. We'll be safe soon."

"Just get me out of here!"

The surrounding walls were barely three meters apart, and behind them, black smoke and intense heat surged forward.

Miranda rounded a bend, as did Krishna. Affranchi discerned their labored breathing before another blast muted all.

Without pause, he and the lady plunged into the thick brown smoke.

He could hear Krishna groaning somewhere around his feet, but Miranda sounded further away.

"Everyone alright?" he cried, vision obscured.

"Affranchi!"

"Right here!"

As he searched for Miranda and Krishna, the warmth of Lady Ento disappeared from his grip.

"Lady Ento!"

Amidst the swirling chaos, her name felt even more alien.

3

Through a smoky veil, an aircraft emerged, its sides boasting circular air ducts and its body crowned with a retro-styled canopy. It discharged a dark, ominous missile which, upon impact with a building's silhouette, erupted in an explosion. There was no fiery red or white light—just the telltale sign of military-grade explosives.

A cloud of inky blackness surged upwards, shortly followed by a thunderous roar that echoed through the air.

"This way!"

The aircraft's movements mirrored those of an advanced chopper. It initially laid down a daunting show of firepower around Affranchi's location, then slowly refined its target, drawing a tighter circle of threat around them.

"What's going on?"

"I don't know."

The query was met with a shake of Miranda's head as they raced onward. Another of the same aircraft whizzed by, dropping explosives and sealing off their potential exit.

"We need to fall back!" Krishna's voice held a hint of desperation.

Krishna's voice rang with panic.

Pushing Miranda ahead, Affranchi moved in Krishna's wake, "Shouldn't you know what's happening? If they're police, they'd be special forces. You're supposed to know about this colony, so why the ignorance!!!"

"It might be under MHA's jurisdiction," Miranda snapped back, "but this aircraft? It's new to me."

"Using explosives like these in a colony isn't standard police policy." Affranchi retorted, his voice heavy with frustration, "Krishna, isn't there any way out of this colony?"

"What do you expect?!" Krishna snapped.

"There has to be a shelter!"

BOOM!

Another explosion from behind a building sent them scrambling.

"A baby's crying!" Krishna stopped in her tracks.

"Don't stop! There has to be a shelter! Remember!" Affranchi gripped Krishna's shoulder, forcing her to face forward.

As another smoky onslaught enveloped them, Miranda's voice broke through, "Here! I've found it!"

Her fingers brushed ash from a wall, unveiling a sign.

"It points to WC Block Twelve."

An arrow on the emergency plaque pointed the way.

Fwoom fwoom, rurururu.

The aircraft's rhythmic droning intensified, punctuated by waves of ear-splitting explosions.

"If this is District Thirteen, then..."

Gathering her wits, Krishna sped over the rubble left by the bombings. Burned and disfigured bodies littered the streets amid the wreckage of plastic materials of the buildings.

Ching!

A scene humanity has continually watched without getting tired of. Affranchi's eyes recorded the shape of each and every corpse.

Corpses without limbs.

Corpses with their clothes stripped off, their swollen bellies exposed like water balloons.

Corpses with their heads split open, their whitish brain matter staining their upper bodies...

The ghastly sight wasn't some surreal artwork but a jarring reality underscored by the acrid stench of war.

"There," Krishna motioned towards a shelter's shutter, nestled behind crates of vegetables and fruits.

It was an entity typically forgotten in day-to-day life. The shelter itself was designed to blend seamlessly into one corner of the building, making it impossible to find unless you knew about it.

Moreover, in front of the shutter, there were piles of garbage bins for the city's market, storage boxes, and cardboard boxes filled with everyday clothing and goods.

The shelter, an overlooked relic from the space colony era, was designed for emergencies when the colony's atmospheric integrity was compromised. It was even equipped with an airlock for access into space. But as the space colony era stretched beyond a century, the shelter had become a forgotten relic, especially in places like Greneze, buried under the detritus of everyday life.

4

Amidst a stack of what appeared to be wooden crates (though closer inspection revealed they were plastic imitations), they discovered an accessible shutter.

"There's a shelter here! Anyone running away, get inside!"

Affranchi shouted in both directions of the alley, though no sign of life met his call.

On one side, dense billowing clouds of smoke obstructed any escape, while the route they'd come from was consumed by flames.

The shelter was an intricate series of shutters, with accessibility defined by the level of emergency.

"Can we get through this section?"

Affranchi, tracing Krishna's steps into the dimly lit space as she turned on the emergency lighting, posed the question.

"Hold on. There's a schematic here." Krishna pulled up an interface from the wall, scrolling through multiple layouts.

"This hasn't seen much use, has it?"

Miranda observed an inspection log on the adjacent wall, noting, "Yet there's a maintenance record from five years ago." She then proceeded to secure one of the entranceways – not to deny refuge to others, but to shield those within.

"We can get through, right?"

Krishna, her gaze sharpened, approached a circular portal resembling a vault door. But before she could act, Miranda handed out emergency oxygen canisters to both her and Affranchi.

Finding a pistol for firing signal flares in the emergency equipment, Affranchi took it in hand.

"...?"

"Just in case. I'd love to get into a normal suit too..."

"There should be some deeper inside. Do you want to wear one?"

"I'm not sure. I'd rather not assume we're the aircraft's sole target, but it does seem we were singled out."

"I think we were targeted."



"Why?"

"Because we gave MHA enough time to move."

A tense pause lingered before Affranchi nudged Miranda, shadowing Krishna into a dim passage. It was a special section, an area between the outer and inner walls of the colony that civilians wouldn't enter unless in emergencies. Structural walls supported the outer facade, maintaining an airtight seal, and inside them were the "ground" structural blocks that formed the dirt beneath their feet when topside.

Like a mesh network, there were tunnels for monitoring the colony repair and various inspection paths in those gaps.

But even an explosion powerful enough to destroy half the buildings inside the space colony wouldn't damage the bottom part of the 'ground' structural materials. The inner wall was just that sturdy, and on top of it was several meters of soil, with buildings standing on that. Yet, the muffled tremors of explosions were audibly persistent.

As Krishna sprinted toward a string of green emergency lights, a distant announcement resounded: "Refugees, head to WD22 and WS87! The Colony Public Corporation will guide you!"

"It sounds like there are other people escaping the shelters too."

"How far do we need to go?"

"About four kilometers," Krishna estimated.

Miranda, noticing the absence of others as they passed junctions, wondered aloud, "No one from this sector is using the shelters?"

"Was there any movement to purge the people of the slum town?"

"The Hellas government is always considering things like that. It even makes the news. But nothing like that has ever been carried out."

"Perhaps today, people believed it's happening."

"Seems too coincidental."

Miranda ran shoulder-to-shoulder with Affranchi.

The three passed yet another alley junction point.

"Affranchi?"

Krishna stopped.

"What's the matter?"

From an adjoining corridor, several silhouetted figures emerged.

This time, the figures slowly approached Affranchi's group, shining the lights attached to their helmets at them.

"It's them."

"Those five..."

The five men wore something like motorcycle helmets with visors. Their bodies were clad in what looked like simplified normal suits with full-body functionality.

Affranchi instinctively moved the two women behind him.

"Smart move, using this district's shelter!"

"We'll kill you! Traitors!"

The man in the center, with a voice modulated through a microphone, shouted.

"Why! What are we charged with!"

"We're not police. We don't need justification! If we deem you a threat, we eliminate you!"

The men were overwhelming.

"Oh really?"

Affranchi fired the flare gun from his hip. The flare, ricocheting off the floor, exploded, emitting a bright white light and a flash brighter than several strobes. In that blinding light, Affranchi shouted, pushing Miranda and Krishna down and urging them to flee.

"Uwaaa!"

When the strobe light died down, the man near the direct hit of the attack was writhing on the ground, his leather overcoat back burnt.

The other four, visors still down, heard Affranchi's group split up and head in different directions. Three pursued, while one pulled out a transceiver.

"UI! We found them, but they got away. There are three of them! Can you hear me! UI Urian!"

1

Fwee-Fwee-Fwee!

The sound heralded the presence of a hovering object, subtly swaying side to side. This was not mere flight but something more ethereal. Upon encountering obstacles, it leaped like a jack-in-the-box and swiftly descended, scattering incendiary bombs in its wake. It moved with an unmistakably mechanical precision.

Pop! Pop!

Seen from a distance, the bombs appeared less formidable. Designed for use within colonies, they eschewed raw explosive power for intense heat to melt structures. Flames shot upwards as if seeking the sky. The mere existence of such weaponry was nefariously sinister, signifying that "someone" intended its use against the general populace.

"Have we lost sight of them?"

UI Urian's fury was palpable upon hearing the report from his underground team. It was that affluent, well-to-do young man who had approached Affranchi Char and his crew under the guise of distress. Now, any semblance of the mild-mannered demeanor he had shown on the *Spasias* was gone. His eyes narrowed, a vein subtly pulsing at his temple.

"Do we have the location of the nearest exit from where we lost them? If they reach the surface, it's over!"

"We're short-handed. It's impossible, don't ask for miracles."

The reply barely cut through the static.

"I'm aware. We're even roping in the police, but I can't trust them entirely. Got it?!"

UI discreetly pressed the hidden microphone button on his shirt.

"We're close. Someone will come to rescue them. Hold them off until then. Hey! Keep the Minox air surveillance network wide open."

He turned to a young man sitting beside him, dressed in a jumper and jeans with ripped knees, the epitome of a local punk.

It was a disguise worn by a MHA team member.

"I'm on it..."

Arrayed before the young man were numerous displays, each showing cursors tracking the dispersal of incendiary bombs amidst the flow of people. However, half of these screens were focused on empty sky, awaiting UI's specified target.

"The Hong Kong data's in there, right?"

"Of course."

The young man turned to UI, visibly annoyed.

"What now?!"

As UI's hand shot out, the man in the jumper collided with his neighbor.

"UI!"

"Don't question when it's time to act. That's MHA's iron rule, isn't it?"

"And you're the one breaking it. What are you saying—Ugh?!"

With a swift, straight punch, UI sent the young man sprawling to the floor once more.

The young man slumped between the chairs, unconscious.

"UI!"

Another slightly older man called out, oblivious to the commotion.

"Have they emerged yet?"

"Top right. It's a man-machine."

The older man gestured towards a display, highlighting a shadowy figure darting across the sky.

"Shall we engage?"

As the man hit the console panel buttons, UI spoke into the microphone.

"The aerial battle is underway. Stay on high alert!"

Seeing the man's actions, UI addressed whoever was on the other end of his microphone.

"Understood. Moving away from the airstrike zone!"

Another voice filled the cramped room through the speaker.

"UI, you bastard!"

The moment UI heard the man's voice from below, gunfire erupted.

"Damn...!"

Something scattered in front of UI's jacket. His upper body recoiled, and in the chaos, his foot inadvertently came down on the groin of the unconscious man in the jumper.

Another muffled gunshot echoed, but UI's foot then kicked at the arm of the jumper-wearing man, who was trying to crawl away.

"Ugh!"

From the corner of his eye, UI spotted the older man scooping a pistol up off the floor.

"If you think you can pull it off, go right ahead."

"Heh! Hehehe...!"

With an exaggerated shrug, the older man grabbed the pistol by its barrel and held it out to UI almost ceremoniously.

"My apologies."

Without a hint of a smile, UI took the pistol, removed the holster from the jumper-wearing man, and extracted a black notebook from his inner pocket.

"It's starting, huh?"

UI informed the older man, who spun his chair back to the displays, now rapidly updating.

"Right!"

The older man focused on the displays while UI opened the door of the small room.

Outside, the cacophony of the city rang out. People ran to and fro, escaping the air raid, as electric cars, bicycles, and trishaws weaved through the crowd. Unbeknownst to many, the room was cleverly disguised as a container on a large truck.

"?!"

Boom!

The sound of an air raid explosion rocked UI's eardrums, and he caught sight of that flying object from before bursting up from the shadow of a building.

UI hurled the unconscious young man into the midst of the screaming crowd and swerving vehicles below. His body tumbled out headfirst, and there was a sickening cracking sound from his neck, but it was drowned out by the din of horns and shrieks. He managed to glimpse the jumper's body get run over by a swerving trishaw that then overturned into the fleeing crowd.

2

Ento Sismesia's words lingered in Affranchi Char's mind, a ghostly whisper at the edge of his consciousness, unsettling him. He wanted to believe that the two women had escaped unharmed. Affranchi had no choice but to blindly navigate the "underground" of the space colony. He ignored several hatches leading upwards, considering that even this dire situation was preferable to navigating a capsized canoe

in the stormy Pacific. Beneath his feet lay the vacuum of space, yet a sprint would bring him to a hatch leading to the surface.

"This situation should be critical, yet I can't hear that sound."

That sound, which usually heralded migraines and tinnitus, always seemed to warn him of impending crises or, perhaps, signaled the advent of a new life.

"Does its silence mean there is no danger? Or rather, does it mean it's already over?"

This thought weighed heavily on his chest, tempting him to stumble, to stop running.

"I've come this far, not fully grasping reality but aided by many. There must be meaning in this journey. If I despair over such anxiety, everything would have ended long ago."

With these thoughts, Affranchi forced himself to keep running. As Gaba Suu often said, the end of things begins with one's own surrender.

"Except for accidents brought by others, everything can be stopped by one's own efforts." Gaba Suu would say, sitting cross-legged, taking Affranchi's hand.

"So, I want to stop those accidents. Can't I do that?" Affranchi had asked.

"Why would you think that?" Gaba Suu inquired.

"Because, isn't it someone who brings the storm? I want to stop it because it causes sadness."

"That's not it. Clouds, wind, and tides foretell the storm. By observing them, one can prepare for the impending tempest. And storms don't only bring misfortune. It quenches sun-scorched islands and purifies polluted tides. It's a blessing from the heavens."

"So, what are the 'others' you speak of, Grandfather?"

"Others are everyone but oneself. Accidents brought by humans are the worst. Unlike storms, which signal their arrival through clouds, wind, and tide, they give no such warning."

"So, human accidents have no forewarning?"

"Exactly. And therein lies the challenge. "We are too diminutive in scale to predict human-caused accidents that arise from human actions without forewarning."

Affranchi remembered feeling a tremor in his soul at Gaba Suu's words. Gaba Suu had taught him about life in this way.

Affranchi continued to run, trusting in his young body. He ran through corridors of smooth, reinforced plastic, where floors, walls, and ceilings merged into a seamless path. The air was suffocating. He saw nothing.

"This way!" Miranda Howe's voice guided them, while Krishna Pandent's smile, visible even in the dim light, offered reassurance. Miranda was breathless.

"Even with training, this is tough..."

Sensing that their pursuers had fallen behind, Miranda caught her breath, speaking between gasps.

"We're getting out here."

"Yes," she nodded, having calculated the distance they had run in her mind.

"Canterbury Zenoah Street..." Krishna read the location on the shelter's emergency hatch.

Watching Krishna's diligent movements, Miranda was lost in thought.

"There!"

"Right." Miranda pulled Krishna deeper into the shelter.

"If MHA is on the move, the police must be too. It's safer to assume all shelters are under surveillance. Let's head to space."

"Outside?" Krishna was visibly shaken.

"Hurry!" Miranda pulled out emergency normal suits from the shelter.

"There are none that fit me."

"Wear anything that fits."

She began to wipe the clotting blood from Krishna's cheek and administered first aid.

"Looks like some glass fragments pierced you. Does it hurt?"

"I'll bear it."

"Right..." Krishna donned the helmet, still mindful of the bandage on her cheek. "But where are we going? We don't have enough thrust for extensive movement."

Krishna was talking about the verniers equipped on the normal suits.

"Heading to the linear car station might be a good idea."

"Ah!" Clad in their suits, they returned to the corridor and descended to the airlock leading into space. Triple-locked, it barred unauthorized passage. Miranda pushed a card into the key lock, entering a password.

"Why do you have something like that?"

"The Colony Public Corporation is quite lax in their management. Without this much preparation, we wouldn't stand against MHA."

They passed through the airlock's hatches, standing before the final door.



"Ready?"

"Yeah."

Krishna took a deep breath beneath the helmet of her normal suit. The moment they dreaded arrived. As the airlock hatch opened, space spun violently into view, a dizzying spectacle through their visors. From this vantage point in space, the neighboring space colony loomed as a dizzying, terrifying spectacle with its rotation creating artificial gravity. The lack of air resistance offered a false sense of security; visually, the scene implied a never-ending fall into the void, a sight that could easily induce space sickness.

Outside the hatch, Miranda and Krishna gripped a safety bar, carefully averting their gaze from the daunting expanse of space as they edged along the space colony's outer wall. Ahead, they saw the linear train running along its exterior wall. In the colonies, linear trains, vital for internal transport, typically ran along the exterior wall, a design choice over using the interior's cylindrical space.

3

Being unfamiliar with the workings of space colonies, Affranchi lacked the decisive nature evident in the two women.

"Alright then," he whispered under his breath. At a seemingly safe distance later, he paused, a little disoriented by the web of unfamiliar street names, before deciding to make his exit through a nearby shelter.

The shelter's hatch, designed intuitively for ease of use by anyone, from the elderly to young children, required him to execute five simple, precise steps. As he engaged the third lever in the sequence of the triple airlocks, a sliver of the outside world revealed itself through the narrowing gap – a police patrol car, oddly still and seemingly unoccupied.

"...?"

He opened the hatch and slid his body sideways onto the road.

"Hey!"

Without warning, a firm grip seized his shoulder, a startling intrusion into his escape.

"!!!"

A jolt of shock sent a flash of white across Affranchi's vision, momentarily blinding him.

"Where did you come from?" asked the police officer, tightening his grip on Affranchi's shoulder from behind.

"I just escaped from a district under air raid..." Affranchi managed before a forceful clamp around his neck cut him off.

"Ugh...?" His words turned to muffled grunts, his plea for understanding lost in the vice-like grip

"We've caught a suspicious one here. James! Call it in!" The officer barked.

"Nngh! What am I accused of?" Affranchi groaned.

"Not sure. You looked suspicious, so I grabbed you," the officer remarked, landing a blow on Affranchi's side.

Each blow from the officer was like a hammer strike, relentless and unforgiving. Above him, the heavy, ragged breaths of his assailant—a formidable giant—echoed ominously.

The officer's hairy arm choked Affranchi, covering half his face and immobilizing his jaw, thwarting any attempt to bite.

"Don't make this harder than it has to be!"

"Ugh!" he groaned in agony, spittle flying, as he endured the relentless, excruciating pain.

"Not so tough now, huh?" taunted the officer, intensifying his assault on Affranchi's side.

"Is this the guy?" Another colleague stepped in front of Affranchi.

The man's mouth contorted into a cruel sneer, dominating Affranchi's blurred vision. A sharp blow, targeted and merciless, struck his solar plexus, stealing his breath.

"Punk..."

The word fell like a verdict from above, echoing in Affranchi's ears as darkness encroached on his consciousness.

As darkness clouded his senses, far from his fading awareness, a grander narrative was playing out beyond his reach: the encounter with the Minox, a flying craft dispatched by UI Urian, and the man-machine Zorin Soul, determined to intervene and counter the unfolding threat.

4

Affranchi's eyes flickered open to the stifling darkness of a cramped space. Pain pulsed through his body, a sharp reminder of reality jolting him to consciousness.

"Eva..."

The words seemed to have formed a voice of their own.

"You awake there?"

A distant voice cut through the haze.

"...?"

Memories of being apprehended by the police flashed through his mind.

"So it's true... Eva... everything's gone wrong," he murmured, a note of despair in his voice.

A hollow whisper of defeat lingered in his mind.

"What's the point... Eva, please... come to me..."

It was more of a silent prayer than a thought.

"I can hear the wind... But there's no way you'd hear wind on a space colony"

Slowly, he realized he was in a space colony, adrift in the cosmos. As this sank in, so did the full extent of his physical pain.

"Ugh..." he gasped, an involuntary response to the overwhelming pain.

A lance of pain pierced his back and abdomen, radiating swiftly to his extremities.

"Ah...!"

His groan, vulnerable and raw, drew mocking laughter from others.

"Hah, he sounds like a woman, doesn't he?"

"Oh yeah, do me! Do me! Screw me ha ha ha!"

Sweat soaked through Affranchi's shirt, clinging to his skin in an uncomfortable embrace. He turned his head, and the faces of the laughing men around him appeared like grotesque masks at a masquerade.

"Where am I?" he asked, his voice rough.

"Where are you, he asks - Ha-ha-ha!"

The masked men roared with laughter.

"With that voice, no way you got a dick! I'll make ya cry!"

As they laughed, a hand groped at Affranchi's groin, shaking his hips as if to violate him. It was more pain than humiliation that drew a groan from him.

"Nnng..."

"Mmm, oh yeah, feels good... No, don't stop!" the voice mocked.

"What the... Ugh...!"

The pain was beyond imagination. Affranchi, now acutely aware of his predicament, struggled to sit up. The pain in his back was likely from shards of glass or something similar during an air raid – painful, but not lethal.

"Oh! You bangin' a dude?!"

One of the men, a familiar Asian face, jeered.

"Let's bang 'im too!"

Just as the voice rang out, Affranchi was struck on the side of his face. Stars exploded in his vision as his body slid sideways, seemed to float, then crashed down. A searing agony tore through his lower back and buttocks.

Affranchi, dazed, lifted his head to see three men leering down at him, their laughter echoing in the cramped space.

"Not cops, are you?" His words were more of a mumbled query than a statement, sounding like a punchline to a joke, making the trio burst out laughing.

"Cops? Oh, you wish, buddy!"

Amid their mocking laughter, Affranchi pushed himself up, his gaze landing on the iron bars ahead.

"Where am I?"

He looked down at the laughing men with a groan.

"Shut up, you punks!"

Beyond the iron bars, a figure appeared, clad in the same uniform as the officers who had attacked Affranchi.

"Look who's awake, the nameless punk!" the officer taunted, peering through the bars with a sneer before disappearing from view.

"Kehehehe... Nameless, and yet so popular with the police!"

The wiry one of the trio leaned in, his face inches from Affranchi's, eyes gleaming with malice.

Affranchi, gritting through the pain, met the man's smug gaze with a defiant glare.

"Hmph..."

His exhaled breath was laden with a strong resolve.

"I owe you boys a proper thank you."

Affranchi's words were deliberate, despite knowing they could put him at a strategic disadvantage.

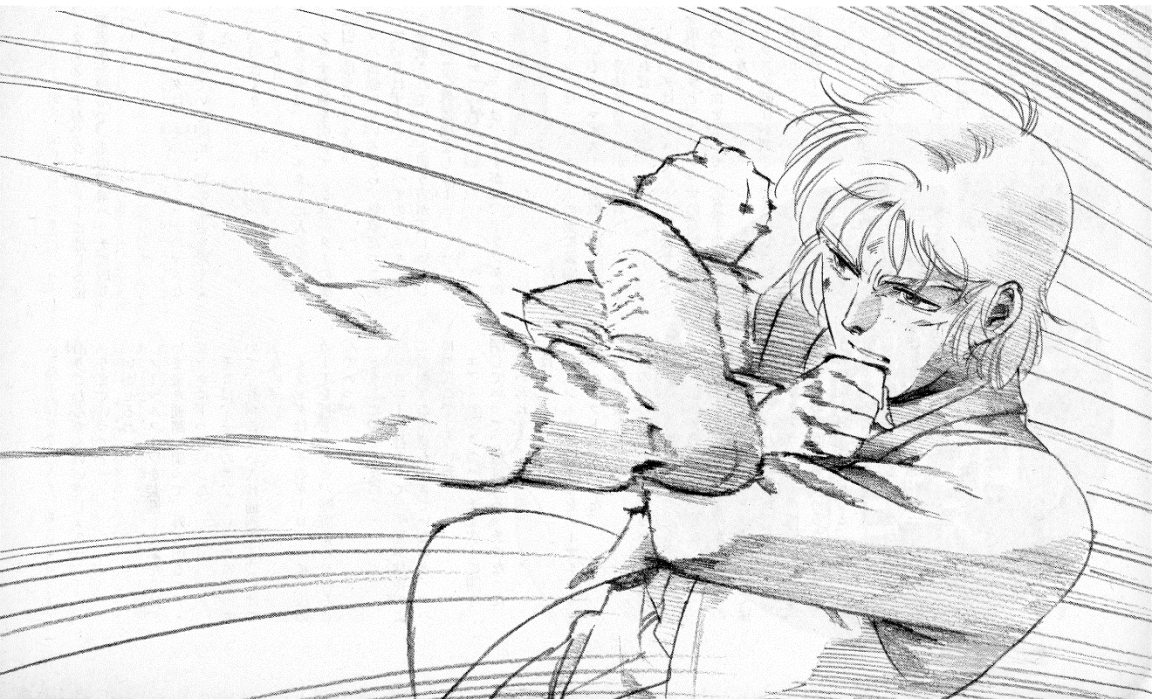
"Huh?! Whatchu sayin', bro?"

The other two men stood up, anticipating what was to come. Affranchi, familiar with the tactics of brawlers, knew what to expect next. As the largest and the skinny one attacked simultaneously, he swiftly dodged, his body moved fluidly. His hands became a blur, weaving an intricate dance of defense and offense.

The giant man, momentarily dazzled by Affranchi's lightning-fast movements, was not outdone and used his legs in the assault. Affranchi crisscrossed his arms, absorbing the power of the punches and countering with a headbutt to the giant's chin.

"Ugh!"

The giant stiffened as the other two lunged from the sides. With calculated precision, Affranchi delivered swift punches to each side,



one striking a throat, the other a chest, with audible impacts. The one hit in the chest crumpled against the wall, his head cracking off it.

"Pheh..."

Affranchi stood in the middle of the cramped detention cell, towering over the three sprawled out bodies.

"I overdid it..."

His unexpected prowess left him stunned, fueling his despair over the heightened suspicion it would surely draw from the police.

"How did I manage that?"

As pain pulsed through his knuckles, Affranchi cursed his impulsive reaction, viewing the ache as an omen of his twisted fate.

1

On the island, Affranchi had never experienced such conflict with others. He pondered, "Does island living forge a person more solidly than life in a space colony?" It was a thought inescapable to anyone from the colonies.

"Geh!"

With a choking cough, a man struck in the throat gagged, writhing slightly.

Affranchi mused to himself, "Perhaps revealing an unknown side of myself is exactly what MHA fears most..."

His insights weren't born of brilliance but were a mosaic of sparse, disjointed experiences, particularly regarding the space colonies—a realm he barely understood.

Yet, his experiences since Hong Kong had been a string of tensions. Such thoughts were natural, even without deep insights into the events involving MHA and Miranda Howe's group.

"Ugh, nng!" groaned the hulking figure, shifting restlessly with eyes that seemed dull and unfocused.

Affranchi noticed but ignored this, settling on the bed to massage his aching hand.

"They say looks can be deceiving, and how true that is..."

The giant man chattered his jaw aimlessly. Affranchi felt a slight headache, his tongue tangling in his mouth.

"What's happening to me?" overlapped his thought with the man's voice.

"Where are you from?"

"From Earth..." Affranchi replied, his slurred speech becoming evident.

"Being from Earth, I realize I'm the one who knows least about myself... It's frustrating," he thought, aware of a mild but annoying headache.

"You don't know where you were born either?"



"Huh? My birthplace? I don't really know," Affranchi replied, his confusion growing as the once familiar sound faded, leaving only the headache.

Now, he feared he might never hear it again. What used to be a source of anxiety had morphed into a different kind of fear.

"What did you do to end up here?"

"Huh? I didn't do anything. Chased by a strange flying object, and some men in plainclothes chased me, too."

"Huh... why's that?"

"I don't know, and that's the problem. I can't think of anything."

Suddenly, the jangling sound of keys echoed outside the cell.

"...?"

The officer from before reappeared beyond the bars, his face puffed up and contorting in irritation as he rattled the keys.

"Hey, kid. Time to get out!" He was oblivious to the two unconscious men, either out of insensitivity or because such sights were routine, perhaps both.

"Move yer ass, ya nameless shit!" the officer barked as he flung open the cell, waving his baton impatiently at Affranchi.

"Name's Totto Göring. Remember that – you'll find it's a name worth knowing," the giant said, a grin spreading across his face as he looked at Affranchi's back.

"Thanks, Totto," Affranchi barely finished before the officer's baton nudged his back.

"Oof..." Affranchi stumbled towards the bars that divided the corridor of the detention area.

"Thinking you have the right to talk, that's your problem!" The officer's scorn followed Affranchi, grabbing his wrist.

The icy clasp of handcuffs tightened around his wrists. Shocked, he winced as the officer yanked the chain, the metal biting cruelly into his skin.

He couldn't believe that he had been humiliated like this, and he couldn't help but feel a sense of anger rising within him. As he followed the officer down the corridor, he locked his gaze onto the man's shoulder in silent defiance.

2

"This way!"

Gaining momentum as he rounded the corner, the bulky officer twisted Affranchi's arm, wrenching his elbow backward in a painful

contortion. To resist the pain, Affranchi's body swayed dramatically from left to right, staggering.

"Walk properly!" Another yank came, peeling the skin off his wrist. With his curse, a wad of chewed tobacco scattered from his mouth.

Affranchi swore never to forget this officer's face. Hatred was an unfamiliar emotion to him, yet the space colony seemed to awaken it with ease. Particularly when an officer, shielded by his status and the law, could manhandle civilians without fear of accountability. Unless you had connections or met a kind-hearted officer, defending yourself from police brutality seemed an impossible feat in this world. It was an inherent flaw in a society's system.

Affranchi grew anxious as a door that apparently led outside came into view over the officer's shoulder. Two men stood by the door.

"Is this the one? The nameless youth?" one of them asked. The door to the right opened, revealing another officer, one of the two who had apprehended Affranchi.

"He came out of the shelter," said the first officer.

"Liar," Affranchi shot back, almost reflexively.

The officer who had just emerged from the door turned sharply towards Affranchi. "You didn't see me leave the shelter. I know that best," Affranchi countered, prepared to stand his ground with this logic.

He sensed a punch coming from the handcuff-holding officer. Affranchi subtly shifted his leg, seeing the officer's fist fly upwards in his peripheral vision. Suddenly, a plain-clothed man in front stopped the officer.



"That's enough!" one of the men commanded in a deep voice, ordering the handcuffs removed.

"Uh...?" The officer, confusion evident as he spat out his chewing tobacco, reluctantly unlocked the handcuffs. Affranchi's wrists were red and raw.

"This is out of your jurisdiction. Don't interfere. He's not under suspicion."

"Got it!" The chewing tobacco-spitting officer, while unfastening Affranchi's handcuffs, muttered, "Don't understand what the hell this is about!"

"Just doing my job. Don't take it personally," one plain-clothed man smirked, patting Affranchi's shoulder before moving behind him.

"You can leave now... though there's a storm outside." The two men, feigning disinterest, gestured for Affranchi to leave.

Affranchi was puzzled.

"We are observers of police misconduct. Your arrest was illegal, based on circumstantial evidence. It's not a release. You shouldn't have been detained in the first place," said the sharp-eyed man with stubble on his chin.

"Should I be grateful?" Affranchi wondered what to do.

"You're free to forget what the officers did or write to the newspapers or TV... But remember, it won't be picked up by the media." The left man opened the door.

Outside, the wind was howling.

"A storm?" Affranchi mused as he stepped onto the pavement, puzzled by the clear sky. Gritty soil whipped against his skin.

"Controlled weather, yet..." he mumbled, trying to spit out the clinging dust.

Newspaper sheets and unidentifiable wrappers tumbled across the road while sirens wailed in the distance, their sound carried and distorted by the wind.

"Is a typhoon coming?" Affranchi mused, his headache persisting.

He walked straight along the sidewalk, eager to leave the police's oppressive presence. Yet, he had nowhere to go, a realization that struck him anew.

The streets were eerily quiet, reminiscent of the island before a typhoon, a tense and hollow atmosphere.

"I should have asked Miranda..." He berated himself for his carelessness in believing there was no need to know his destination in advance.

Clang, clang, clang! A fire truck, ringing its bell rather than using a siren, sped past him.

"Why aren't they using the siren?" Affranchi thought, but no new ideas came to his throbbing head. Maybe the anachronistic feel of this space colony affected even people's minds, he wished to believe. Accumulated irritation can turn a person dangerous, whether into violence, decadence, or cynicism.

He turned several corners, almost bumping into people several times.

A metro sign caught his eye. In the space colony, the metro meant a linear train running along the colony's outer wall.

Seeking shelter from the wind, Affranchi headed towards the metro entrance. The main hatch was closed; people were using the side doors. He slipped between the rushing crowd into the corridor leading to the metro station.

Enticing shops lined the spacious area, filled with the heavy scent of spices. Narrow storefronts encroached on the walkway, their depths hinting at more shops beyond.

The passage was crowded, none seeming to move. Long lines formed at public phones. The metro platform speakers blared: "The next train's departure is uncertain due to an air raid. This is an emergency. The turnstiles are sealed. Do not move. We take no responsibility for anything that happens. Please remain where you are. Buses may be a better option now."

Affranchi moved towards the metro arcade, overhearing conversations of people who had taken shelter from the storm.

"I heard there's a hole in the colony's outer wall!"

"That's why it's windy?"

"Of course. The weather bureau wouldn't create this. It must be a breach."

"But there was a similar storm ten years ago."

"This is different. The air is blowing out through the hole in the wall."

"But the wind is too weak for that."

"The air can't escape all at once."

"The TV says repairs are underway."

"How did this happen?"

"There's been talk of increased activity by the anti-Earth Federation government movement. That's probably it."

As he moved among the people, he learned about the colony's situation from these conversations. He avoided drawing attention, moving slowly, trying to blend in as a regular citizen.

He accidentally brushed against copper pots hanging outside a shop, causing them to clang loudly.

"Hey, if you damage it, you just bought it!" a gruff voice warned from the dark interior.

"S-sorry!" Affranchi quickly moved away.

Overhearing snippets of conversation, one caught his attention: "A humanoid machine made the hole?"

A broadcast announced, "The Colony Public Corporation the wall's restoration poses no major issues, but there's no information yet on the start of full-scale repairs."

Affranchi peeked into an incense shop where a large TV showed space, the shopkeeper engrossed in it.

"...?"

He glanced at the flashy incense packages in the show window while sneaking a look at the TV.

"Severe action against malicious terrorist acts is why that flying object was deployed," the broadcast continued.

"It's the military's doing, isn't it?" the interviewer pressed.

"We're unaware. Maybe MHA's doing?" the military man deflected.

"If this is the police's crackdown on the anti-Earth federal government movement, isn't today's air raid in the Jabour district by the flying object an overreaction?"

"The military is not involved, so we cannot comment," responded the officer in the interview.

"Isn't it odd to say that the flying object is under police jurisdiction?"

The flying object now being discussed appeared on the screen. It was the same object that had pursued him from the abode of the fortune-teller, Ento Sismesia.

"Even I don't know the true nature of MHA. But, regardless of the organization, it's unthinkable for any public entity to conduct air raids on civilian residential areas," replied a high-ranking military official, his demeanor casual and detached, the very image of a politician unaffected by the gravity of the situation.

"Then, is this flying object part of the anti-Earth Federation government movement?" the interviewer probed.

"Exactly, that's what we also believe," the official affirmed.

Affranchi realized that even the residents of this space colony knew only the superficial aspects of the current situation.

"The truth of things... apart from the tides and stars, remains unknown..." he recalled the words of Gaba Suu.

"Miranda and the others have kept me in the dark, but now, who will shed light on these events?" Affranchi pondered. He resolved that

he must make contact with Miranda, Krishna, or someone from the crew of the *Spacias*.

"Do I have no choice but to return there?" Affranchi thought of the building where the *Spacias* was moored, a mix of apprehension and determination in his thoughts.

3

"So this is the result of administering the truth serum?"

UI Urian's face contorted into a grimace of disgust as he addressed his superior.

"Yes, I adjusted it to keep him sane. The results are unfortunate, but he wasn't informed by the Z Organization. He's not even fully aware of the possibility that he might be the second coming of Char."

Standing before UI, the captain exuded a sense of competence, his stance authoritative. His deep-set eyes were a transparent blue, betraying a sense of defeat.

"The data sent from the Hong Kong branch about Affranchi Char is no coincidence. It's proof he was a premeditated part of the plan, someone connected to Char Aznable, that warrior from the Principality of Zeon."

UI's tone was decidedly firm, a stark contrast to the "young master" persona he had shown aboard the *Spacias*.

"But UI, would they really show the sign so openly?"

"True, symbols and codes aren't usually so overt. But if there were people planning Char Aznable's resurgence, they'd be romantics. Individuals of that sort tend to want to display symbols, much like this name, somewhere, don't you think?"

"Hmm... You have a point," the captain conceded, glancing at the display on the antique table monitor showing Affranchi Char's pain-stricken face. Before regaining consciousness in the detention cell, Affranchi had been forced to confess by UI's team after being administered the truth serum, but he hadn't revealed any concrete information that might make them into his enemies.

"Despite our efforts, he didn't confess. Moreover, he managed to pilot a man-machine and hijack a shuttle. Even with support, a guy who pulled that off so skillfully is no ordinary man, right?" UI insisted, his words cut off by the ringing of the phone on the table.

"Here we go," the captain said with a wry smile, picking up the receiver. "Yes... from the Hellas Administration? Connect them."

Glancing at Ul, Captain Bijan slightly smiled before speaking, "Captain Bijan Dargol speaking. Ye--... Yes. I understand your position, but I must disagree. Reports suggest the Jabour district is earmarked for forced containment in the urban plan. From our perspective, we were simply providing assistance."

Bijan's words left no room for rebuttal. He raised his hand to halt Ul, who was about to stand.

"However, sir, the Minox is an unmanned recon probe. Its remote control failure was due to sabotage. If it weren't for that insurgent's machine, such a disaster wouldn't have occurred. Therefore, we bear no responsibility. Rather, we should be thanked for the Minox's defensive actions... Understood. I'll visit your official residence this evening."

After hanging up, Bijan asked, "What now?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm thinking of a date. If our adversaries wish to remain inconspicuous, they'll likely play along. It's a simpler way to capture one of the Organization's crew."

"This... Krishna Pandent?" Bijan glanced at a file before adding, "But we lost track of her after driving her into Jabour. Will she come?"

"It's hard to say, but if the enemy is powerful enough, they'll make her come. On the other hand, they might plan to abduct me..."

"Hmm... Anyway, our system is still at version three. Take it easy."

"Yes, sir... If we had more mobility, we could easily locate their base and wipe them out..."

"Let's not go down that road. The bureaucrats favor legal amendments and system organization over tangible results. Their priorities are different."

"That's why we need to expedite our system. Operating solely as an extralegal entity comes with its challenges."

"And yet, you seem to relish these challenges."

"That's not at all the case, sir. Even with the Minox's control and support, we could still control it from a different control booth, even if one car was destroyed. Capturing the enemy's man-machine was possible."

"I understand. Control of the Minox was compromised by just two gunshots. Meanwhile, my efforts were preoccupied with laying the legal groundwork for the MHA Gayjisu. You'll have to forgive me."

"Yes, sir!" Ul responded, offering a rueful smile and a crisp salute before exiting the room.

4

With empty pockets, Affranchi found himself with no option but to walk after emerging from the metro. Although there was a looming fear that the air might thin, there were still cars on the streets, and he could see other pedestrians.

To reach the central core of the space colony, his path led through zones ravaged by the recent air raid.

"It's strange how those people who were chasing me so relentlessly let me go so easily." he mused, walking through the strong wind while nursing a nagging headache. Unbeknownst to him, the headache was an aftermath of the truth serum and its erasing agent.

"Ugh!" he grimaced as gusts of wind, laden with dirt and debris, whipped against him. The coarse dust of the space colony, thick and tenaciously clinging to his hair, served as a stark reminder that his belief in the pristine nature of this artificially created world was a mere illusion. Affranchi chuckled ruefully at his lack of imagination.

"Could I be followed, or have they planted a tracker on me?" he speculated, pausing at a crosswalk to watch the cars whizz by as the pieces of his unexpected release began to fall into place.

As he crossed the street, Affranchi felt compelled to press forward, his progress as labored as if scaling a mountain. Fear prevented him from even a casual glance back.

The wail of an ambulance sireded past.

"What have I done? Why would they release me? What kind of secret organization would go to such lengths to investigate me? Eva... I never imagined that by living in space, human suspicion could swirl so intensely..."

Affranchi stepped onto a street crowded with fire engines. In the distance, a corner of the sky was marred by billowing soot-like smoke or gaseous substance whipped up by the wind.

"Civilians need to keep back!" echoed the urgent shouts of the police, cutting through the tumultuous scene.

Behind the police line, several forms lay still, shrouded in blankets. A cold realization struck Affranchi as he recognized them as bodies in rigor mortis.

1

"Got it, thanks. Frequency's checked and locked," Captain Madras Caria of the *Spasias* intoned, casting a glance over his shoulder at the crewman tinkering with the radio behind him before setting down the receiver.

"Locked on for sure?"

"Yes, this speed indicates walking pace. It's Affranchi, right?" Joe Suren, lean and youthful, chimed in with a hint of curiosity.

"He's heading for the central core, isn't he?"

"Looks like. He'll pass through Canterbury Zenoah Street. Seems he's enjoying the mountain view on his stroll."

"Right. Is Krishna ready?"

"I'll make sure. Excuse me for a sec," Joe said, rising from his seat.

"Please do, Joe."

Madras's tone turned grave.

"Murasko's in the dark about the true identities of the department operatives who intervened. We must assume MHA is making its move."

Murasko, a police officer, was one of their informants within the organization.

Thanks to that tip, they were able to intercept the signals of the transmitter planted on Affranchi and track him, a feat made possible by the absence of Minovsky particles in the colony's atmosphere.

"Now that Affranchi's been arrested, he might have gained some insight on the Federation government. Shame we couldn't keep him here longer."

"Captain, what's the plan for the Zorin Soul?" asked navigator Michel Aiken, turning from the radio.

"Depends on how the enemy plays it. We might need to deploy it again. Keep Keran Mead on alert, though I'm concerned about his readiness..."

"Krishna's our ace, but she's playing the decoy, right? We can't put her on board."

"Obviously. The Alpha's secured on the Thirty-One Squared. Once we get there, we can escape Hellas' airspace."

"We're pulling out?"

"Was there ever a doubt? We got too comfortable with Affranchi around."

For the first time, Madras's voice carried a sharper edge.

Lit like a checkerboard, high-rise buildings framed the view from the window. On a couch below, Krishna Pandent lay, a conspicuous bandage on her right cheek contrasting with her skin.

This piece of Hellas was a far cry from the ambush site, yet another facet of its sprawling downtown. Krishna enshrouded in a saree-like garment, mustered a faint smile at Joe's voice from the communications room.

"Still hurts?"

He asked as she rested her head on the armrest.

"Well, the glass shards are out, at least."

"And you're going like that?"

"A date's a date. Plus, sympathy's on my side after the air raid."

"Captain might call in the man-machine and make a quick retreat depending on how things turn."

"I've been trained; I can handle it."

"That's what worries me," Joe sighed, looking down at Krishna, who shifted with a playful grimace.

"But retreating now? Feels like we're giving up."

"The captain's priority is keeping Affranchi safe, that's all."

Joe looked towards the door as Miranda stepped in, fretting over her slightly damp hair and her loungewear.

"What's the latest?"

"Nothing, we're sticking to the plan to let Krishna go on her date with UI."

Joe relayed.

"Oh, I see..." Miranda's beautiful profile clouded over for a moment before she resignedly added, "We have no choice but to go through with it..." and moved towards the window.

"Miranda!" Captain Madras called from the adjoining room.

"Yes?"

"Need a word," he said, his face serious and concerned, peeking through the door.

After Miranda left, Joe looked down at Krishna and remarked, "You're tough, aren't you, Krishna?"

"Am I? Or are you trying to say I'm behaving improperly?"

"No. It's just... the way you bounce back, full of life... That's what's incredible about you," Joe clarified.

"Thanks, Joe."

Despite the compliment, Krishna remained lying down, her attention drifting towards the door Miranda had exited through.

"What's wrong?"

"Miranda's not keen on our next move."

"She wants Affranchi to herself. Different jurisdiction in Hellas irks her. She hasn't realized her role is over."

Krishna tried to accept this explanation, yet part of her resisted the idea that it was that simple.

"The captain should just assign her the next mission."

"Can we drop the old-school terms? 'Mission,' 'job,' 'ideology'—it makes us sound like those Federation bureaucrats."

"We're an organization. It's the nature of our work."

"The hell with that," Krishna countered, suddenly springing up from the couch, her defiance clear.

2

Meanwhile, Affranchi, the target of Madras and his team's tracking efforts, trudged against the wind, deliberately heading away from the chaotic aftermath of the air raid. The peculiar numbness at his tongue's tip was ebbing away, but he couldn't figure out why it was numb in the first place. As he shook off the last vestiges of disorientation and a headache, a more primal need nudged at him—hunger.

"Incredible, I'm actually hungry," he mused aloud, a sense of vulnerability creeping in. Raised on a lush southern island, Affranchi was a stranger to hunger. Even though it wasn't a land of plenty, one could always find something fallen in the fields to pick up, and the shore provided seaweed, shells, or fish with just a little effort. Nature, it seemed, had a certain laxity, not binding or stimulating people too much, providing just enough to live on. Even in poverty, people weren't crushed by the struggle of daily life.

Yet, in this city, a labyrinth of man-made structures, where the very density of life acted as a barrier, and the artificiality itself became a pariah, not a single bite of food could be scavenged. Especially since waste management in space colonies was designed

for thorough reprocessing, all garbage was funneled down to a floor equivalent to the city's underground for processing.

Moreover, although food was abundantly available just a wall or door away in the city, the distance separated by a single door or shutter of a restaurant or convenience store was negligible, not like crossing a high hill or passing through rocky areas. However, to cross the boundary of a restaurant door or convenience store shutter, one needed money or a credit card. If you had either, you could satisfy your hunger without hurting your feet, being yelled at, or getting drenched.

Yet, even with money, credit cards, or a widely accepted ID card, without a functioning system to accept these means of payment, even if people were present, crossing over remained impossible. Even with manual systems as a fallback, their rarity in use underscored a collective reluctance to bypass technological hiccups, deferring instead to experts for repairs—a mindset far removed from the simplicity of acquiring food. This was considered modern wisdom, unrelated to rain or the growth of flora and fauna.

"Social studies taught me that modern societal mechanisms have both spawned countless jobs and eradicated unemployment, yet they've also ushered in an era of technocratic tyranny. They believe they can continue to live by endlessly creating systems that bind people without speaking, thinking there's no need for the sea or land... People inherently need the uncertainty nature offers..."

That was Affranchi's intuition.

He walked on, looking up at the mountains that began to appear between the buildings. The headache was no longer as memorable, but the chafed wounds from handcuffs had become more of a concern.

"But outside, beyond these metal walls, lies the infinite void, akin to the sea around my island. Perhaps, in their own way, the colony's architects were reaching for something similar."

Affranchi let out a sigh of relief as he observed the orderly cityscape, quite different from the city he had been running from. The wind had calmed to a gentle breeze.

"Watch it!"

As Affranchi looked up, he collided with a young man who suddenly darted from his right—a straggler from a boisterous group of youths.

The one who cursed was a straggler in the group, with long hair and jeans, adorned with a nude tattoo on his bare shoulder, though it didn't quite suit him.



"Don't mind him!" a voice called out from the front of the pack, a mix of men and women, singling out the young man as the group's outlier.

Affranchi offered a wry smile and began to walk again when, unexpectedly, he was kicked from below, causing him to stagger forward.

"Smirk at me, did ya? Giving me the eye, huh!"

Despite the young man's abnormal anger, Affranchi, stunned, attempted to leave the scene with the momentum of his stumble.

That was his mistake.

Several men from the leading group turned on their heels and came charging back.

"You looking down on us?"

"Just a slow kid, huh!"

Affranchi found himself facing men a head taller than him, some wearing leather bracelets with iron spikes, others with spiky metal on their knuckles.

"I haven't done anything..."

Affranchi realized this city truly was a den of such thugs. If not, then the officials were either as tyrannical as cops or as mysterious as those men in plain clothes.

"This guy's one of our adorable pals, right? Right!"

The ringleader's shout, charged with authority, was the signal for an onslaught as fists and feet hurtled toward Affranchi.

Caught off guard, he crouched, bracing as youths lunged at him from both sides, leaving no room to dodge.

"Ever heard of Totto Göring?"

In the midst of this, a black fist flew from the left. Affranchi's knee rose, kicking the youth in the solar plexus.

"What did you say?!"

"Said I'm a friend of Totto," Affranchi managed to push the winded youth back into the group.

"Know him?" The long-haired one from behind asked.

"Met him at the police station, became friends there."

The group stirred.

"What kind of friends?"

"The kind where you hit each other... and that's how you become good friends."

"You should've led with that, man... could've saved us all the drama!" the ringleader laughed, the tension dissolving into camaraderie.

"I'm new to this city. I don't know what kind of people you are."

"Is that so? What's your name?"

A suddenly friendly hand slapped his shoulder.

"Affranchi Char..."

Using a fake name hadn't crossed Affranchi's mind.

"Really?"

"Yeah, Totto told me to use his name. Just met him at the police with two other friends."

"Huh! Fair enough, Aff. I'm Messer Mett. Got work now, but if you need anything, give me a shout," Messer said, calling Affranchi by a nickname and handing him a lavish business card.

"Thanks. I just arrived in this city, so I don't know much about the place. Do you live in Greneze?"

"Around here, it's Jahur to the maps, but to us, it's Greneze."

"Why?"



"Grenze means 'edge,' 'corner.' It's where we, the forgotten, carve out our lives."

"Oh!"

"Catch ya later!"

With that, Messer shrugged, and the group of hooligans dispersed from around Affranchi, leaving him alone once more.

3

Navigating the unfamiliar elegance of Canterbury Zenoa Street in Hellas, Krishna, hailing from the rugged streets of Grenze, felt the stark contrast of her surroundings. Here, amid the opulence of high-end establishments, every step took her further from the world she

knew. It was a place she seldom visited, nor had any reason to, until now.

She wished she didn't have to wear the bandage on her right cheek, but nonetheless, she pressed on briskly and confidently, posture straightened by habit when wearing a saree. Despite not being raised particularly in Indian traditions or taught Hinduism, something in her bloodline compelled this adherence.

"Captain says we got into that dangerous situation because of UI Urian... But the police informant didn't even know UI," Krishna thought as she navigated through the bustling evening crowds on the sidewalk.

She couldn't help feeling that all of Greneze, or rather the entire colony of Hellas, was engulfed in an invisible web of power.

"It's not Affranchi's fault that MHA has resorted to launching an air raid."

She quickly identified the café, Udenberg, where she was to meet UI. The bakery on the ground floor and the coffee lounge above were unmistakable. Even though she was late for their appointment, she paused outside the café, expecting Affranchi to approach from the opposite direction.

"Is he late?" she wondered, briefly allowing herself to feel a flutter of anticipation before remembering her "mission" and proceeding upstairs.

The lower floor was crowded with business professionals, and the chic items on display were all high-end, nothing as casual as a hot dog to be seen. The lounge was also busy, but UI Urian's checkered jacket was easy to spot.

"Sorry, I'm late," Krishna announced louder than necessary upon approaching UI, ensuring others around them took notice. It was all part of her strategy to establish an alibi, much like her decision to wear the saree.

"No worries, a slight delay can't dull our meeting," UI remarked, his smile not quite reaching his eyes as he pulled out a chair beside him. "But your cheek... that seems a more pressing tale," his tone laced with a curiosity that hinted at underlying concerns.

"Did you hear about the air raid in the Jafur area?" she asked.

"Yeah, I saw it on the news. Were you there at the time?"

"It was terrible. Some unidentified plane dropped bombs."

"Sounds like it could escalate into a political issue. They're saying it was the military."

"Does the Earth Federation Forces even have such planes?"

"I can't imagine they do... There are rumors about MHA being involved, though."

Krishna fell silent as UI mentioned MHA, signaling a change in the conversation's direction. UI, seemingly unaware of Krishna's discomfort, casually asked what she'd like to drink.

"What about food?"

"I've arranged for us to dine somewhere else."

"Thank you," Krishna said, genuinely pleased. UI's response was exactly what any man prepared for the expense hoped for—a genuine appreciation.

"I'm just disappointed you're not a student," UI joked.

Krishna, laughing and not missing a beat, asked, "And what about you? You're not a student. Even though you showed me hang gliding and stuff, to me you looked like someone in the military."

"Why would you think that?"

"Well, students these days tend to look so indistinct. You, on the other hand, seem like you have your act together."

Krishna wanted to speak quickly to hide the fear she was holding, but she was conscious that doing so might make her say the wrong things, so she deliberately spoke slowly.

"What's got you so frightened?" UI inquired, his voice echoing a subtle blend of curiosity and concern.

Krishna, grappling with a cocktail of apprehension and defiance, retorted, "It's because I can't figure you out. Being wary is pretty standard for a girl, don't you think?"

"Maybe for the average person, but you? You're far from average. You don't look frightened at all," UI countered, his gaze unwavering, as if he was seeing through the façade she struggled to maintain.

"I can't tell if that's supposed to be a compliment," Krishna said, her voice laced with skepticism just as their drinks arrived.

"Thank you..." She smiled at the waiter, whose attire screamed urban chic before her eyes found UI's again.

UI matched her smile with disarming ease, offering glimpses into his life as a history grad student—a curious blend of academia and athleticism as if he was navigating two worlds simultaneously. This physical discipline probably set him apart from the more sedentary scholarly types, he mused.

"Still, my father considers me a slacker," he added with a half-smile.

Krishna stood up, quipping, "Asking about your father's line of work would make this sound like an interrogation, wouldn't it?"

Her sudden movement caught UI off guard.

"I'm hungry. Let's go," she declared, sparking a flurry of activity.

"Oh! My apologies," UI said, pressing his watch with a finger and signaling for their ride.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"The car's on its way," he briefly explained, grabbing the receipt and guiding Krishna towards the stairs with a hand at her waist, his efficiency leaving her no room for argument.

Krishna couldn't help but think, "This man might really be the highborn gentleman he seems."

Descending into the night, Krishna found herself on the sidewalk, bathed in the glow of Udenberg's lights as UI finalized their departure. The evening had deepened, the colony's pulse quickening with the night's allure and mysteries. A sleek limousine silently pulled up, its driver, cap in place, stepping out with a formality that drew Krishna's cautious eye.

"...?"

Krishna faintly suspected why the driver was looking at her, but the driver simply turned towards the rear door without stopping and opened it.

"Your ride, m'lady!" UI announced.

"It's so luxurious! Like something out of a movie," Krishna exclaimed, half in jest.

"Happy to hear you're impressed. It's not every day I get to borrow my father's car," UI replied, his light-hearted tone belied by a current of tension that Krishna couldn't help but notice.

A chill of foreboding swept through Krishna as she eyed the driver. This was no ordinary chauffeur; there was a sharpness about him, a keen alertness that spoke of hidden depths and secrets. And her intuition was correct. He was one of the plainclothes policemen who had released Affranchi at the police station where he was detained. He exuded the sharpness of MHA staff.

"Thank you," she said, climbing into the limousine with a resolve that belied her earlier levity.

"Where to?" asked the driver, now part of their narrative, a narrative taking a turn towards the uncertain.

"French cuisine sound good?"

"That's fine."

Krishna smiled, trying to maintain a semblance of normalcy despite the undercurrents of danger she sensed.

"Krishna?"

Affranchi stopped about ten meters behind the limousine. If not for his distraction with the allies of Totto, he might have missed witnessing Krishna's departure.

"No, don't go!" A shadowy figure restrained him, whispering a command that halted him mid-step.

"Who are you?" Affranchi demanded.

"It's me, Joe from the *Spasias*," the figure revealed himself, a sentinel in the night with eyes on the limousine.

"Joe Suren?"

"We've got eyes on that limo. But you, you've got a bigger fish to catch. Come on," Joe pressed, steering Affranchi into the shadows as the limousine merged with the night, leaving behind a tension that slowly dissipated, swallowed by the shadows of unfolding events.

Chapter.06

The Depths of a Toilet

1

"Did you figure out that Ul Urjan is a dangerous man?" Affranchi Char asked over his shoulder to Joe Suren.

"No solid proof, but his contact with Krishna is evidence they're getting desperate. This is our chance to catch them off guard."

"I see..."

"More importantly, your condition is what's troubling. Come on."

Joe said, gripping Affranchi's wrist and flagging down a taxi with a practiced motion.

"Why?"

"Take off your jacket, will you?"

As Joe instructed the driver on their destination, he meticulously searched Affranchi's jacket from label to hem with his fingers.

"What's going on?"

Affranchi's unease grew.

"Take off your belt. There could be a tracker anywhere on your body."

"How? Why?"

The questions tumbled out, laced with disbelief.

"You've been bugged by the police. Sneaky, right? Wouldn't put it past MHA to pull something like this."

The taxi slid into a back alley after a few sharp turns.

"Here's good. Stop here!" Joe cheerfully said, handed the driver a bill, and quickly got out.

Affranchi followed, barely managing to keep his pants up, and together, they darted into a brightly lit street where a hotel loomed. They ascended a few steps and passed through wooden doors on either side to find the reception.

"Madame Skea's room?"

"Mr. Joblan?"

"Uh, yes, that's right."

"She's waiting for you," replied a disinterested middle-aged front desk clerk amidst a cramped lobby barely accommodating a single sofa set and footpaths worn into the carpet.

They took an elevator, barely big enough for four, to an upper floor. Drab wallpaper was barely illuminated by dim lights.

Joe knocked on a door.

"You whore!"

A man's voice sounded from behind as a woman burst out of another door, which slammed shut.

"Good to see you made it," greeted Miranda Howe in a suit, inviting them in, "Are you alright?"

A smile broke on Affranchi's face at the sight of Miranda's calm demeanor. It dawned on him that her presence was his anchor, a realization that brought comfort and a twinge of repulsion at his own dependency.

"Strip down to your bare skin."

"Do what?"

Despite understanding the necessity, Affranchi felt humiliated by the demand to undress outside a medical context. He went into the bathroom and handed Joe all his sweat-soaked clothes.

"Shit!"

"What's wrong?"

Moments later, Joe burst in, urgency in his voice.

"Let me take a look at you! You've been bugged!"

"Eh?"

"The signal is emanating from where Affranchi is," Miranda said from outside the door. Joe, with a receiver-like cord, inspected Affranchi's wet hair and entire body.

"No visible wounds... So, it must be in the stomach or here, right?"

Joe pointed at Affranchi's anus.

"I don't feel anything foreign."

Affranchi tried to feel for any foreign object in front of him as well.

"Then, it's in my stomach... but I don't remember swallowing anything." "Typical. Didn't you sleep at the police station?"

"I was knocked out..."

"That's it. Heavy-duty laxatives are needed; I'll buy some. Joe, could you rent a camper?"

"Eh?"

Joe peeked in Miranda's direction.

"Is it safe to leave Affranchi here?"

"If we move recklessly and stumble into their trap, what then?"

"Right. Carelessly moving and having them notice the presence of the transmitter wouldn't be amusing, would it?"

"No, moving is better. If we stay here and then move, they'll follow immediately. But if we maintain a rhythm, they'll feel secure."

Affranchi, drying off, said.

"Huh?"

Joe seemed confused.

"Understood. Joe, I'll need you to arrange for a rental car."

Miranda spoke from beyond the door, then opened it.

"We need to hear from the captain about Krishna too."

"Outside, then?"

"If we make a call here, it might be bugged."

Affranchi changed into new underwear provided by Miranda, uncomfortable with the idea of something foreign inside him. To avoid dwelling on it, he thought of Krishna.

"She'll be fine. She's tough..."

Affranchi noticed a half-eaten sandwich on the table by the window, marked with Miranda's lipstick.

2

The limousine carrying Krishna and UI veered off the city streets into the dimly lit paths of Forann Forest Park. On one side, the park stretched up to the mountains housing the space colony's central core. Krishna found it agonizing that she could only believe they were being followed without the means to confirm it.

"Where are we going?"

"There's a place hidden here in the park, famous for its duck cuisine," UI replied a hint of mirth in his voice.

"Andersen's, perhaps? I've heard it's quite pricey."

"Ha ha... Consider it a token of our new friendship; don't worry about it. Look, there it is."

Looking ahead at UI's cue, Krishna saw a cluster of lights emerging from among the densely packed trees, the park's sole high-end establishment.

"How lovely!"

Naturally, Krishna had never been to such a place, neither during the day nor at night. Venturing here at night was a luxury reserved for those with limousines. Unlike its daytime guise, the restaurant adorned with illuminations truly looked like something out of a storybook. Sure enough, the majority of the people visible through

the glass windows facing the street were dressed in black formal wear or haute couture.

Moreover, the restaurant was surrounded by trees arranged so that the lights from the city's skyscrapers were obscured, engulfing it in the night's darkness. Only privileged companies or classes could secure land in a space colony like this.

The doorman opened the door for Krishna. She glanced back at UI just as the limousine driver leaned in to whisper in his ear.

"...?"

Inside, the ambiance was filled with the sound of a live piano and herbs, their melodies blending with the din of the patrons into a music of its own.

UI ordered their meal with an ease that lent credence to Captain Madras's concerns.

"But... I just don't have the knack for picking up on vibes like these..."

Krishna lamented her lack of discernment, knowing such judgment required training. For Krishna, discerning the propriety of ordering at such a high-class establishment was beyond her grasp. Yet, UI's ease with wine selections and menu nuances hinted at a deeper sophistication.

"So... There must be people from privileged backgrounds who are also part of MHA."

Krishna thought, coming to terms with it. They talked about their favorite music and hobbies, and Krishna even had a bit of wine.

After the meal, UI broached a new topic.

"Did I mention I've been delving into historical studies?" he began, his demeanor as casual as one sipping coffee, though the subject was anything but.

"I've stumbled upon something fascinating in Hebrew. Every letter in the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value, imbuing numbers with layers of meaning, wouldn't you agree?"

"Like how thirteen is considered unlucky?" Krishna ventured, her tone light, attempting to match UI's casual air.

"Exactly. And, in Hebrew, the Almighty God Shaddai corresponds to the number three hundred and fourteen. There's also an angel called Metatron with the same number. So, Metatron is revered just as much as Shaddai."

"He knows everything."

For Krishna, part of the Z Organization, which cryptically utilized the abbreviation of 31—a nod to the numerical essence of 314—this revelation struck hard, like a club to the skull. The organization's

cryptic use of numerical bases, from squared to cubed, mirrored her own recent assignment for man-machine training on the space colony referred to as Shaddai, though its exact location remained a mystery to her—a safeguard by the organization to keep certain knowledge compartmentalized for security.

"Why resort to numbers, though?" Krishna asked, trying to maintain composure.

"It's simple. Consider Islam's prohibition against writing the word for 'God,' fearing the sacrilege of discarding such sacred words on perishable paper," he explained.

"Wow, really?"

Krishna did her best to act like an ordinary girl.

"People often fear stating their deepest beliefs outright, worried it might reduce their dreams to mere commonality. It's a matter of faith."

"Primitive, wouldn't you say?"

"That too. To think such rudimentary beliefs could find their place in modern society," Ul countered, his words edging closer, challenging.

"Really?"

Krishna hesitated momentarily.

"Why are we governed entirely by computers?"

"Hm... The advent of space colonies necessitated this. The balance between a colony's capacity and its population, down to the last kilogram, dictates its construction plans. It's a consequence of our era—a far cry from life on Earth."

"So, in a way, the lack of such management, humanity had to accept its fate of being expelled from Earth, right?"

"Yes, that's true..."

"So, modern management isn't like what was said in the past. The systems in place today aren't about control but survival. Those who fall outside these parameters are considered outlaws."

"And by outlaws, you mean...?"

"People who don't need to be protected by law... In other words, those who don't have the right to live in the colonies."

"That's harsh... But even if colonies could be built infinitely, at least, they need to be constructed. And that requires management..."

"Exactly... That's right, Krishna."

"Yes?"

"However, there have always been free-spirited outlaws in every era, undeterred by the notion of ego."

"I admit that ego is neither a right nor a basis for being a member of society."

"Yet, the people who embody the number three hundred and fourteen have existed not just in bygone eras but today as well. What does it signify?"

"No! You said it, right? Shaddai, the Almighty God."

"Yes. And where does that power reside?"

"It's in space. Or perhaps within ourselves."

Krishna's predicament deepened.

"A general theory, Ms. Krishna Pandent?"

At the mention of her full name, Krishna recoiled in her chair.

"What I want to know is the current location of the present three hundred fourteen."

"So is our conversation repayment for this meal?"

"I don't invite women to dinner with that kind of motive. That's why I didn't bring this up during dinner."

Ul's urgency was palpable, though he remained the epitome of kindness.

"The sacred Shaddai resides in the cosmos and within ourselves!"

As Krishna spoke, she leaped up, grabbing the tablecloth. A cacophony of clatter ensued as the table's contents slid towards Ul, and she took her chance to bolt. However, with swift reflexes, Ul targeted her legs and, in a practiced move, sent her tumbling forward.

"Ah!" Her exclamation was cut short as her field of vision captured the motion of men near the café's exit. Ul's grip was firm on her arm, pulling her up, her body sliding against his as they made their escape outside.

The high-pitched staccato of machine gun fire ripping through the night.

"Over here! They've made a run for it!" shouted the limousine driver in the chaos.

He ran towards the voice, unaffected by Krishna's resistance. His skill in handling people was evident.

Krishna couldn't shake off Ul's grip, held by just two fingers on her wrist.

3

As Krishna and Ul entered Andersen's in Forann, Miranda was busy with Affranchi, handing him a laxative and another small box.

"You'll need to take care of this yourself," she said.



"An enema? Isn't the medicine enough?" Affranchi sighed as he read the instructions on the small box, his dismay palpable.

"I'm sorry, but we're in a hurry. You need to pass the transmitter by tonight. Please use both tubes," Miranda instructed, urgency laced in her voice.

"That much...?"

"We wanted you to live here for a while and learn about the realities of the space colony. But the situation is not allowing the optimism we were hoping for."

"It seems that way..."

Affranchi's reluctance was evident as he shuffled into the bathroom, rereading the instructions and lamenting the lack of advancement in such medical procedures. The indignity of the method struck him deeply.

"Perhaps those who make these drugs are indifferent to personal dignity..."

After administering the two tubes, Affranchi felt a slimy discomfort around his rear, a sensation that left him pondering his predicament and the choices that led him to this moment.

"Why did I even venture into space if it meant enduring this?"

Despite sitting on the toilet for a while, the expected relief didn't come; he felt only a disconcerting buzz throughout his body without any sign of an imminent bowel movement.

"Alright... Yes!"

Miranda's voice filtered through, indicating she was on the phone. Shortly after, Miranda called out to him. Affranchi, adjusting his underwear, left the bathroom.

"Joe's brought the car. You're good to go, right?"

"Yes, I'm still good," Affranchi replied, masking his embarrassment.

Without any other way to hide his shame, Miranda grabbed a notably large bag and headed to the corridor, instructing, "Leave the lights on!"

She stopped Affranchi from turning them off, closing the door behind them. Even when she handed over the keys at the front desk, she didn't forget to mention, "We might come back in the morning."

"So, what's the situation?"

"About what?" Joe asked, his tone unfriendly.

"Krishna," was all Affranchi could inquire.

"She's being targeted for abduction," Joe stated bluntly.

"By UI?"

"More like MHA. They've made their move. The ones tracking us are probably on our tail right now."

"Then we head for her. You know where the enemy is, right?"

Affranchi's assumption of their knowledge was optimistic.

"We're not as sure as you think. It looks like they're moving through Forann's forest towards the mountains."

Their conversation was interrupted by a sound that whizzed past overhead.

"What's that?"

"Someone's launched an air strike."

Affranchi heard this with a growl in his stomach.

"MHA's sudden movement is a response to what Miranda's group did in Hong Kong."

Joe glanced upwards briefly before turning back to Miranda.

"Even that flying object indicates the Earth Federation government has been preparing for a crackdown on opposition forces."

Miranda protested from the back seat, her objection lost amidst the unfolding events.

"...?!"

Affranchi was enduring the frustration in his chest and an uncomfortable, slimy feeling spreading through his lower body.

"Can't we get to where Krishna is?" he said to Joe as he heard gurgling noises rising from his stomach to his throat.

"But we've got no gear in this vehicle. We can't help," Joe countered, practical as ever.

Affranchi felt a sudden, intense turmoil in his stomach and clamped his mouth shut, feeling as if his entire body was floating in grease.

He bent over slightly.

"The toilet's over there!" Miranda pointed out, catching his desperate look.

"I know!" he snapped back, his voice a mix of irritation and shame, as he shuffled toward the bathroom.

Bumping into the walls on either side, he hunched over the toilet. The cramped space made it clear that Joe was driving fast. He pulled down his pants in a rush, hoping for relief, but he didn't feel anything coming out of his stomach.

Only loud flatulence followed.

The sound of his failure possibly reaching Miranda's ears, adding to his humiliation.

"Damn it! Will it even come out?"

He groaned from the depths of the dimly lit, box-like bathroom.

"If it's something stuck to the stomach or intestinal walls, maybe this isn't enough to get it out..."

What would he do then?

The camper van suddenly lurched as he tried to wipe the sweat from his abdomen with his shirt.

"Wah!"

The jolt propelled Affranchi into action, providing an unexpected but crude form of relief.

4

The limousine, with Krishna forced inside, sped through the dark lanes flanked by the dense forests of Forlorn Park at full throttle. Hot on their heels were a trio of motorcycles and a pair of elec-cars.

"What are you planning to do?!" Krishna asked, fumbling for the door lock behind her with her left hand.

"We're going to exterminate Thirty-One, the base of the anti-Earth Federation government movement," Ul's eyes hardened for a moment, but it was fleeting.

"UI, it's okay to rough her up, make her talk!" came a voice through the speaker from the driver's seat.

"Listen, Krishna, talk now, or we resort to drugs, and that won't be pleasant. Better to talk now, spare yourself the pain," UI warned.

"UI! Are you with MHA?"

"Wondering about that is as good as confessing you're a Z Zeon activist, isn't it? Is Thirty-One located here on Hellas? Is it a code for Affranchi's birthplace?"

His tone softened as if trying to coax the information gently.

"I don't know. I don't know!"

"What about the young man, Affranchi Char? What's his relation to Char Aznable?"

"I don't know anyone like that... Ah!"

UI was quick as a flash, knocking Krishna's right hand away from the key lock. He then grabbed her wrist, pulling her close to him.

"Think twice before jumping out of this car. You'll end up with more than a scratch, and we men wouldn't want to mar such beauty."

"I can't answer about things I don't know."

"We're masters at this interrogation game. Your denials just prove you're hiding something."

"I don't know!"

"You're just playing the part they told you to. Such a sad role, being used by your so-called friends. Why stay loyal to them?"

"I'm loyal to nothing because I know nothing!"

Krishna struggled, but his vice-like grip on her wrist immobilized her, pressing vital points that sapped her strength.

"You may be the youngest of the Spasias crew, but you fit in the best. That tells me you know the ship inside out. Maybe you're a Newtype."

"Newtype? I'm just an ordinary girl."

"Really? Tell me about the Thirty-One."

"Even if I were part of this Z-whatever organization, do you think the elders would tell me the meaning of such a code? That's not how the adult world works!"

"No. The Z Organization is a very democratic organization that empowers even its younger members, unlike the bureaucrats of the Earth Federation government."

UI's sarcastic smile loomed large in front of Krishna.

"That's not true!"

Just then, a motorcycle swerved dangerously close behind them.

"Tch! Can't the Minox pinpoint them?! If you dawdle, *that* might show up!"

The man driving could be heard through the speaker.

"That...?! You lot are far more reckless, aren'tcha?! Bringing a man-machine into the colony!"

Ul's frustration was evident for the first time, referring to the Zorin Soul.

"A man-machine?!? I don't know anything about that."

Krishna hadn't witnessed the incident involving the Zorin Soul's appearance.

"Please, just let me go--" she pleaded, straining against Ul's hold, her body tense with the effort to escape.

1

As they emerged from the shelter of the forest park, the world outside underwent a dramatic transformation. A stark descent unfurled before them, swathed in the obsidian cloak of night, echoing the mountain's lower stretches yet opening up to a vast pasture-like expanse devoid of the towering trees they had left behind.

Their eyes lifted to the skies, tracing the clouds that danced around the mountain's waistline. Suddenly, the limousine became a beast, rolling and pitching with untamed ferocity.

Within this turbulent cocoon, Krishna found herself grappling for stability, her limbs outstretched, seeking solace between the window and armrest, echoing UI's own struggle for balance.

"We're going too slow!"

UI's voice cut through the tension, his impatience lashing out at the driver.

They were traversing a mountain region connected to the space colony's central core. Its expansive slopes were naturally preserved as orchards and meadows, offering a slice of nature amidst the colony's artificial divisions. This preservation of natural scenery seemed like an unspoken rule in the colony's design ethos.

Three motorcycles shadowed them, ducking into a ravine's embrace only to emerge with relentless intent. The trailing elec-cars appeared to dawdle, outpaced. Then, with the grace of predators, three Minox aircraft descended.

"They're on us! UI! Get one to land!"

"That's the plan!"

"What?!"

Krishna attempted to protest, which UI misread as aggressive.

"Stay still," he commanded.

"Like hell," she defiantly responded, just as a chop from UI's hand landed on her neck due to the limousine's sudden jolt. He followed that with a firm jab to her solar plexus.

Krishna's body crumpled forward. The technique was a reflexive action of someone well-trained, albeit excessive.

UI still had amateurish tendencies.

"Sorry, but it's because you resisted."

Leaning forward, he fetched a submachine gun from beneath his seat and rolled down the window to aim outside.

"Let's do this."

"Don't hold back."

The driver's irritation bubbled to the surface.

UI paused, sensing a hesitation in their pursuit. Was lethal force unnecessary?

"Tch!"

It was his first time pointing a gun at a living person. He aimed the muzzle downward and fired.

Bra-ta-tat!

The gunshots sounded lighter than he expected, like a toy. Moreover, with the limousine's jostling, the gunfire bounced wildly.

"Ugh!"

UI hastily focused on steadying the grip, and with another burst, a bike slid to the left and toppled.

"Whoa!"

The bikers were too preoccupied to notice.

"What happened to Krishna?!"

"Cut ahead and make them stop!"

The chase intensified, the remaining riders drawing weapons, the air crackling with their intent.

UI tasted the acrid tang of gunfire, a novice to its sting.

"Damn it!"

UI momentarily withdrew, swapped out the magazine, and leaned out again, but one bike deftly slid in front.

Warning shots ricocheted off the vehicle's body.

Meanwhile, warning shots flashed from the elec-car vans lagging behind. The approaching Minox seemed to be at a loss as to where to direct their attack.

One of the three was unmanned, set only to pursue the limousine.

"Hm?"

When UI looked at the bike that had moved ahead, he saw the rider leaping up from it.

Thud!

The motorcycle's body collided violently with the limousine's left front, and the rider's body that had been thrown up tumbled on the ground from the side to the rear.

At this speed, it seemed impossible for them to hold on.

"Nngh!"

Ul's body was flung forward by the limousine's violent shaking, and he fell in front of the rear seat. He saw Krishna's unconscious body bouncing on the seat. The limousine had half run over the bike.

Passsssh!

A bright flash rose on the rear window, turning into the color of flames.

"Use grenades!"

The driver shouted angrily.

The motorcycle's gasoline had ignited, infuriating him.

Most modern cycles are electric-powered. The mere fact that it used gasoline was nothing short of handling explosives in this day and age.

Ul grabbed several grenades from under the seat and tossed them out the window. Explosions briefly illuminated the night, disrupting their pursuers.

Though unsure if the bikes were destroyed, the immediate threat seemed to dissipate. Eventually, one Minox engaged an elec-cycle, while the other two positioned themselves around the limousine.

"Finally caught on, you clowns."

Ul was fed up with the words of the driver, someone who was supposed to be his "senior."

"Does he ever silence his prattle... Is he really MHA material?"

As if shaking off that irritation, Ul opened the console panel between the front seats and operated the Minox's proportional control.

With that remote control device, he would land the unmanned Minox near the limousine.

2

"The enemy is making their move, and they mean business!"

"Dammit... we're in trouble now," muttered Joe, the driver, wiping his brow as he turned to Miranda.

"It's either we stop that kid, or they take Krishna."

Miranda cursed herself for being lulled into a false sense of security by the young man's checkered jacket, mistaking him for an ordinary citizen.

"We tried to uncover Ul's true identity, but..."

She realized her knowledge was purely academic, which she had learned from Baam Segen's lectures. The anti-Earth Federation underground movement in the space colonies was far more active than she had imagined.

The Earth Federation was willing to torch a corner of the colony to crush that movement. Even if they were unaware of Miranda's Char Continuation Operation, they were determined to smoke out and annihilate the underground anti-Federation leadership in one fell swoop.

"Keran Mead and the Zorin Soul are coming to provide cover," Joe said, apparently receiving a transmission from the captain.

"What?"

"That's how serious this has become. We'll have to push back with force."

"Is that wise? Won't it be intercepted?" Miranda asked, only catching the name Zorin Soul.

"We're using encryption... I think."

"If you've got time to chat, then punch it! Are those Minox? Focus on tracking them!"

Affranchi yelled from his seat next to the restroom.

"You don't have to tell me twice!" Joe promptly obeyed, accelerating.

The Minox drones that had blended with the forest trees vanished into the distance.

As soon as Affranchi spoke, Miranda watched with concern as he doubled over and stumbled back into the restroom.

Nothing came out this time.

"At least there's that..."

Affranchi exhaled deeply, expelling the stench from the cramped restroom. The dull pain shifted from the right to left side of his lower abdomen, the gritty discomfort sinking towards his rear. His entire lower belly shuddered.

After blasting the bidet at maximum pressure, Affranchi glared into the darkness.

"Of all the times for this to happen..."

He cursed the frailty of human biology as the intestinal cramps intensified. He could feel his sphincter tighten painfully.

Cinching his belt as tight as it would go, he braced himself against the walls and attempted to stand.

"Krishna is a good kid," he muttered like a mantra as he exited the restroom.

"Where are they coming from?" Joe's voice rang out.

Trees still whizzed by on either side.

"Are you alright?" Miranda asked.

"It's passed."

Affranchi collapsed into the seat behind her, catching his breath.

"Take some more medicine, just in case," she advised, handing him a bottle of black pills from the first-aid kit.

"These are for your stomach. They'll settle it."

He popped one into his mouth, the pungent herbal scent somehow soothing amidst the overwhelming nausea.

"Did you just dry swallow that?" Miranda looked shocked.

"Compared to our current situation, this is nothing," he replied, though privately, the unfamiliar taste lingered unpleasantly. Growing up, he'd never taken pills.

"There!" Joe veered the camper van around a sharp bend as the forest gave way to darkness. A Minox roared overhead like a thunderstorm, its exhaust glowing faintly behind the trees.

"Straight ahead!" Miranda relayed enemy positions from the receiver to Affranchi.

"Ahead?"

A glint of light appeared slightly elevated in the distance - the Minox's tail nozzle, though its significance eluded him.

"Where's the Zorin Soul?"

"Not here yet!" Joe snapped at Miranda's urgings.

Meanwhile, UI Urian synchronized with his driver's breathing as he maneuvered the Minox's proportional controls.

"Now!" he barked.

The driver's response was a terse grunt of acknowledgment.

As the limousine screeched to a halt, UI landed the Minox alongside it.

The driver leapt out, attempting to extract an unconscious Krishna, still in her sari attire, from UI's side.

"Careful!" UI warned, ensuring the shock absorbers had fully depressed before disembarking.

"Pfeh! This from the guy who knocked her out?" The driver snickered.

UI detested these cheaply villainous adult types. MHA's staff were elite - volunteers, either non-commissioned officers or higher, or those like himself chosen for exceptional aptitude.

However, UI observed that a segment of these high achievers tended to bask a little too comfortably in their illustriousness.

Competence did not always align with character. Hence, the need for

unwavering vigilance was paramount, a cornerstone of what they termed 'professionalism.' The man before him epitomized this shortfall, his cavalier attitude and tasteless jests grating on UI's nerves.

UI was no stranger to self-reflection. He recognized his own flaws, remembered Captain Bijan Dargol's words about his impulsive streak. Yet, he endeavored to blend in, to appear ordinary, engaging in hobbies that rounded out his edges. Sometimes it proved advantageous at work - the practice of feigning normalcy had endeared him to Krishna.

But this time, with an organization, if not military, then at least a sophisticated underground network backing Krishna, it hadn't sufficed. They possessed the resolve to use her as bait.

3

UI cradled Krishna's legs, urging the man to hurry.

"How do we get her into the cockpit?!"

The man balked, apparently daunted by the Minox's lofty height.

Resisting the temptation to linger on Krishna's warm skin, UI dashed beneath the unmanned canopy. Deploying the Minox's step-bar, he clambered up, opening the hatch and concealing the hand crank.

A few twists lowered the Minox's seat through the bottom hatch.

"Whoa!"

"Move it!" UI snapped.

"Right!"

Even with their wingman providing covering fire, their pursuers were attempting to close in.

Babam!

The Minox's barrage erupted nearby, erecting a rail-like wall of earth and gravel.

"Seat her!"

UI commanded, hoisting Krishna's legs.

With a flicker of irritation, the man deftly maneuvered Krishna's upper body into the seat.

"I'm counting on you!" He dashed back to the limousine.

UI secured Krishna with the seat belt, propping her outstretched legs on the foot bar.

Meanwhile, he lowered the other seat.

The limousine sped off.

At that moment, Affranchi's camper van spotted Ul's Minox and the departing limousine.

Dobaboom!

An elec-car attempting to approach from the front left exploded, struck dead-on by the Minox.

Civilian elec-cars were flimsy. A single direct hit shattered half the chassis into dust.

"Those bastards! What's Keran doing?!"

Joe, eyes glued skyward, ignored what lay ahead.

Driving with headlights off, there was little need.

Affranchi, violently jostled, savored the sensation of his insides being completely purged.

"To the right!" He collapsed into the rear seat, grasping Joe's shoulder.

"I know!"

Doboom! Shhhh! Thud!

An avalanche of debris cascaded from above.

They must have plunged into a crater gouged by the bombing. Affranchi's body flew, slamming into the ceiling before dropping onto Joe.

Affranchi's ribs collided with the steering wheel.

"Ow!"

Miranda felt the seatbelt dig into her thighs, her bones crying out.

The sound of falling earth ceased.

The windshield was completely obscured.

"Damn it!"

Affranchi kicked through the glass.

"Ugh...!" Joe groaned beneath him, his shoulders and back were in Affranchi's view, but there was no time to worry about that.

"Miranda! Can you get out?!"

"Joe! Are you okay?!"

Ignoring her cry, Affranchi hauled himself through the shattered windshield.

The remaining elec-car, mere moments from reaching the landed Minox, was repelled by crimson beams and erupting earthen walls on either side.

"No?!"

In that instant, a massive flash swelled above and to Affranchi's right. He ducked instinctively.

Bagoom!

The explosion wrung out any remaining liquid from Affranchi's hollow guts. But he felt no shame over soiled pants, only a wave of nauseating revulsion.

Glancing up, he saw lingering flickers in the sky, glittering debris raining down.

A Minox had been shot down.

The pursuing elec-car tried to brake in front of the grounded Minox.

"Krishna!"

Affranchi leapt from the window but crumpled, pitching forward. His body refused to cooperate.

The helplessness felt absolute, disconnected from his will.

"Shit!"

Mustering what strength he could, he crawled up the dirt slope.

The camper van was half-buried in a depression.

Fween!

That distinctive exhaust note came from the Minox ahead, taking off. It rose a few meters, swaying side to side. Under UI's control, it began to ascend.

Inexplicably, the pursuing elec-car accelerated, sliding beneath the Minox.

"Ugh!"

Affranchi witnessed a chilling sight.

A humanoid machine approached from above as if to intercept the ascending Minox.

"What the?"

He felt the strength drain from his elbows.

If that man-machine shot down the Minox, Krishna would be done for. Affranchi knew it instinctively.

The limousine and Minox rendezvousing on the ground must have been to secure a hostage. Krishna was unlikely to be in the limousine.

Moreover, the humanoid machine wasn't the Zorin Soul.

Distraught, Affranchi glanced back at the camper van.

"Miranda! Is that an enemy man-machine?!"

Struggling to his feet, he yelled while trying to run.

The other Minox pivoted overhead, opening fire on the humanoid machine.

"Joe! You alright?!"

"Wh-what... did the Zorin Soul finally make it?"

"That's not the Zorin Soul."

Miranda said, helping Joe sit up. Blood spurted from the gash on his forehead with each breath.

"The Gaia Gear then..."

Joe rasped, eyes wide in his blood-streaked face.

The humanoid machine, evading the Minox's attacks, touched down briefly before leaping skyward.

"They got that working?!"

"Gaia Gear?"

Miranda mulled the foreign, hard-edged term.

"Gaia Gear Alpha. Serial number Alpha... I hadn't heard it was operational."

Joe slumped back into his seat, pounding the radio and shouting into the mic.

"This is Joe! It's Alpha, right?!"

Meanwhile, Miranda wiped the blood from Joe's face and retrieved a styptic from the first-aid kit.

"Where's Affranchi?"

When Miranda looked out the window, hand on Joe's hem, Affranchi was a good distance away, falling on his rear.

A Minox had been shot down overhead, the blast knocking Affranchi to the ground.

"They've got Krishna!"

Affranchi's scream carried over as he tumbled.

Beeeen.

"Captain!"

Ignoring Joe's bellow, Miranda adjusted the radio frequency.

"Miranda?"

Joe double-checked the frequency.

"Can't reach the Gaia Gear?"

"No!"

"Give it a shot!"

"That last enemy seems to have Krishna! Don't destroy it! Krishna's in that Minox up ahead!"

Joe hollered into the mic, Miranda still pressing on his forehead.

"Miranda, I want to give chase. Can you hail that thing?!"

Affranchi panted, having staggered back to the duo.

"It doesn't seem possible with this radio," she replied.

"So that man-machine intends to shoot down the enemy aircraft, Krishna and all?"

"Wouldn't put it past Keran Mead..."

"But why?!"

Affranchi, hands braced on the glass-studded frame, sliced his palm.

Yanking back his hand, he spotted two more humanoid machines, man-machines, tearing past.

"The enemy!!"

Affranchi's gut screamed.

1

Two unfamiliar man-machines materialized, apparently belonging to the Earth Federation Forces.

"Are those Gussa? They've gotta be, right?" Joe Suren asked.

"Hard to say. I couldn't get a good look..." Miranda replied, applying a large emergency bandage to Joe's forehead.

"Machines belonging to MHA or whoever they are?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. JO, ditch the vehicle. Call for rescue, now!" Joe barked into the mic before zeroing out the radio's frequency dial and killing the power.

"Miranda, you have the emergency code transmitter, right?"

"Of course." She nodded, patting her waist.

"Is that elec-car coming back?" Affranchi pressed Joe, still clutching his somewhat aching stomach.

"The one that went ahead should swing back," Joe said, looking none too pleased as he helped Miranda out of the car.

By then, the bandage on Joe's forehead had turned crimson. The bruising on Affranchi's side was starting to hurt now, too.

"You okay?" Miranda seemed the only one unscathed, though she had to have taken a beating too.

Keran Mead.

The pilot currently strapped into the Gaia Gear Alpha's cockpit as it streaked through the sky - the man who'd commandeered this man-machine.

Keran was on edge.

"Gonna have to snatch it, huh?!"

The radio chatter from the tailing elec-car informed Keran that Krishna Pandent was aboard the machine dead ahead, the Minox.

Hence why he couldn't blow it out of the sky.

He decided his only option was to capture the Minox with the Gaia Gear Alpha's manipulators, but bull-headed as he was, he doubted that was something he could do.

"...?!"

However, he only hesitated for a moment.

Spotting the Minox piloted by Ul Urian beyond a thin veil of smog and realizing he didn't know the Minox's armaments, he instinctively cranked up his barrier emitters to full and gunned it, not putting much stock in the scuttlebutt about this barrier.

Still, better than nothing.

He accelerated.

Just as the Minox's strange frame was about to fill Keran's view, it flipped vertically.

It intended to descend at a right angle. A flash ran along the underside of its frame.

Bam!

A blossom of light flooded the forward view, chased by an explosion that painted the entire front display a blinding white.

The display's glare-dampening filter kicked in but couldn't mitigate all of the intense nearby flash.

Shattering explosions continued.

"Sand barrels!"

A type of buckshot.

They had made contact with the barrier and exploded.

While that action protected the Gaia Gear's frame, it wasn't entirely safe - just not a direct hit. And it worked against the Minox too.

The point-blank explosions - minor as they were - chewed up the Minox's ring fins.

Threw the machine's stabilizers out of whack.

"Ugh...!"

The Minox's cockpit shook with considerable vibration.

"Ah...!" Krishna thought her body would be torn apart by the seat belt. The jolt snapped her awake.

"Tch!" To Krishna's eye, Ul deftly manipulated the front stick and flank toggles.

But even to her, Ul didn't seem like an ace with this machine.

His operation was textbook, rigid.

"Ugh?! We're going down!"

When Krishna clocked the fast-approaching scene in her view wasn't the limo, the terror of staring down her own end left her thunderstruck.

"I know!" Ul yanked the front stick, his voice pitching up a tad. Sweat beaded on his brow.

The view from the Minox's cockpit was so crystal clear you'd think it was made for sightseeing. Slicing through wisps of cloud, a gridwork of light raced up at them from the pitch-black ground.

"Where'd that machine go?" Krishna craned her neck, loosening the veil around her throat.

"Never seen a man-machine like that before, but...?"

Bands of light left vertical afterimages as they plummeted.

"What was that machine?!"

"I don't know! Anyway, it's not for you to ask... kidnapping a citizen, how absurd."

"Sounds like something an activist would say. An ordinary citizen would just cower in fear."

"Even ordinary citizens know about the existence of MHA."

"You lie! MHA never so much as made the news."

"Seems you've confessed, UI Urian."

"Mark my words. We're not the military, so we don't play nice."

A smirk twisted UI's sculpted features as he sent the Minox climbing.

Was it Krishna's imagination, or did a sinister shadow flit across UI's fine-boned profile as it shuddered with the machine's juddering?

2

Moments after the Gaia Gear was struck by UI's Minox, two man-machines approached, their silhouettes flickering on Keran's dimming display.

"...?!"

In a flash, the pair unleashed a salvo from their beam rifles while fanning out above and below. Keran dodged, punching the accelerator.

A mountainside at the colony's edge rushed up in an instant.

The Gaia Gear's feet kicked off the slope, plunging into the tubular cloud mass pooled at the colony's center.

"Shit!"

Keran cursed, rapidly decelerating Gaia Gear and initiating a full-spectrum infrared sensor sweep.

The colony's inner wall teemed with city lights, requiring the camera feed to be computer-processed, isolating movements corresponding to man-machines and displaying them onscreen.

Without this method, the light-saturated imagery would be unidentifiable. But even under Minovsky Particles, the close proximity

negated the need to account for wavelength refraction, enabling fairly accurate positional measurements.

The Gaia Gear's computer surely outperformed the man-machine Gussa before him in terms of distance and mass calculation.

"There!"

Keran fired the same sand barrels the Minox had used.

Basically, buckshot missiles for close-quarters.

They fanned out in three waves, assailing the foe in one fell swoop.

A rear strike could've downed a man-machine.

But head-on, it'd take one hell of a lucky shot to do any damage.

The two hostiles flinched.

Not missing a beat, Keran lunged.

The enemy likely had high-end infrared detection too. They might fire guided missiles even under Minovsky particles.

Such weapons were prohibited inside colonies regardless of circumstances, but humans were unpredictable. When pushed to the brink, there was no telling what they might do.

Keran didn't know all the Gaia Gear Alpha's specs, but he leveled the beam rifle and centered the man-machine below and to the right in his sights.

"Gotcha!"

Keran had every reason to think so.

The targeting scope projected a multi-screen in the center of the front display, drawing Keran's focus.

Consequently, he lost sight of everything else.

Pow! Bwoom!

The telltale flash of a mega particle cannon streaked across Keran's vision like a sputtering sparkler.

"Whoa!"

Without the barrier, that would've been a clean hit for sure.

Bzzt, crackle, pop, pop...!

An oddly muffled noise pinged in his normal suit's receiver.

More like the sound of a skin-to-skin chat than anything electric.

Keran squeezed off a few shots from the beam rifle while descending.

Wham!

The enemy's silhouette zipped past, vanishing into the clouds.

'That one did it, huh?'

His blood boiled.

Fwoosh!

A soft flash like a trailing sparkler climbed dead ahead.

Keran's beam rifle must've landed a lucky shot. The enemy man-machine seemed to skid.

But Keran had no time to confirm.

The man-machine that had attacked him and vanished forward was his chief concern.

"Here it comes!"

Sure enough, the Gussa that had melted into the clouds showed signs of closing in again.

Signs...!

Pilots encased in machines had that sense. Keran spotted the beam trail from below and forward, then dodged.

But-

"Dammit!"

Badoom!

Next thing he knew, Keran had flung the Gaia Gear into a flash of light.

Crunch, clang!

The Gaia Gear plummeted into a block of the city, plowing half the frame into a building.

Skreeeee, grind!

The Alpha's left flank scraped down the building's facade as if glued to it. Rubble spewed across the display, filling his view.

"Oof!"

The cockpit, the cockpit core itself, was suspended via linear tech, and the seat inside was guarded by a triple-layer shock absorber to boot.

But even with the normal suit fabric's own shock-absorbing properties, Keran's breath caught at the nauseating sensation of all his blood dropping to his feet, and he nearly blacked out. It wasn't a main thoroughfare below, but several cars crumpled as debris rained on their roofs.

The sight of people scattering left and right was heartbreaking.

In an instant, that stretch of road descended into utter pandemonium, and the power went out in one of the buildings.

3

The Earth Federation's man-machine, Gussa, took a direct hit from Keran, but the recoil from the impact lowered its altitude, which wasn't very high to begin with. Its pilot, Jonathan Liev, guided the machine towards the darkness where he first encountered the enemy while avoiding the city blocks, gliding through the air.

However, the altitude was even lower than it appeared. By the time he realized it, the height difference was zero, and the machine's shoulder thumped with impact. It took less than ten seconds.

Jonathan clicked his tongue and tried to raise the machine's upper body. It took longer than he expected because this was his first such experience. Of course, he had been this machine's pilot for several years, but having grown up in a military of a bygone era, he lacked the adaptability to handle unexpected situations.

And then, what Jonathan Liev saw next was an unbelievable sight.

"Get out!"

"...?!"

An unfamiliar young man was standing beyond the open hatch. Jonathan didn't understand the meaning of his words. He was more curious about why the hatch had opened in the first place.

"Get out. If you don't get off the seat, I'll kill you."

The young man had an automatic pistol in his hand.

"Get out... who are you?"

"The same as the man-machine you were just fighting against."

The young man, Affranchi Char, jumped onto the seat lying sideways against the ground and tried to pull Jonathan up by the arm. His hand pressed the button behind the pilot suit's helmet. Jonathan's visor slid up with a whoosh.

"I'm not joking around. Get up!"

"Hey! Get up!"

Another man's voice came from above.

"...?!"

"Okay, okay. I'm getting up."

In that instant, the pistol at the waist of the pilot suit had been drawn by the hand of the young man who had descended like a shadow.

"..."

Jonathan had no choice but to realize he was in a situation where resistance was futile.

"Hey!"

Affranchi threw the drawn pistol to Joe Suren.

"Catch!"

Joe deftly caught it, flicked the safety, and pointed it at Jonathan.

"Hurry up, Chief!"

While the pilot was crawling out the hatch, Affranchi slid his body into the sideways seat, reading how the console panels differed from the Zorin Soul.

The damage display panel showed damage to two left hip verniers and the surrounding shield was gone. It wasn't clear why it fell with just this.

However, after seeing the pilot's legs disappear beyond Joe, Affranchi judged:

"That pilot panicked..."

"Hey! You okay?"

"Seems to have calmed down a bit..."

"Not your stomach. Can you pilot the man-machine?"

"I brought the Zorin Soul."

"You'll get sniped by the Gaia Gear!"

"I won't let it shoot. Get down. I'll drop you."

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

Joe disappeared from view.

On the front display, Miranda was shown standing in front of the enemy pilot, making him raise his hands.

Affranchi raised the man-machine while tuning one of the radios to the frequency Captain Madras was using.

The machine number displayed on top of the screen read Gussa 18.

Behind Miranda, the elec-car's van could be seen approaching. It was their comrade's elec-car. Joe had called them and they were guided here by Miranda and the others' emergency code.

"This is Affranchi, taking off in Gussa 18!"

Affranchi called out on Captain Madras' radio while increasing Gussa's output. Below the feet of that man-machine were the anxious faces of Miranda, the pilot, and Joe riding in the elec-car's van.

"Mmm!"

Affranchi tried not to think about anything on a superficial level. Just run on instinct. He resolved to do so.

"18!"

He was able to receive such a voice after rising above tree height. Even with strong Minovsky particle interference waves, there was no distance inside the colony. Reception was possible.

"Over there!"

He turned the machine and went to maximum acceleration, then immediately decelerated. In that fraction of a second movement, Affranchi had already brought the other Gussa that ascended in front of him into his field of view.

"Sorry about this..." he thought.

However, unwarned destruction was not his intention.

"Unit 18 has been commandeered by Char Aznable. If you move, I will destroy you. Pilot! I'll give you 10 seconds to escape from the cockpit."

"What? What are you saying!?"

That voice was shaken.

"Unit 18 has been commandeered by Char Aznable. If you resist, I will destroy you. You have 10 more seconds! Then it's over. Pilot, eject!"

"Don't joke around. Isn't this Jonathan!?"

"I won't warn you a third time."

Affranchi predicted this radio communication was likely being intercepted by the Earth Federation government.

"Then what will happen?"

The moment Affranchi thought that, he saw the enemy machine turning around.

"You doubt what I say?!"

"Who the hell are you!?"

"Trying to confirm my identity will lead to your death, I reckon!"

In this instant, Affranchi could only pity the pilot, who was capable of nothing but straightforward manual thinking or spec thinking.

"I warned you!"

"Ahhh!"

While hearing that voice that sounded more like a yell or battle cry than words through the Minovsky particle noise, Affranchi fired a single shot from his beam rifle.

Byun!

Perhaps that flash of light heralded the revival of Affranchi's rebirth... or possibly the mythical return of Char Aznable.

The aim was precise. The beam grazed the right side, the beam rifle-wielding side, of the Gussa that turned to face him for a charge.

The shield was peeled off, the waist gouged out, the right leg disabled, and the shock of a direct hit should have rendered the beam rifle unusable.

Furthermore, he had no intention of doing something as stupid as blowing up the fusion reactor's main engine inside the colony.

He was also confident he hadn't killed the pilot.

"Uwaaah!"

The enemy Gussa drew a large arc to the left.

"Keran Mead! Respond!"

The reason Affranchi spoke in an odd manner was because his empty stomach suddenly relapsed with diarrhea symptoms.

His words were oddly clipped.

Affranchi accelerated forward and opened the hatch in front of the cockpit.

The display disappeared and outside air flowed in. Beyond it, the Gaia Gear was ascending.

"Who are you?!"

Keran said over the radio.

"I'm ejecting! Picking up Miranda and Joe."

While saying that, Affranchi waved the Gussa's manipulator, ordering them to approach.

The seat under Affranchi's rear end became warmly damp.

Affranchi lowered the radio output until he could communicate with the Gaia Gear in front of him.

"Keran! Do you have any idea what you're doing?!"

Affranchi said, enduring the discomfort of diarrhea.

"Yeah, yeah, is that so."

From Keran Mead's voice, Affranchi sensed the haughtiness of a person riding a machine.

He felt an instinctive repulsion towards such people.

Whoosh, the gallant frame of the Gaia Gear approached.

"Listen up! Follow me!"

Affranchi commanded Keran while descending the Gussa 18 into the darkness away from Miranda and the others' elec-car.

He wondered how he knew that location so well.

"?!"

The elec-car was there.

"You made it back, huh."

Joe said in amazement.

"We're escaping from here in one go. Can you do it?"

Affranchi bent the Gussa's upper body to confirm Miranda's figure.

"How?!"

The hatch of the Gaia Gear that descended in front of the Gussa opened and Keran Mead yelled back.

"Get Miranda and Joe into your cockpit!"

Affranchi raised the Gussa's upper body and made the Gaia Gear face downward.

"Use the manipulator!"

Affranchi crawled out of the hatch while holding his stomach and jumped down to the Gaia Gear's hatch.

"What the?!"

Keran sank into his seat as Affranchi landed in front of him.

Affranchi didn't like his pilot suit either.

"He looks the part, but he's just playing around!"

That's what it was.

"Don't get cocky just because you think you're strong. The power will crush you."

"Wh-Who the hell are you!?"

"I'm Affranchi Char. You heard earlier. That radio..."

"You're the one!?"

"I have terrible diarrhea. But I still showed you what I can do in a machine I'm using for the first time. You're a man-machine pilot, aren't you? Then, as a man, show that you can do at least that much!"

"Got it..."

Keran Mead finally seemed to grasp the situation.

He operated the Gaia Gear's manipulator, placed Miranda and Joe on its hand, and moved them in front of the hatch.

"The pilot?"

"Tied up, inside the elec-car..."

Miranda responded with a smile to Affranchi's face that looked energetic.

"Miranda, get in the back!"

Joe Suren urged.

"What will you do?"

"I'll follow in that, with the Gaia Gear."

"Without a normal suit?"

"No choice."

Miranda crouched beside the seat in the Gaia Gear's cockpit.

"Affranchi, did you wet yourself?"

"Does it stink?"

"Yeah... you don't look so good either. Can you do this?"

"We can't stay here, right?"

"True."

As Joe also crawled into the cockpit,

"Keran! Get Affranchi to the Gussa-"

"Roger."

"I don't know the course. Keran, I'm counting on you."

Affranchi rode on the tip of the Gaia Gear's manipulator as it ascended towards the Gussa's hatch.

"We're probably being monitored. Keran, we're escaping at full speed, but the capabilities of the Gussa and Gaia Gear differ. At least cover for that."

"Leave it to me," Joe shouted beside Keran.

As the Gaia Gear stood up, Affranchi started up the Gussa to match it and followed the Gaia Gear at maximum takeoff speed. The

Gaia Gear headed straight for the "river" section of the colony. Keran was heading for the hole through which they had entered the colony.

Naturally, one could assume there was an ambush waiting.

"Don't think about anything."

That was Affranchi sitting in the man-machine's cockpit.

For some reason, that sound couldn't be heard, and his stomach growled again, but it showed signs of settling down.

However, the cockpit was filling with a foul stench.

"I want to let some wind in," he thought, not of the air conditioning but of the sea breeze.

1

"Over there?!"

Affranchi Char exclaimed as he spotted the dull 'river' stretching beyond the dark expanse—likely an agricultural block or forest. He lowered the altitude of his Gussa No. 18, slightly above and ahead of the Gaia Gear Alpha that had led him here.

The "river" was actually a transparent outer wall section that allowed sunlight into the colony, with a dozen bridges connecting the residential blocks on either side to create a river-like landscape. By day, it transformed into a river of light, cascading luminance. Forests, strategically cultivated between the river and residential zones, masked the unnatural glow from the 'ground' below. Now, at night, the river showed a black surface like a large river on Earth.

Affranchi slid the Gussa along the ground, approaching the river.

"Better assume there's an ambush," warned Keran Mead over the radio from the Gaia Gear, his voice still somewhat arrogant.

"I know," Affranchi replied curtly, wary of being eavesdropped on.

The forest edges on either side bent toward the river as air from inside the colony escaped through the hole Keran had punched with the Gaia Gear.

"I heard that if the hole's not too big, it can be repaired quickly, but..."

Affranchi mused, recalling that sealing a hole about a dozen meters in diameter in the colony wasn't a difficult task, as such accidents often occurred due to collisions with meteors and drifting objects.

"It's dangerous..." he muttered, realizing that the lack of repair work meant the colony management company had been stopped for some reason.

Forgetting the stench filling the cockpit, he made his Gussa hover near the hole, noticing dust flowing in streaks into it.

The Gaia Gear showed no sign of approaching Affranchi's machine and moved in one direction above the river.

"Keran!" Affranchi called out, intending to ask where he was headed.

"Cover for me. Then we can escape," Keran's voice came over the static-filled radio, annoying Affranchi with his unilateral.

Affranchi didn't know where to go once they were in space, feeling that Keran's comments didn't take such things into consideration.

However, from Keran's perspective, he had Joe Suren and Miranda Howe on board without spacesuits. It was natural for him to think that the Gussa piloted by Affranchi alone was the escort machine, considering that they had to escape without being shot down.

But Affranchi wasn't wearing a pilot suit either, and above all, he wasn't a combat pilot. He felt that a man who forgot the basic situation underlying this kind of situation underlying this kind of scenario couldn't be called capable.

This was his own reasoning, or rather, his rationale.

"Seriously..."

His obsession with details nearly distracted him from his diarrhea and the peril he faced.

Bzzzt!

A flash appeared, so powerful it seemed to emit a sound.

"Uh?!"

Then, the reinforced plastic of the river morphed into upward-streaking waterfalls.

"Are they going to fight regardless of the colony?!"

At this point, Affranchi wished for Keran to escape, regardless of how he was.

"Go!" he commanded.

The Gaia Gear flew along the river, firing its beam rifle toward it. At the same time, Affranchi also rushed into the hole and fired several shots from his beam rifle outward.

Beams erupted from outside, diffusing in the air-filled space and cascading toward the opposite residential section, undoubtedly wreaking havoc.

With a swift zoom, Affranchi's Gussa grazed the hole's edge. Soil scattered into the vacuum on either side, revealing the colony's mirror as a wall beyond.

"Here we go!" Affranchi made the Gussa go straight out of the hole.

Then, firing the beam rifle to the left and right, he returned to the colony through the hole again, but at that time, the Gussa's shoulder hit the edge of the hole, scattering the building materials forming the river.

"...?!"

It was his first time doing such a feat. Affranchi himself was surprised he could do it.

Surprised at his own feat, Affranchi skidded sideways across the river surface while beams crisscrossed around the hole, causing it to expand further.

From above, two Minox descended rapidly while three man-machines emerged, charging through the hole.

"Uh...?"

Affranchi didn't see the Gaia Gear on the river surface, so he arbitrarily believed it had successfully escaped.

While firing a barrage from the beam rifle at the Minox, he leveled the machine horizontally just above the river surface and flew into a corner of the forest.

Thud! The Gussa's shoulder hit a tree, slowing it down.

"...?!"

As the man-machines leapt over the trees in pursuit, Affranchi timed his flight to intercept them, propelling his Gussa forward.

For the enemy, since they were the same type of machine, they couldn't identify him instantly, but for Affranchi, everything was an enemy. This situation confused the Minox above.

"Send out an identification signal!"

"It's our own craft, why signal?"

The Gussa No. 18 was listening to such communications between the enemies while jumping above the Minox.

"Sorry about this," Affranchi dropped down as if kicking one of the Minox, damaging its ring fin.

And then, falling into the forest again, Affranchi lowered the Gussa's upper body.

"...!"

A Federation Forces Gussa slid in front of him.

"He's behind you!" Affranchi yelled into the radio as he surged forward to intercept the Gussa.

That Federation Forces Gussa turned in the direction indicated by the No. 18 Gussa's beam rifle, in sync with Affranchi's voice.

"What?!" That voice came over the radio, and the Gussa positioned in front of Affranchi rotated its frame further.

"...?!"

Affranchi fired a single shot into the tail nozzle on the upper back of that Gussa as if stabbing it with the rifle. This way, it shouldn't directly hit the fusion reactor or the cockpit.

The beam penetrated from below the front neck of the Gussa and diffused. By then, Affranchi's machine had slid into the hole in the river. The sniped Gussa drifted across the river surface, finally resting at the colony's mountainous edge.

Thud! When Affranchi saw the view of space, he accelerated all at once.

Glancing back, he watched the colossal mirror panels of the colony swiftly shrink away, swallowed by the vastness of space.

Affranchi took a zigzag course, fearing enemy sniping.

There was a rapidly approaching light, but there was only one.

"...?!"

Affranchi braced for more battle, fatigue gnawing at his resolve. Anxiety swirled; exhaustion was taking its toll.

The reason he had won was that it was easy to identify the enemy, and this was nothing but good luck. Such a battle couldn't go on forever.

"Miranda?" Affranchi amplified the voice coming over the radio while feeling the sweat on his back stick to him.

"...A man who didn't get lost, even alone at sea... A man who didn't get lost, even alone at sea..."

Through the static of Minovsky particles, Miranda Howe's voice crystallized, growing louder. That was the identity of the approaching light.

"The Gaia Gear... Why do I recognize it so quickly?" Affranchi groaned when he identified the shape of the Gaia Gear's frame.

The colony resembled a space-borne flower, its tubular structure unfurling three mirrored panels like petals. Nearby, sister colonies of Hellas echoed the design, their delicate appendages flaunting a similar grace.

2

Ul Urian stared intently at Lieutenant Simnau Abahn, a military communications officer. "Char Aznable, you say? Couldn't the Minox have received it?"

Simnau shook his head.

"They were flying too low."

He rewound the tape and played back Affranchi's declaration amidst the static: "Unit 18 has been commandeered by Char Aznable."

"He sounds young," Ul mused. The voice seemed familiar, but he kept that to himself.

"The dream story of a Char Continuation Operation has long existed among the general public. Ideologues and rebels are trying to win over public opinion by using this name," he explained, and it wasn't just his personal bias. This belief was widely acknowledged. In the space age, far removed from Earth's ancient history, revolutionary tactics often resorted to crude methods.

This tendency likely stemmed from a historical stagnation, compounded by the novelty of life in space, which left people with the leisure to romanticize Earthly traditions. Furthermore, the vast distances and intervening vacuums between living spaces lessened public engagement with the Earth Federation government, a once-unifying political force. Now perceived as a breeding ground for corruption, exploiting physiological triggers became seen as an effective strategy to sway the disinterested masses.

"The Earth Federation is hardly justice incarnate," Simnau pointed out, trailing behind UI, who replied without stopping.

"True, but reform from within, as Captain Dargol argues, is more effective."

"Haha, that hardly sounds moderate. Does MHA endorse that view?"

"It's our view, not the organization's... but..."

UI glanced at Simnau, maintaining his brisk pace.

"If you also acknowledge the corruption in the Earth Federation government, Lieutenant, you must also acknowledge the need for effective reform."

UI stopped, turning to face the man.

"Hmm... I understand that the problems of the Earth Federation government are the problems of all humanity."

"There are too many people who don't understand that, which is why internal reform is impossible. But even if you try to undermine the federal government from the outside, you'll only exhaust your energy."

Simnau shrugged, "We get paid by the federal government. It's best to just let the reformers, like those considering Char Continuation Operation, handle the world-changing."

"And you're okay being under their thumb in the future?"

"If it works out, why not?"

"That's rather opportunistic."

"I'm older, perhaps more cynical. You'd argue that to be human is to strive for improvement until death."

Lieutenant Simnau started walking again with a smile.

UI liked the lieutenant's affable nature, so he often ended up going to the military rather than MHA's direct information room.

Yes, the Information Center was shared by the military, the police, and MHA.

"That's right. Otherwise, what's the point of living? It's good to have leisure and a beautiful wife. Is that what life is all about?"

"What more is there?"

"Lieutenant, the colony environment lacks something that nature has. In an environment like this, people who look forward to a leisure-oriented life and retirement are proof of degeneration as animals."

"That's true. An artificial environment doesn't challenge people."

"Space colonies may produce beautiful flowers like greenhouses, but similarly, mixed heritage has beautified humanity. Consider the immune deficiency syndrome that warned of sexual disorder and made us rethink the fundamentals of treatment... After the treatment to suppress it was found, humanity truly became free. But what was the result of that freedom? People lost their sense of purpose, and recreational suicide emerged as a disturbing trend. This is a clear indication that our environment is profoundly polluted."

"Newtypes have the reason to overcome that, don't they?"

"Yes. They are people who can remain happy until death in a state of absolute peace of mind."

"A lofty spiritual matter."

"Indeed, but it's not so simple. In other words, even if you're like Jesus Christ, a true Newtype is one who can continue to be Christ without being crucified."

"A difficult feat indeed."

"Exactly. Without developing such profound abilities, one cannot achieve a state of perfected existence in a world that offers absolute mental peace."

"And what does that require?"

"Both reason and the imagination to harness it," replied UI.

"What do you mean?"

"Alone, reason turns you into a mere utilitarian, obsessed with facts. Imagination by itself can lead you astray—turn you into a creator of oddities or a local mystic."

"Ah, I see."

"Therefore, one must balance reason with the ability to explore enduring themes deeply, tirelessly. Achieve that, and you could remain engaged and vibrant for a century."

"How does one reach such a state?"

"We Oldtypes often believe liberating ourselves is the ultimate justice, even if it means dividing society. We must identify the root issues and cleanse them. By nurturing both our reason and our imaginations, we too can ascend to Newtype status."

"You're rumored to be a Newtype prodigy. How might others gain such power?"

"That's a lie - a mere label you use to identify me. My abilities don't elevate me above anyone; disliked by nearly everyone but MHA, I'm hardly what you'd call a true Newtype."

"I'll give you that," the lieutenant conceded, "But still, how, UI..."

"Articulating this is one thing; implementing it is another. The path to becoming a Newtype is complex, filled with countless necessary actions."

Lieutenant Simnau understood UI's logic, yet couldn't help but feel the young man was simply carried away by a combatant's fighting spirit.

3

As UI Urian and Lieutenant Simnau turned a corner in the winding corridor, they entered a certain room.

"Well, any word?"

The room was stark, clinical—bathed entirely in harsh white light that left no room for shadows or color.

"No, sir, nothing new to report. Should we increase the truth serum dosage?"

One of the two staff members in the room, the middle-aged one, turned his face as if he had forgotten to change his expression.

"She's innocent in this. What do we gain from breaking her spirit?"

At Lieutenant Simnau's strong words, the middle-aged staff member in a white coat pursed his lips and turned his face towards the display.

"We need the data, don't we?"

"Just in case."

"That's it."

The staff member in the white coat pointed his chin at the printer in front of UI. At the same time, several sheets of paper were spat out from the printer with a whoosh.

As UI picked them up, he noticed that there were no new words on the sheets listing Krishna Pudent's confessions.

"She seems to know the name of the Z Organization, but... she doesn't know the actual location of the base."

"But she did receive training on the man-machines."

"However, the outlines of those memories are the same as the military's. She doesn't know the location of the organization's base that we want to know about."

UI handed the papers he was holding to Lieutenant Simnau and then asked the staff, "Can I open the door?"

"Go ahead."

UI pushed open the double doors, flicking on the light panel as he entered what resembled a hospital room.

Soft light bathed the room, casting a stark glow on Krishna, who sat restrained in a chair resembling an electric chair at its center.

Her sari, stark against the room's sterility, seemed out of place.

"..."

Anger flared in her eyes.

"Sorry about that. We haven't used any serious drugs," UI murmured, leaning close to whisper in her ear. His tone was low, intended to be reassuring but carrying an undercurrent of something darker.

"The folks here are real sadists. This is a sincere warning."

"...?"

Krishna's brows knitted in confusion.

"There are levels to how these things are done—ways to make someone talk without pushing too far."

"Why don't you let them do that?"

"I have no desire to ruin your future or reduce you to a shell of yourself."

"Thank you ever so kindly."

"But are you aware of what some are capable of under the guise of extracting confessions? There are those here who have turned bodily torture into a fine art without ever bringing their subjects close to death. Sadists, really."

"Are you one of them?"

At Krishna's retort, UI lightly slapped her cheek.

"Ugh!"

A throbbing pain numbed half of her face. There was a dull pain as if shards of glass from the air raid were still lingering.

"What do you want from me?" she asked, her voice strained.

"Nothing, really. Just agree to stay with me, and you're free to go," UI responded nonchalantly.

"Huh...?" Krishna's confusion was palpable.

"We shouldn't discuss this here, not with prying ears around." UI's tone suggested urgency as he crouched down, beginning to unbuckle the leather straps that bound Krishna's wrists and ankles.

Krishna felt a shiver as UI's fingers brushed her ankles in the process. "You're lovely," he murmured, the words carrying a weight that felt disproportionate to their simplicity.

As UI's hands gently encircled her other ankle to free it, Krishna attempted to stand, but a wave of numbness swept through her, rendering her momentarily weak.

"You have to stand up slowly."

UI advised with a supportive smile, his hands steadying her elbows.

Confusion and a growing sense of indignation clouded Krishna's thoughts, her body feeling detached and unresponsive.

"Now..."

Gently, UI supported Krishna by the waist, lifting her with a careful embrace.

"This feels wrong," Krishna managed to say, the discomfort palpable in her voice.

"Sorry about that. Men always have a lecherous nature."

Krishna frowned because the meaning of UI's words didn't connect in her head.

"Oh, you don't like this approach?"

"Is becoming an adult about becoming despicable and having a dirty mind?"

As Krishna said that, she fixed her eyes forward and started walking, and UI followed closely behind her back as they left the white room.

Lieutenant Simnau watched UI closely, his voice low, "Careful, UI. Getting too close to the enemy invites a knife in the back."

"I know."

UI replied to Lieutenant Simnau and left the corridor as if shielding Krishna from the eyes of the sadists.

4

Affranchi's stomach had finally settled after the bout of diarrhea. Keeping an eye on the Gaia Gear's flight path, he retrieved the first-aid kit from under the seat and removed his soiled slacks and underwear.

He placed the soiled underwear in the waste pack of the first-aid kit and cleaned and disinfected his lower body. Afterward, he cranked

the cockpit ventilation and heater to maximum, placing his slacks in front of the heater to dry the damp spots. He wiped his hands and feet with disinfectant cotton, took the intestinal medicine from the first-aid kit, and gulped down plenty of water. It made him feel like he'd been brought back to life.

Once his stomach had settled a bit, he chewed on nutritional tablets and emergency crackers and washed them down with a nutrient drink.

As the cockpit air grew hot, the seat felt pleasant against his bare bottom.

"I can't let Miranda or Krishna see me like this," he mused, while simultaneously recalling the contours of Everly Key's supple flesh. It was an image that stirred his manhood, reminding it of its vigor.

"Eva..."

In the sweltering cockpit, Affranchi couldn't help but fantasize about Every's sun-kissed limbs.

It evoked a longing and ache that seared his core, and before he knew it, tears were streaming down his face as he moaned.

"Uh, uh, uh, uh..."

Affranchi could hear his own sobs.

The fever pitch of his emotions only intensified at the sound of his own weeping, and he lamented his own inscrutable fate.

However, that didn't mean Affranchi's subconscious intended to flee from this destiny.

"I can't run away from this..."

That only made it more heartbreaking.

"Even though I don't know where I'm going, I have to confront my destiny!"

Affranchi screamed that to Everly.

That's why he feels despair.

"Ah! Eva! Everly!"

And so, in that moment, he succumbed to tears.

But being able to cry meant he had a modicum of breathing room.

And more than anything, having just been released from the tension of battle, Affranchi's emotions were saturated.

Even as he wept, Affranchi called out to Everly Key, and if he could imagine the body of the woman he called out to, his manhood would swell with power. The gulf between flesh, emotion, and reason...

"Eva!"

Beneath the gaze of a weeping, disheveled Affranchi was evidence of his surging virility. Dwelling on it only made the poignancy of his predicament even more tearjerking. If he were on that island, he could

have held Everly's body close amid that island life without being seized by such heartrending thoughts.

Repeating that forever might have grown tedious and tiresome.

But it wouldn't be this painful.

At the very least, it would mean having someone to share his feelings with... No matter the era, simply living and leading a full life is painful, but if the pain is all the same, to be caressed by Everly's gentle hands... It's better to mutually cherish and be cherished by this power that one can boast of at any time.

He genuinely believed that.

And because he genuinely believed it, he could cry as moans poured out, and Affranchi masturbated.

Beyond the cockpit display, the Gaia Gear soared as if gazing up at the void.

But it appeared as nothing more than a still image.

Affranchi's moans mocked him.

Chapter.10

Thirty-One Squared

1

As Affranchi Char sequestered himself within the cockpit, a cathartic release of pent-up emotions ensued—perhaps an instinctual preparation for the tumultuous destiny that lay ahead, waiting to be embraced.

The Gaia Gear's predetermined destination remained shrouded in mystery, beyond the realm of his wildest imaginings. Yet, such uncanny premonitions were not his alone to bear; they are a universal human experience encountered by all at least once or twice in a lifetime.

In a state of transfixed awareness, Affranchi marveled at the man-machine, the Gaia Gear, as it soared next to him with unwavering purpose, an enigmatic entity to behold.

"This machine... it's guiding me," he mused, his thoughts echoing in the solitude of the cockpit. "Not by the will of the pilot nor by the power of its creators. No, a greater force—one that allows this machine to exist and seeks to wield it—is at the helm. How else could those two familiar faces, apart from that foolish pilot, find themselves in such close quarters?"

Affranchi's comprehension of the situation crystallized with each passing moment.

With deliberate movements, he shed his garments and donned the emergency kit's underwear and pair of now crisp, dry slacks.

The cockpit's temperature gradually returned to its normal state, a comforting embrace after the intensity of his self-gratification.

In the aftermath of such an act, most young men would find themselves consumed by a sense of revulsion.

Yet, he remained unencumbered by such feelings, for he understood that his actions within the cockpit held a profound significance.

The art of emotional release is a skill that separates individuals and defines their very essence. Society often equates stoicism with

nobility, imagining that those who maintain unwavering composure throughout their lives are somehow superior. However, such an existence is far removed from the reality of the human experience.

Attempting to suppress one's emotions for a single day is a feat in itself; maintaining that control for an entire year is an impossible task. The very act of waking each morning, feeling either invigorated or despondent, is a testament to the emotional nature that governs us all.

Inevitably, there are moments when we find ourselves swept away by the tides of our emotions. How we process and integrate these experiences into the tapestry of our lives ultimately shapes our presence in the world around us.

Those who have mastered the art of emotional alchemy can navigate the complexities of life with grace, avoiding the pitfalls of misplaced expressions. Conversely, those who struggle to find balance may find themselves perpetually seeking to fill an insatiable void, forever grasping for the love and affection they were denied in their youth. A child unknown to parental affection might indulge in excess, manifesting as physical corpulence—an emotional statement in its own right.

The opposite is also true.

Emotional expression is not just about joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness.

If one receives affection when they should, they will not seek or search for biased affection when they become adults.

They can remain calm.

Otherwise, they will eternally seek and demand love. That is the appearance of a person experiencing continuous frustration.

Those who are fulfilled do not make others feel frustrated.

The unfortunate reality of human society is that, upon entering adulthood, we must learn to harmonize our own emotions with those of others in order to thrive.

Some, fearful of the perceived dangers of emotional expression, may find themselves forgetting how to authentically convey their feelings altogether.

In this world, there are those who equate emotional suppression with maturity, giving rise to a generation of rigid, unfeeling adults who find themselves ill-equipped to handle the challenges that require emotional dexterity. Others may swing to the opposite extreme, expressing too much or too little, forever out of sync with the world around them.

Such is the paradox of adulthood: those who openly and honestly express their emotions are often dismissed as childish, while those who maintain a façade of control are lauded as mature. Yet, the truth remains that life is an endless dance with emotionally charged individuals, and to navigate it successfully, one must possess a rich emotional intelligence.

In matters of business and creativity, the ability to empathize and connect with others on an emotional level is paramount. Those who lack this capacity may find themselves forever on the periphery, unable to fully engage with the world around them.

And so, society continues to perpetuate the flawed notion that age alone determines one's status as an adult, regardless of emotional maturity or lack thereof. This is the true fear of adulthood—the realization that the world may not see us for who we truly are, but rather for the masks we wear.

In a bizarre twist of power dynamics, the older adults create laws and regulations to strip younger, seemingly more childlike individuals of power, ostensibly to prevent themselves from being displaced by the newer generations. In such a society, a structure is formed where adhering to these norms can make one an adult, and thus, each new generation of potential adults grows into similar narrow-mindedness by following the biased rules established by their predecessors.

It would be fair to conclude that human society is structured with this reverse hierarchy. This explains why people often cherish the frankness and innocence of childhood, even though this very nostalgia can be regressive. If only people could maintain the best of the past without nostalgia, they would be better off...

Affranchi, while not consciously articulating these ideas, possessed an innate understanding of their truth. His physiology and embedded reason, shaped by an insatiable desire to discern the essence of all things, guided him through the turbulent waters of his own emotions.

And so, in that moment, Affranchi's being accurately expelled the emotions his current form craved, preparing him to face the challenges that lay ahead.

2

Tucked in the emergency kit, Affranchi discovered a surprising addition—hair tonic. With meticulous care, he styled his hair, then proceeded to chew on more nutrient supplements and quench his thirst with water.

"All set," he murmured, feeling a sense of relief as he looked out. In the space ahead, the moon loomed large, its surface a giant sphere, and something gleamed starkly white against the dark expanse.

"Follow me. No communication is necessary," came the voice of Keran Mead, the pilot of Gaia Gear. The implication was clear—keep radio transmissions to a minimum—but the pilot's manner of speaking grated on his nerves.

A stream of rocks drifted from right to left, detected and effortlessly dodged by the Gussa's sensors. It seemed they were in an area dense with debris.

"Could this be the base the captains mentioned? They referred to it using strange numbers... something like three hundred and forty-one..." Affranchi mused, unaware of the organizational or Hebrew connotations linked to these terms, unlike Ul Urian. His subconscious echoed no familiarity with the sounds that once filled his mind, becoming fainter the more he felt their necessity.

"Why is that?" he wondered, deliberately avoiding delving into his own tangled history now that he had purged his emotions.

"I should be fully independent by now," he reassured himself, finding solace in that thought.

The approaching object turned out to be remnants of an open-type colony, sliced like a ring, within whose crevices docked a spaceship. Despite being cut, the colony's remains still spanned about three kilometers in diameter, with sections hundreds of meters thick.

The ship remained concealed, seamlessly integrated into the intricate web of steel frames, accumulated metals, and plastic blocks.

Scattered across the debris, several aviation marker lights blinked, indicating it was under the jurisdiction of the Earth Federation government. Yet, such debris was abundant in lunar orbit, not fully managed by either the Federation government or its military—only their computers were aware of its existence.

Affranchi, lacking any real knowledge about spacecraft, cautiously moved closer to the colony's shadow while observing that the ship seemed distinct from the colony debris.

The Gaia Gear motioned with its manipulator as if to say "come forward." Affranchi looked ahead, spotting a blinking light signal from what seemed to be the deck of the spaceship.

He moved the Gussa closer.

Two man-machines resembling the Zorin Soul stood guard, seemingly wary of the Gussa.

"Do they see me as an enemy? Will I be treated as a prisoner?" Affranchi mumbled to himself as he allowed himself to be guided, drifting towards the deck-like surface.

He oriented the Gussa's legs towards the deck and engaged the deceleration verniers slightly. The sensation of a successful maneuver coursed through him.

A gentle thud signaled the Gussa's landing, and the machine came to a halt.

"Finally stationary," he thought, his entire body sensing the newfound stillness within his stomach.

One of the Zorin Soul-like man-machines spoke, likely through a form of communication known as a contact channel, where the machines' bodies made contact to transmit messages.

"Proceed forward. Stop at that light."

"Understood," Affranchi replied.

The same voice inquired once more, "Are you alright?"

"I've never made it walk in zero gravity before, but it should be capable. This man-machine has good responsiveness."

"Yes, sir! My apologies for the concern."

The polite tone of the inquiry elicited a light thrill in him, the anticipation of expectations since Miranda becoming more imminent.

The Gussa's claws clinked against the deck's protrusions as it advanced leisurely. The brightly lit walls of the spaceship's deck framed the silhouettes of about a dozen normal suits flowing around, waiting for Affranchi. "Impressive," he thought, feeling the warmth of human presence even in the vacuum of space.

A green lamp aligned with Affranchi's line of sight lit up horizontally—a signal to halt.

Activity intensified on the cat deck as several normal suits moved around, and a manipulator carrying tubes approached him. His gaze remained fixed on the "external vacuum" sign on the console panel.

"Seeing this makes me want to open the hatch," he contemplated the urge, a reminder of the space environment he was in. The tube carrying the normal suits seemed to make contact with the front of the Gussa.

"Hold tight for a bit. We don't have a tube specifically for the Gussa, so it will take some time to attach one," a female voice communicated through the contact channel.

"Thank you. Take your time; there are no problems," Affranchi responded, opting not to explore the surrounding sights further. The uncertainty of what might unfold did nothing but exhaust him, heightening his anxiety if he dwelled on it.

Affranchi checked the cockpit for any unsightly traces of his earlier activities and settled in to wait.

3

As Affranchi peered through the rear camera, he witnessed the Gaia Gear entering the mobile suit deck.

"May I open the hatch?" The voice of the woman from earlier reached his ears.

"Please do," Affranchi replied.

With a soft whoosh, the air gently escaped, causing a slight pressure in his ears.

"..."

Beyond the opened hatch stood a woman, and behind her, several men came into view. Another man wobbled through the connecting tube, gradually approaching.

The woman's head was wrapped in a hood designed for normal suits, and her helmet was removed.

"I'm Margaret Lane. Pleased to meet you," she introduced herself.

"Affranchi Char," he responded.

"It's an honor to finally meet you," Margaret said, her voice warm and sincere.

"Thank you. There are soiled items in the survival case from when I had diarrhea. Please incinerate them." The words felt awkward leaving Affranchi's lips, uncomfortable with sharing such personal details with a young woman.

"Understood." Margaret's reply was smooth and professional, unperturbed by Affranchi's concerns.

Her response put him at ease, realizing she was a seasoned deck crew member. Margaret possessed the poise to focus on her duties without being distracted by Affranchi's personal circumstances.

The man who had traversed the tube spoke up, a smile playing on his lips as he gestured towards the awaiting group.

"I'm Dr. Krakower Nakaga. How are you feeling?"

"Back to normal," Affranchi replied.

"Excellent. Can you make it to the other side of the tube?"

"I believe so."

As Affranchi leaned out of the cockpit, Margaret's voice called out from behind him.

"Will you be alright?"

"Probably..." Affranchi glanced back, offering a reassuring smile before extending his hand forward and kicking off.

The tube had a slight distortion, causing Affranchi's body to drift upwards towards the ceiling. He placed his hand on the upper wall to control his trajectory, then pressed against the floor to right himself.

By the time he emerged from the cramped, two-meter-wide tube, he found himself gliding onto the floor where the men awaited.

"Well done," the man standing in the center, Captain Madras Caria of the Spasias, extended his hand to grasp Affranchi's wrist.

Unlike the others, Affranchi wasn't wearing shoes with Velcro soles. He positioned his feet on the floor, slowly flexing his knee cushions to counteract the recoil.

Despite his efforts, his body still floated upwards.

"Pardon me!"

The arms of the men on either side reached out to steady Affranchi.

"Well done," they echoed, their voices respectful yet clear.

"Thank you," Affranchi replied, once again finding himself at a loss for words.

"The honor is ours, Your Excellency!" the men responded in unison.

"I'm truly grateful to see you safe and sound," Madras said, his manner of speaking reminiscent of their time aboard the Spasias.

"Indeed, but knowing you were one step ahead makes me feel a bit betrayed," Affranchi remarked with a wry smile, shaking Madras' hand once more.

"I understand your sentiment. However, it's thanks to your outstanding performance that we were able to return here safely. You have our gratitude."

"Is this one of the Thirty-One?" Affranchi inquired.

"Yes, this is Thirty-One Squared. Affranchi Char, allow me to introduce our staff." Madras glanced at the men on either side.

"No, not now. I need some time," Affranchi interjected.

"Time?"

"I'm already being treated better than my status, and I don't fully understand its meaning. In other words, I'm unsure how to respond. It's like listening to a foreign language, and it's making me quite nervous. Could you give me a bit of time until I have a better grasp of the situation?"

As Affranchi spoke, carefully enunciating each word, he met the gaze of each man in turn.

"Time, you say..." Madras sought the agreement of the men beside him.

An elderly man, addressed as Admiral, spoke up. "It's a reasonable request, don't you think? I'm so overwhelmed with emotion that I can barely hold a proper conversation. Let's do as he asks, for both our sakes."

"Quite simple, isn't it, Admiral?" one of the men remarked.

"Don't underestimate me. Despite my appearance, my intuition hasn't dulled. Meeting this man has confirmed that my convictions were not misplaced. Certainly, I don't wish to be outdone by the younger generation, but I can now understand that this person is indeed His Excellency. This is a blessing. Our belief in the Char Continuation Operation and our efforts until today have not been in vain."

The elderly man, referred to as the Admiral, kept his gaze fixed on Affranchi as he spoke.

"I believe I can remember at least one of your names, Admiral," Affranchi said, his tone calm as he met the elderly man's eyes.

"Forgive me, Your Excellency. I am Azaria Parrish. Within this organization, I hold the rank of Rear Admiral, but it's merely on the level of a private military force. Please disregard the formalities."

"A pleasure to meet you, Admiral Azaria Parrish."

"The honor is mine, Your Excellency."

"Hmm..." Affranchi decided not to dwell on the titles being used to address him for now.

"Well then, Affranchi..." Madras beckoned.

"Ah, yes!" Affranchi prepared to step forward.

Suddenly, Miranda's voice rang out.

"Affranchi!"

"Hey!" Affranchi instinctively raised his hand in response.

"Is your stomach alright?" Miranda asked as Joe Suren's body drifted into view behind her.

"I'm fine! What about you, Joe?"

Affranchi pushed past Madras, gliding towards them.

However, a furious voice interrupted their reunion.

"How disrespectful, you two! To address His Excellency in such a manner!"

The reprimand came from none other than Admiral Azaria Parrish.

Chapter.11

Your Excellency

1

"Admiral, these are the brave warriors who brought His Excellency here. They have been working on a strategy to acclimate him to life in space, treating him as one of their own."

"But now that they've arrived at the Thirty-One Squared—"

The tall officer to Admiral Parrish's right interjected, his tone placating.

"Your Excellency is not yet accustomed to this new reality. Did you not even refuse to be addressed as 'Your Excellency'?"

"I understand, Captain. His Excellency is weary. We must allow him to rest without delay."

With those parting words to Joe and Miranda, who were celebrating their reunion with Affranchi, Admiral Parrish pivoted and left.

Joe snapped to attention, a roguish grin playing on his lips.

"Yes, sir! Admiral!" He returned the salute with a flourish, his shoulders shrugging as if to say, "Just another day in the life."

A petite woman in a crisp uniform emerged from behind Miranda and Joe, a warm smile gracing her features.

"Ms. Miranda?" she inquired.

Miranda turned to face her, her hand still holding Affranchi's.

"Yes?"

Captain Madras, noting Admiral Parrish's absence, seized the opportunity.

"Miranda, have her guide you and Affranchi."

"But I'm worried about Krishna. She was captured by MHA."

The captain, who had pacified Admiral Parrish, spoke up.

"You're right," Affranchi conceded. "Please do."

The guide gestured down the corridor. "This way, then."

Affranchi sighed.

"I'm sorry. For now, I must rest."

Joe clapped Affranchi on the back, his earlier pain forgotten in the comfort of familiar surroundings.

"Yeah, do that! Get some rest!"

As Affranchi made to follow the guide, he turned to Joe, a question in his eyes.

"What's the matter?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Joe's eyes widened in confusion before he spun on his heel and strode away, leaving Affranchi to his thoughts.

"He was singing your praises, you know. Keran Mead, too."

Affranchi felt a rush of gratitude.

"Is that so? I'm honored."

Miranda's shoulder brushed against Affranchi's, sending a thrill through him. He drew her close, his arm encircling her waist as they followed the guide.

As they entered a long corridor, the guide grasped a moving hand grip on the wall, gliding effortlessly along. "The key is to hold the grip without resisting its movement," she explained, her voice echoing in the stillness.

When they reached the officers' residential block, the guide handed them each a classic key. "Your Excellency's quarters are at the front. Ms. Howe's are further down."

Affranchi noted the use of mechanical keys instead of magnetic cards—a precaution against electromagnetic and magnetic interference aboard the ship.

The guide offered a parting smile. "My name is Ann Marsan. Should you require anything, please call the officers' reception. I will attend to you promptly."

"Thank you, Ann," Affranchi replied, his voice warm.

"Well then, if you'll excuse me."

The girl, her freckles dancing across her cheeks, kicked off from the floor and glided away, her exit as graceful as her entrance.

Miranda took the key from Ann and peered into the room Affranchi had opened.

"Hmm... It's just like a business hotel."

Affranchi pressed a hand against the single bed that dominated the space, a wry smile tugging at his lips.

"Well, it's not the worst accommodation, is it?"

Miranda perched on the edge of the chair, her eyes fixed on the personal computer display.

"Do you think the Thirty-One crew will rescue Krishna?"

"They seem understaffed, so I imagine they're eager to retrieve even one of their own."

"How much did your boss in Hong Kong tell you about this place?"

"It's all been one surprise after another. I was just a secretary at Segen Real Estate, you know?"

"But you knew about the Char Continuation Operation."

"Well, I was informed about the existence of the building that hid the Zorin Soul, so I knew about the operation to revive Char Aznable. But how do I put it, it's a matter of ideology, you know? I had no idea that a military force like this actually existed."

"This Char... He advocated for the total abandonment of the polluted Earth, with humanity thriving in space colonies, did he not?"

"Yes. In the end, he only managed to establish a short-lived dictatorship in a single space colony before his defeat. But his ideals were noble."

"And you believe I am cut from the same cloth as Char."

"Affranchi Char... That name was chosen with purpose."

"I was told that... by a strangely scholarly man named Truth Stronger... He was the observer you guys had released, right?"

"That's how it turned out. Baam Segen found him useful, even though he was apparently on the Earth Federation government's payroll."

"You're remarkably nonchalant about all this."

He realized that Miranda's business-like demeanor was unlikely to change anytime soon.

"They call me 'Your Excellency' because they are convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am Char reborn, but..." Affranchi trailed off, the weight of the implications bearing down upon him.

Miranda leaned in close, her hand resting on Affranchi's knee.

"Circumstantially, there's no doubt. I've written that report countless times."

Affranchi instinctively pulled back, startled by Miranda's sudden proximity, but then paused. "Are you concerned about eavesdropping?" he whispered.

Miranda's voice took on a sultry tone.

"Oh, that's right. Affranchi... I'm so relieved you've found your calm."

"As am I," Affranchi replied, endeavoring to match her tone but feeling his acting chops fall woefully short.

Miranda's lips grazed Affranchi's ear, sending a shiver down his spine. "I loathe the people on this ship. You know the type—contrarian to the core."

Affranchi nodded, understanding in his eyes.

"I hear you, Miranda. For now, we need to rest. Later, we'll reassess our approach with the ship's crew."

"Yeah... Affranchi." Miranda pulled away, a mischievous grin splitting her face as she stifled a laugh.

Affranchi responded in kind, but a growing unease settled in his gut. How long could he maintain this charade before it began to erode his true self?

After seeing Miranda off, Affranchi indulged in a hot shower before collapsing onto the bed, his body cocooned in the sheets. Sleep claimed him quickly, and though he sensed the whisper of dreams, they vanished upon waking.

Hours had passed, but the depth of his slumber made it feel like mere minutes. With a heavy sigh, Affranchi reached for the phone, ready to face the challenges ahead as he made a call to Admiral Azaria Parrish.

2

As Affranchi sat beside the imposing figure of Admiral Azaria Parrish, he listened intently to the tall man's explanation, his late-night snack momentarily forgotten.

"Glenn Coldill. So you mean to say that since MHA's movements are unclear, we can't pinpoint Krishna Pandent's movements either, right?"

Glenn lowered his gaze, his fingers absently stroking the thick file before him.

"Yes, sir..." His words were barely a whisper, weighted with the gravity of the situation.

"Captain Madras Caria. What about you? Any news from Murasko, your infiltrator within the Hellas police force?"

"Unfortunately, the risk of eavesdropping over radio communication is too great. We have no choice but to maintain radio silence."

A heavy sigh escaped Affranchi's lips as he sipped his rice porridge, "That's quite the obstacle, isn't it..."

The gentle voice of Ann Marsan, the young guide who had shown them to their quarters, broke through the somber atmosphere.

"Tea...?" she offered, her eyes filled with quiet concern.

Affranchi nodded, a flicker of gratitude in his gaze.

"Please."

"Sure..."

As she glided towards the kitchen core, Affranchi made up his mind.

"I'm going to Hellas to rescue her."

The admiral's eyes widened, disbelief etched into every line of his face.

"For Krishna alone? How?"

"Is it truly such a reckless endeavor?"

"Of course. The combat strength available on this Thirty-One consists of a mere four Dochadi, a single Gaia Gear Alpha, the outdated mobile suit you arrived in, and one Zorin Soul."

"We're not waging a full-scale war. Surely that should suffice."

"Your Excellency!" The admiral's voice rose, a note of exasperation coloring his words.

"Admiral... I don't recall ever accepting that title. It's hardly appropriate to address a young man as Your Excellency."

Ignoring the elderly admiral's unspoken protest, Affranchi surveyed the room, his words measured and deliberate. "You flatter me with this 'Your Excellency' nonsense and seek to elevate me to the leader of your anti-Earth Federation government movement. And then, should something go awry, I'll be left to bear the brunt of the blame as the supposed mastermind. I cannot and will not accept such a role."

The admiral's brow furrowed, a hint of defensiveness creeping into his tone.

"That is not our intention in summoning you."

"Then I must insist that you desist. I am Affranchi Char. Not some mere copy of Char Aznable that you've conjured up in your minds."

A heavy silence descended upon the room in the wake of Affranchi's declaration, the weight of his words settling over them like a suffocating blanket.

"I understand. In that case, we shall put the matter to rest."

"Very well."

But the admiral was not finished.

"However, let it be known that we will, in turn, treat you as a subversive element or an enemy. Is that acceptable to you?"

"That's quite the extreme stance to take..." Affranchi murmured, momentarily at a loss for words.

His gaze darted around the room, seeking an ally in this verbal battleground. Captain Madras seemed to be his only potential supporter, and Miranda, his trusted confidante, was still lost in the embrace of sleep.

The realization hit Affranchi like a physical blow. Miranda had been right all along. The biased and narrow-minded approach of these individuals was painfully apparent.

In contrast, Madras and the crew of the *Spasias*, despite their somewhat irresponsible and carefree demeanor, had proven themselves to be reliable allies, their actions speaking louder than their words.

Captain Madras's voice cut through the tension, a lifeline thrown into the churning waters of the conversation.

"Admiral... We've brought him this far. Surely you can see that your words are uncalled for."

But the admiral was not to be swayed, his gaze hardening as he fixed Madras with a pointed look.

"You're taking this far too lightly, Captain. Need I remind you that you yourself will be facing an inquisition committee tomorrow? Choose your words carefully."

Madras's eyebrows drew together, a vertical crease forming between them.

"An inquisition committee?"

"That's right. If this man truly is Char, then you're guilty of placing him in unnecessary danger. And if he's not, then you've committed the grave error of bringing him here without proper vetting. Either way, your actions have sown confusion and discord among us."

Affranchi's patience snapped, his words laced with a biting edge.

"This is no laughing matter, Admiral! I'm calling into question *your* clumsy handling of my situation. And yet, you choose to ignore the critical nature of the current crisis, instead fixating on past grievances. Have you lost your wits entirely?"

The admiral's face contorted, shock and indignation warring for dominance.

"What? What did you just say?"

Seeing the cracks in the admiral's composure, Affranchi pressed on, his words tumbling out in a relentless torrent.

"I have no interest in repeating myself. Know this: it is often one's own lack of clarity that sows the seeds of confusion. My parentage is exactly as your data indicates. If you trust Baam Segen, then you must accept his report as the unadulterated truth. I may go by the name Affranchi Char, but this body has been irrefutably proven to be an individual regenerated from the very cells of Char Aznable himself. You have confirmed this, have you not?"

The admiral nodded, his voice trembling slightly.

"Ye-Yes, sir...!"

"In that case, while I may grow accustomed to being addressed as 'Your Excellency' in time, I am not yet at that point... But let me make one thing clear. I command you to rescue Krishna. However, this is not a declaration of war. We will disguise it as a private endeavor."

As the final words left Affranchi's lips, the door to the room swung open, revealing the presence of Miranda Howe. She paused, the tense atmosphere washing over her like a physical force, stealing the breath from her lungs.

Affranchi's eyes met hers, a silent communication passing between them. With a nod, he turned to Glenn, his voice firm.

"Glenn. Summon that pilot, Keran Mead."

Glenn's eyes widened, surprise evident in his features.

"Huh...? Keran, you say?"

"That's right. He may be reckless, but in times like these, his skills will prove invaluable. Wouldn't you agree?"

Glenn hesitated, glancing uncertainly at Admiral Parrish.

"No, I do agree, but..."

"Very well. Glenn. His Excellency has made his decisions. We must trust in his judgment. However, there are still aspects that he is unaccustomed to. It falls upon you to assist him in those matters."

"Yes, sir... Admiral..."

Admiral Parrish rose from his seat, his body floating gracefully in the zero-gravity environment. With a final nod, he exited the room, leaving a heavy silence in his wake.

"Captain... Glenn? Please hurry."

Glenn's fingers flew across the computer terminal, his voice low.

"Yes, sir!"

After a moment, he glanced up, a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes.

"We try to avoid using ranks as much as possible, Your Excellency..."

Affranchi's laughter filled the room, a hint of mischief dancing in his eyes.

"Hahaha... Then don't you find it rather odd to address me as 'Your Excellency'!...?"

As Ann returned, placing a straw-equipped container of tea on the table before Affranchi, Miranda settled herself beside Captain Madras, her gaze fixed intently on Affranchi.

A wave of regret washed over him. He had taken the lead, resolving the situation on his own terms. With a rueful shrug in Miranda's direction, he braced himself for her reaction.

But Miranda's expression remained stern, her eyes boring into him with an intensity that left him feeling exposed. After a moment that felt like an eternity, she turned her gaze to Captain Madras.

3

"We're invading Hellas again?" Keran Mead furrowed his brows, clearly taken aback. "Isn't it premature to strike so soon after the last time?"

Affranchi met Keran's stare head-on, his own resolve unwavering.

"You won't be going in alone. Two machines will be deployed. Surely that changes the game, doesn't it?"

"Who's piloting the other one?"

"I am."

"You—?" Keran's voice faltered, trailing off into a stunned silence.

Before the quiet could settle, Glenn's voice broke through, steady and reassuring.

"Your Excellency has been equipped with the aptitude to operate a man-machine. There's no cause for concern."

Affranchi bristled at the word "equipped," a flicker of irritation in his eyes that went unnoticed by Glenn. Keran, after a moment's hesitation, voiced his doubts.

"I wonder about that. Your piloting skills are impressive, but your flight time is too short."

"Does more time in the cockpit automatically make one a better pilot?"

Affranchi's sarcasm hung in the air, a palpable presence that demanded an answer.

Keran fell silent, the weight of Affranchi's words pressing down upon him. After a moment that stretched into an eternity, he spoke again, his voice low and serious.

"Two units won't cut it. It's not enough," he finally said.

"Is that so?"

Madras nodded from behind Keran, his agreement clear.

"He's right. This time, both MHA and the Hellas garrison forces will be waiting for us, ready and eager to put us down. And... Krishna, was it? They think they have her as a bargaining chip, a hostage to hold over our heads. They'll be on high alert, watching our every move. To outsmart them, to have even a chance of success, we'll need every last one of Thirty-One's man-machines."

Affranchi's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "I never took you for one to err on the side of caution, Keran."

His words carried a hint of amusement, a dash of spice added to the conversation. But the act of His Excellency had begun, and there was no turning back now.

Somewhere in the depths of his mind, a haunting ringing sound echoed, its reverberations sending a chill down his spine.

A question formed, unbidden. "Is this the path we should be taking?"

Keran's expression turned mischievous, a contrast to his carefully chosen words. "I may be many things, but an idiot isn't one of them. I won't charge in blindly."

"Point taken, Keran. But you do realize that deploying all our man-machines is tantamount to declaring war?"

"War, or something damn close to it."

"And in doing so, we'd be playing right into the Federation's hands. Surely there must be another way."

"If we're considering using man-machines, this is what it comes down to. But there's still one piece missing from the puzzle. Do we have any idea where they're holding Krishna?"

Keran directed his question at Madras.

Madras replied without hesitation, his voice tinged with impatience.

"Leave that to me. While the man-machine diversion unit keeps them busy, I'll reach out to our contacts in Hellas and get the information we need."

A snicker escaped Keran's lips, his tone mocking.

"Right, because relying on intel from a bunch of spies in MHA always works out so well."

Madras's jaw clenched, irritation evident on his face. Keran continued, his words sharp as a knife.

"Oh wait, we haven't managed to infiltrate them at all, have we?"

Desperation crept into Madras's voice as he countered, "We have people on the inside, in the police force!"

Keran let out a sigh, resignation in his tone.

"Yeah, sure. But MHA's a different beast entirely. Infiltration is a pipe dream at this point." He turned to Affranchi, his eyes questioning. "So, what's the play here, boss?"

Affranchi's mind raced.

"MHA's certainly proven to be a formidable foe..."

"Without a doubt. The way MHA operates in Hellas suggests there's a more mobile organization backing them."

Memories of round aircraft bombing the inside of the colony by MHA flashed through Affranchi's mind, the destruction etched into his thoughts.

"You mean the air raids?"

"Exactly. Even the military wouldn't resort to such brutal tactics," Keran confirmed, his voice grim.

Determination settled in Affranchi's chest, his words carrying a sense of purpose.

"Alright, I think I've got a plan. Keran, your bluntness may be infuriating at times, but it's given me an idea. Get the man-machines prepped and ready. I'll handle the Gaia Gear Alpha myself. We clear?"

"Is that an order straight from Char himself?"

You're damn right it is. I am Char."

"Yes, sir..."

A weariness settled over Keran as he saluted, his movements slow and deliberate.

He left the group.

Glenn Cordill's question cut through the silence. "What's our next move?"

Affranchi's reply was swift, his mind already racing ahead. "I need to do some research, but first, is there a place where Thirty-One can relocate to, somewhere we can regroup and plan our next steps?"

"There are options, but... Remaining here was for the purpose of collecting man-machine parts."

"Ah..."

"That mission hasn't been completed yet."

"How far along are we in the planned schedule?"

"About seventy percent, I'd say."

"Can you take steps to continue the work afterward?"

"It's possible, but... Convenient locations like the remains of this colony are few and far between."

Affranchi's brow furrowed.

"But it's only a matter of time before MHA sniffs us out here, right?"

Glenn nodded, his expression grave.

"Unfortunately, yes. And like Keran said, it seems MHAa has brought the Earth Federation Forces under their control and are gearing up for something big. There are signs of a military buildup."

"I see... Confirm that with the Admiral."

"Confirm what, exactly?"

"Your assessment of MHA's movements. The Admiral isn't fully convinced of the threat yet, correct?"

"N-no. The Admiral is still set on maintaining our position here... If you don't mind me asking, how did you know?"

Affranchi's lips curved into a knowing smile.

"I can read people. I know you're in a tough spot, dealing with an Admiral who's as stubborn as they come."

Glenn's eyes widened in surprise.

"I appreciate that, sir. But what's our plan moving forward?"

"Move this ship."

Affranchi's words were simple, but their impact was profound.

Glenn glanced back at Madras and Miranda, clearly taken aback.

"But, Your Excellency..."

"Drop the 'Your Excellency' nonsense, Glenn. If MHA is indeed preparing for war, what do you think will happen the next time we deploy our man-machines? Keran's assessment is spot-on."

"We'd be walking straight into a warzone."

Affranchi nodded, his expression grave.

"Exactly. And if we don't act now, before MHA has a chance to consolidate their power, our small force won't stand a chance."

"You make a valid point."

"Inform the Admiral of our decision. And get Thirty-One Squared ready for launch."

Awe tinged Glenn's voice as he recognized the man before him for who he truly was.

"Right away... Affranchi Char!"

4

Admiral Azaria Parrish's shock at Affranchi's decision came as no surprise, nearly knocking him off his feet.

When Affranchi stepped onto the ship's bridge for the first time, the Admiral was already there, waiting for him with a mixture of anticipation and apprehension.

"There's a man-machine assembly factory nestled within the ruins of the colony," the Admiral began, his voice strained. "Evacuating it will take time. Time we may not have."

Affranchi met his gaze, unwavering. "Then we'll make the time. The Thirty-One Squared will launch with a forty-eight-hour grace period. No more, no less."

The Admiral's brows knitted together, confusion etched across his face. "But... deploying the Thirty-One for the sake of a single captive? I don't understand the logic behind such a move."

"And yet..." Affranchi countered, his words sharp as a blade. "My request has already spread throughout the ship as an order. If that's the case, is it really so surprising for us to mobilize and rescue one of our own?"

"In that case... Your Excellency, I urge you to reconsider your authority and duties..." the Admiral pressed, desperation creeping into his voice.

Affranchi's patience snapped, his words dripping with sarcasm. "Authority? Duties? You've been throwing around the title 'Your Excellency' without any justification, and now you question my decisions? Save the bureaucratic nonsense for after the operation, Admiral."

That haunting, ringing sound resonated within Affranchi's mind.

"The microphone, Captain!" Affranchi demanded, his voice urgent and commanding.

"Pardon?"

"I have a message for the entire ship. The microphone, now!"

Startled by Affranchi's forceful tone, Captain Mangm Queilen handed over the microphone without hesitation.

"Attention, all crew!" Affranchi's voice boomed through the ship's intercom, demanding the attention of every soul aboard.

"Sir!" The on-duty soldier, pressed against the wall behind the bridge, flipped the switch on the intercom, his movements swift and precise.

Beeeeep!

The audio signal sounded twice before Affranchi's voice filled the air.

"All hands, listen up!"

Affranchi addressed the unseen crew, speaking to them directly for the first time, his voice filled with conviction.

"I am Affranchi Char. My lineage is no secret to any of you. As of this moment, I have transferred to the Thirty-One Squared. The era of the Z Organization lying low, biding our time, has come to an end."

Affranchi continued, sensing Miranda's complex expression directed at him.

"The day after tomorrow, at dawn, this ship will depart to rescue our comrades held captive by MHA at the Hellas government headquarters. From there, we'll relocate to our next base of operations. And from this day forward, I ask that you never forget my presence among you. I hereby declare my unwavering dedication to the fight for lasting peace, to preserve our vibrant, shining Earth for

generations to come. In the name of this grand cause, I ask you to entrust your blood, your sweat, your very lives to this mission."

With a click, Affranchi switched off the microphone.

Applause erupted on the bridge, a thunderous chorus of support.

"Thank you, everyone. I'm counting on you," Affranchi said, his gaze sweeping over the fifteen or so crew members gathered before him.

"Hell of a way to kick things off, boss!"

Voices of support rose from the crew, their enthusiasm palpable.

Admiral Parrish let out a sigh, but he still flowed his body in front of Affranchi, his shoe soles touching the floor.

"I concede," he said, his voice tinged with resignation. "I called you 'Your Excellency' because I sense the spirit of Char within you. This is exactly the kind of move he would make. As an old man, I won't say anything more, but I beg you, Affranchi... don't let your passion lead you astray."

Affranchi met his gaze, his tone respectful yet firm. "When that time comes, Admiral, your guidance will be invaluable. I hope I can continue to rely on your wisdom in the days ahead."

"Yes... Your Excellency... or rather, what should I call you?"

"Affranchi will do. Or Char, if you prefer. Titles like 'Your Excellency' are nothing more than empty decorations for men without substance."

"Very well... Affranchi Char," the Admiral relented, the words leaving his mouth with a hint of reluctance.

Affranchi turned to the Captain, his voice filled with authority.

"Captain, gather the officers, including Glenn. It's time for a strategy meeting."

"Right away, Affranchi," the Captain responded, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. Whether it was a gesture of support or sarcasm, Affranchi couldn't quite tell.

"Char, it's an honor to have you here!" one of the crew members exclaimed, his voice brimming with excitement.

"I'm Kensest Beilen, and I've been waiting for this day for a long time."

"Hatana Nomusozaki, at your service," another chimed in, snapping off a crisp salute.

"We've all been eagerly awaiting your arrival, Char. I'm Kayneth Bren," a third crew member added, respect evident in his tone.

"Nias Cain here. We can drop the whole 'Your Excellency' thing, right?" a fourth asked, a hint of mischief in his voice.

Affranchi nodded, a smile tugging at his lips. "Affran works, too."

"Affran, huh?"

The endearing face of the crew member lit up with a grin.

"You have no idea how long we've been waiting for you. Two years since we arrived here," one of the crew members remarked, his voice filled with anticipation.

Another interjected, his tone playful. "Two years? Try a hundred! This operation has been in the works for a century, my friend."

Affranchi held up his hands, his expression a mix of apology and reassurance. "I'm sorry for keeping you all waiting. But I want you to know that I'm still the same Affranchi you've been waiting for. Keep that in mind, alright?"

"Yes, sir!" the crew responded in unison, their voices ringing out as one, as if under the spell of Affranchi's presence.

1

The base, known by the cryptic code name Thirty-One Squared, encompassed the shattered remnants of the colony and the sprawling spaceship nestled within it as if entombed. Now, the artificial structures that once clung to the ship like a protective cocoon began to stir, slowly drifting away from their once-steadfast companions.

One by one, two by two... five by five...

They floated off into the void, a chaotic ballet of separation and rebirth.

It was a scene of parting from the old and the emergence of the new, a cosmic dance of transformation. The ship, which had once huddled close to the main body of the colony's remains, now stood out in stark relief, its silhouette etched against the inky blackness of space.

At the center of this maelstrom stood Affranchi Char, a man whose destiny had taken a most unexpected turn.

The man who had known nothing but the solitude of a Pacific island now found himself at the helm of a colossal ship, a twist of fate that defied all logic. The absurdity of this situation could be attributed to the abnormality of this world, but it was supported by the unshakable foundation of good intentions. Whether those intentions aligned with the elusive concept of justice, however, was a question that hung heavy in the air, unanswered and perhaps unanswerable.

"The base's code name is fine, but what does the original 'Three Hundred Fourteen' signify?" Affranchi asked, his curiosity piqued.

Glenn Cordill, the tactical advisor, flashed a knowing smile at Affranchi.

"Ah, it represents the archangel Metatron, or the Almighty God, Shaddai. The numbers hold the same value."

"Then why not use that as the ship's name?"

"We were waiting for the right person to make that call," Glenn replied, a hint of reverence in his voice.

Miranda stepped between Glenn and Affranchi, addressing Captain Mangm.

"Is that why numbers were used instead of a proper name?"

"Well, yes. It's a matter of discipline within the Z Organization. And since Affranchi just declared the end of the Z Organization..." Captain Queilen trailed off, leaving the implication hanging in the air.

Affranchi, noticing Miranda's consideration, asked the Captain politely, "Does this mean we can decide on a new name for the ship?"

"Yes... Char, Your Excellency... No, let's drop the 'Excellency.' You have the authority to make that decision," Captain Queilen responded, his tone a mix of deference and relief.

"What do you think, Captain? Shaddai, perhaps?" Affranchi inquired, gauging the Captain's reaction.

"Heavens, no..." Captain Queilen shook his head, a wry smile on his face.

"Too grandiose, don't you think?"

"Yes. But Metatron, on the other hand..."

Affranchi nodded, a glimmer of understanding in his eyes.

"I see. In that case, let's go with Metatron. Mother Metatron, the Metatron Organization... It's a way to shed the old shell and embrace the new."

His words were carefully chosen, a subtle gesture to include the opinion of the often-overlooked Captain Mangm.

Miranda, relieved by this development, leaned back against the seat in the center of the bridge.

"You have to navigate these waters carefully, Affranchi," she thought to herself, a mix of concern and admiration in her heart.

"Well then," Captain Queilen ventured, a deferential note in his voice, "would you do the honors of announcing the new name to the crew, Affranchi Char?"

Affranchi waved a hand, gesturing towards Admiral Azaria Parrish and the Captain, seated at the bridge's rear.

"I'm afraid that's not my role, Captain. That responsibility falls upon either the Admiral or yourself, does it not?"

"But..." Captain Queilen began, his protest cut short.

"Glenn and I are heading to the man-machine deck," Affranchi declared, his tone leaving no room for argument. "Combat shift discussion. You, Captain, keep doing what you do best." He extended a hand to the man, a friendly invitation for a handshake.

Captain Queilen glanced at Admiral Parrish, seeking silent approval, before gripping Affranchi's hand with a firm squeeze.

Admiral Parrish stepped forward, his presence commanding attention as he positioned himself between the two men. "Affranchi's right, Captain..."

"The key has been turned. All that remains is to follow the will of Metatron and put the will of Shaddai into practice," the Admiral declared, his words resonating with the crew on the bridge.

The top staff's acknowledgment of Affranchi's presence and their alignment of purpose acted as a unifying force, at least for those gathered on the bridge. Affranchi, having achieved this effortlessly, understood the importance of how he presented himself to those around him. The information guiding his actions may have been woven into his very being, but it was his physical form that brought it to life.

2

Affranchi gripped the handle leading to the man-machine deck, following Glenn's lead as he navigated the unfamiliar territory of zero gravity. He experimented with the speed, slowing down, speeding up, even letting go, trying to match Glenn's pace in this alien environment.

"It's not so hard, is it?" Glenn remarked, surprise flickering across his face at Affranchi's apparent lack of experience in space.

Yet, he couldn't help but be impressed by Affranchi's composure and the way he seemed to approach this as a game rather than a challenge.

"Our first real man-machine battle could be just around the corner, and he's playing around..." Glenn mused silently, releasing the handle to make a sharp turn into the left passage, his body flowing gracefully as he placed his feet on the wall to change direction.

"Turn here!" he called out to Affranchi.

Affranchi followed Glenn's voice, making the turn with surprising skill, but his momentum carried him toward the ceiling. Miranda and Madras, close behind, caught up to him in an instant.

"Stop fooling around!" Miranda scolded, her hand darting out to grasp Affranchi's, pulling him close.

"Sorry, sorry. Air resistance is no joke, huh?" Affranchi laughed, his arm finding its way around Miranda's waist as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

They clung to the handle Miranda gripped.

"Hey, Madras..."

"Huh?"

Madras Caria, right behind them, looked at Affranchi from below.

"Do you think it was a mistake for people on this ship to address me as Your Excellency?"

Affranchi had let Miranda pull him close to confirm this.

"It's fine," Miranda reassured him.

"Really?"

Affranchi felt a wave of comfort wash over him, the feeling of being able to lean on Miranda once again.

"What I did was an exercise of command authority, you know?"

"If they truly didn't want to accept you, Affranchi, you would have been thrown in the brig," Miranda pointed out, punctuating her words with a gentle bump of her nose against his.

"I'm going to use this ship to rescue Krishna, but after that, I don't know. I don't plan on staying here forever," Affranchi said, looking at Miranda and Madras.

"You don't like it that much?" Madras asked.

"It's just... I don't think dogmatic people are capable of truly changing the world," he mused.

"But where else can you go?"

"Space colonies have a way of making people conservative. The folks here are on the better end of the spectrum," Madras added.

"True, but real innovation has to come from the present, not the past. Bringing up people like Char Aznable, that's a step backward. There's no heart, no life in that."

"And that's exactly what you're here to show us, Affranchi. We know that much, at least," Madras said, his tone simple but laden with meaning.

"It's not an easy path, is it?"

"Life never is," Miranda said, her words carrying the weight of experience as if she were explaining a fundamental truth to a child.

"Hey, Affranchi and Miranda. If you two are gonna have a love scene, could you do it somewhere else?" Madras muttered under his breath.

Affranchi blinked. "Did it look like that?"

"Sure did."

Miranda's arm tightened around Affranchi's waist, and with a mischievous grin, she pushed him forward.

"Well, in that case...!"

Affranchi used the momentum to grab the handle in front of him, increasing his speed as he glided through the air.

Glenn's sarcastic remark followed him.

"Pretty agile, aren't you?"

"Don't start. I've got a lot on my mind," Affranchi shot back.

"Yes, sir. I understand. This is it, below us. The man-machine deck..."

Glenn released the handle, his body flowing downward through the vertically wide hatch. Affranchi followed, his eyes widening at the sight that greeted him.

Man-machine equipment lined the walls on either side while a dozen crew members in normal suits bustled about, organizing the gear. A whistle echoed through the ship, demanding attention.

"Attention, all personnel! Admiral's orders! Attention, all personnel!"

The officer's call was followed by Admiral Parrish's formal announcement of the ship's new name.

"The decision we make today is guided by the insights and direction provided by Affranchi Char. From this moment forward, we will operate under the name Metatron Organization, dedicating ourselves to rectifying the injustices perpetrated by the Earth Federation government and advocating for much-needed reforms. Our objective in this operation is to liberate our comrades from the clutches of the corrupt military and police officials who prioritize their own interests over the well-being of the people. All personnel, be ready to launch from the second combat formation and transition to the first formation."

As the speech reverberated through the ship, Affranchi descended the nearly thirty-meter height of the man-machine deck. For those unaccustomed to it, the sight was terrifying. The four Dochadi man-machines lined up on either side made the view below seem even more dizzying, and even in zero gravity, Affranchi felt his legs go weak.

"This is tough," he muttered, marveling at the crew members who flowed by on either side, working as they drifted.

Suddenly, Affranchi's body came to a stop, his downward momentum too weak to carry him further.

"Affranchi!" Miranda reached out, but her hand missed him by mere centimeters. Madras descended, disappearing from view.

Glenn looked up at Affranchi, a smirk playing on his lips. "Stay there until you naturally drift down. I'll go discuss things with Keran and the others."

"..."

Affranchi stretched and retracted his limbs, but his body remained stubbornly in place, only rotating slowly.

"Just like a baby," he grumbled under his breath.

"That's right," a voice answered from behind him, the words brushing against his hair and earlobes.

"Ah...?"

It was Margaret Lane, the first crew member Affranchi had met on this ship.

"I'll give you a push, okay?" she offered, her voice kind.

Affranchi felt heat rise to his cheeks. "It's embarrassing, but I don't have a choice. I'll have to take you up on that."

"I thought so."

Margaret's thick gloves, part of her normal suit, gripped Affranchi's waist, and then the vernier on her suit gently fired. Whoosh! Affranchi's body moved downward, and Margaret confirmed his trajectory before changing her own direction.

Affranchi's feet touched the floor of the man-machine Deck, solid ground at last.

"I'm thinking of having Madras take command of the ground battle. He knows Hellas best, don't you think?" Affranchi said, his mind already racing ahead.

Glenn nodded. "Makes sense. But you're not thinking of going into Hellas yourself, are you?"

"I intend to receive Krishna outside of Hellas. But you know as well as I do there's bound to be more than just one prisoner. There's no telling what might happen," Affranchi replied.

"I'd like to think we can manage with just a show of force," Glenn hoped, his voice tinged with optimism.

Keran Mead scoffed at Glenn's words.

"You really think they'll just roll over?"

"Having Madras in Joe's Dochadi could prove useful if things go sideways," he added.

"Keran, you're too quick to jump the gun. We need to stick to the plan and work as a team," Glenn said sternly.

"You rely too much on data and reports. Real combat is fluid and unpredictable. We need to be adaptable and use every advantage we have. Otherwise, we'll end up dead," Keran retorted with several times more words than Glenn.

"Enough!" Glenn shouted over the noise of the man-machine Deck. "Your recklessness with the Gaia Gear Alpha nearly caused a disaster during repairs!"

"But it worked, didn't it?" Keran argued.

Glenn's hand clenched into a fist, his frustration boiling over. "Don't give me that!" He swung, but in the zero gravity, his own momentum betrayed him, sending him staggering off balance.

"Keran, stand down. We need discipline and unity now more than ever. And Glenn, we can't discount Keran's experience. Find a middle ground," Affranchi ordered.

"Is Joe good?" he asked.

"He's here. It'll be fine," Madras said, jerking his chin in the direction where Joe Suren could be seen flowing in, fully clad in a pilot suit.

"I see... Joe in Dochadi Unit 4," Affranchi noted.

"That's the plan," Madras confirmed.

"Alright, listen up! Mechanics! Install auxiliary seats in all units on the double!" Glenn commanded, and this time, it was the mechanics floating above who were in a panic.

"Auxiliary seats?" one of them asked.

"In all man-machine units! We don't know how many prisoners we'll be bringing back, do we?!" Glenn explained.

Over the all-range radio, another mechanic protested. "The Marion Surag will be taking point. There's no need for extra seats!"

Affranchi's voice cut through the chatter, his words leaving no room for argument. "You have your orders. Glenn's in charge. Make it happen."

"Very well..."

Affranchi smiled at Glenn and the others, confirming the overall machine operation plan. He then asked Miranda, "Monitor our mobile suit unit's actions from the Metatron's bridge, please."

"Smart move. Having a familiar voice in their ears will keep the pilots focused," Glenn agreed, approval clear in his tone.

But Miranda's hand caught Affranchi's sleeve, her whisper urgent.

"If I'm stuck on the bridge, how am I supposed to go with you when you leave? You said you wouldn't stay here forever."

"One step at a time. For now, I need to focus on handling the current situation in the best way possible. Having a familiar voice guiding us from the bridge will be reassuring for those of us in the man-machines," Affranchi explained.

It dawned on him that this trust and reliance on Miranda had only developed after coming aboard the Metatron.

3

Affranchi's breath caught in his throat as he stepped onto the bridge, now clad in his sleek pilot suit. The view through the front glass was arresting—the sun hanging low, almost taunting him. For a

fleeting moment, he couldn't shake the sense that this very scene would soon become his greatest adversary.

Was it his victim mentality, forever too close to the surface? Or perhaps his overactive imagination, flirting with delusions of grandeur? Affranchi was all too familiar with this—his inner consciousness forever at war with the face he showed the world, twisting his perceptions, aggrandizing the mundane.

At the back of the bridge, the admiral dozed, strapped securely to his chair. Affranchi approached with a question burning on his lips.

"Admiral, Mother Metatron is set to depart for Hellas. Awaiting your command."

The old man's eyes fluttered open, a wizened hand reaching out. "You've shown the potential we always believed you had. The rest... is in your hands now."

With Affranchi's words, the captain's launch order rang out, a clarion call rippling through the vessel. As the colossal ship pulled away from the colony's skeletal remains, the main fusion engines roared to life, not yet at full power but thrumming with barely restrained might. The Metatron was a strange marvel to behold—from one angle, a triangular behemoth with radiator fins outstretched; from another, an elliptical ring girded by three main engines and four mega particle cannons.

In truth, the Metatron's elegant bulk was a Frankenstein's monster, disparate ships melded and married into devastating, unified purpose. But here in the void, free from the terrestrial shackles of air resistance and wave-making drag, size and shape, bent the knee to power and potential.

The Metatron swung its mighty bow towards Hellas, the Side 2 colony glimmering in the distance. For a breathless instant, a blinding flash erupted from the three main nozzles—a declaration of war in light and fury.

BAFOON!

The dazzling display was as much a statement to allies as enemies, a blazing beacon to all who lurked in the coldness of space. Distance was no obstacle, a trivial concern for a behemoth like the Metatron. The moon loomed impossibly large as the ship hurtled forward, locked on target.

"Forward recon, launch! All hands, eyes peeled and locked on! Minovsky particles, full combat dispersion! Man-machines, battle stations! Marion Surag unit, B Deck and on standby!"

Amidst the swirl of orders and motion, Affranchi stole a final, fleeting kiss from Miranda on the bridge, a gesture equal parts gratitude and farewell.

"Thanks..."

"It's... it's okay, really..."

Their words, soft and ambiguous, diverged and scattered. The captain's voice sliced through the din.

"Transmit the ultimatum to Hellas command! All units, maintain level two combat alert!"

Affranchi slipped away from the bridge as the orders flew. The Metatron surged onwards, accelerating into the heart of Side 2's colony cluster even as it beamed its declaration to the Earth Federation via every means available—radio, laser, light itself bent to their cause.

"We are the Metatron Organization," the message blazed, unyielding and uncompromising. "We demand the immediate release of all detainees accused of colluding against the Hellas administration under the false flag of the Z Organization. Failure to comply will result in Mother Metatron launching a full offensive against the Hellas space colony. Consider this your one and only warning. The clock is ticking."

4

The transmission of Metatron's declaration to MHA was swift, a matter of mere moments. Captain Bijan Dargol, having determined the origin of the flashing light as a spacecraft, had already issued a full mobilization order to the MHA forces stationed at Hellas. It was only after a brief delay that two cabinet ministers from the government and the director of the Space Surveillance Bureau arrived to meet with him.

"Unbelievable," one of the ministers groaned. "Wasn't the Z Organization supposed to be nothing more than a ragtag band of underground dissidents?"

Dargol bit back the retort that these were the very cockroaches they had been trying to exterminate. Politicians, forever chasing their own agendas, blind to the larger tapestry. His mission was singular: secure their pledge to entrust the crisis to MHA, no more, no less.

"And the military?" a minister inquired.

"We've requested their deployment, but the garrison forces alone won't be enough to stop this." Dargol's voice was grim. "If the other colonies mobilize, Hellas will be done for."

"Indeed. And the police claim they can produce rebel elements?"

"Certainly. They can deliver around thirty arrestees."

"But is it not our duty to quell political insurgents?"

"True, but public security falls to the police first and foremost. In a crisis like this, MHA's swift fist is needed to ferret out the rebels' movements."

"Surely, this falls under the purview of the military and the police."

"You're well aware that the relationship between the two is less than ideal."

"So what do you propose we do?"

"We'd like you to hand over the suspects MHA has independently arrested as well."

"And this will spare Hellas from attack?"

"If this Metatron's claims are to be believed."

"Very well. But we shall act independently. Guerrilla tactics, you understand, are the key to victory."

"I'm fully aware of that."

"Hellas won't come under attack as long as the military doesn't lose its composure. But that's our greatest concern, isn't it?"

"Are you proposing we cede command of the military to MHA as well?"

Even as cabinet ministers, none of them possessed that kind of unilateral decision-making power. Above all, politicians instinctively loathed taking orders from the military or its affiliated organizations.

"Did I say anything of the sort?" Dargol replied smoothly, his gaze drifting to the ceiling.

"However, the military is full of amateurs in actual combat... I'm worried about their rash actions," the director of the Space Surveillance Bureau chimed in.

"Is that so?" The minister's groan was one of resignation.

"Why bother with this charade? Leave it to us."

"Captain!" The minister's face was ashen.

"We shall honor our pledge, nothing more. The rest is your affair." Captain Dargol exited the room, his poker face unflinching.

"Report," he barked.

"Only one ship! We're analyzing its scale, but information is scarce."

"Tap the military's data. Now."

Dargol's order was laced with a wry grin.

"Yes, sir! Requesting a link."

"What does the military say?"

"They're demanding we deploy our Gayjisu ship as well."

"Prepare it. We'll either independently track Metatron or find a way to sink it."

"Yes, sir!"

"Captain..."

After issuing several commands, Captain Dargol heard UI Urian's voice.

"Speak."

Across the desk, opposite the array of displays, UI stood by in his pilot suit.

"Let me use the Bromb Texter series test unit."

"Your reasoning?"

"The fact that it's just a single ship struck me as odd."

"What's odd about it?"

"Don't you think it's too hasty for them to emerge with a single vessel? And to demand the release of rebels on top of that..."

"You forget yourself. Choose your words carefully."

"Apologies, sir. But do you not sense it as well?"

The Captain paused, considering UI's insistent tone.

"A sizable force, lurking in Hellas' recon sector. The military's failure, laid bare. And now, this sudden revelation... You're correct. Their actions are premature. A cunning foe would consolidate their strength before striking."

"Exactly. In other words, there's only one explanation for this strangeness: it's all for the sake of a single prisoner we captured, Krishna Pandent. Forgive my presumption, but their actions seem driven by emotion, raw and irrational."

UI's final words bordered on a monologue.

"That's an interesting perspective. You think Metatron moves as you would? As if conversing with yourself?"

"I... apologize for the impropriety, sir."

Dargol waved off the concern.

"No, it's fine. The unidentified man-machines started coming and going from Hellas after Affranchi's arrival. If we consider the series of events, it seems Metatron began its activities with Affranchi Char at the center, doesn't it?"

"Yes, sir! It's just as you always say. Strategy reflects ideology. This time, I want to see with my own eyes the enemy forces of Metatron that carried out this ridiculous operation. Did they mobilize a warship for the sake of a single girl, or not?"

"If they're doing this with a sound mind, they'll be a formidable foe."

"Yes, sir!"

"Hm... But we have no Bromb Texter units at our disposal."

"It still allows for more freedom than the Gussa."

"It's a test unit for space, developed on Earth. Enemy data hasn't been inputted yet."

"If we rely solely on data, we might as well be playing video games."

"So be it. Use Krishna as bait, probe Metatron's secrets. The military and police will hand over twenty or thirty suspects to Metatron as a token gesture. You'll make your move after that."

"Yes, sir!"

"And Urian? Uncover Metatron's true face, by any means necessary."

"Yes, sir!"

Krishna recoiled at the ironic smile playing on UI Urian's lips, a cruel jester in his pilot suit.

"What... what's happening?"

"That normal suit... rather fetching, no?"

"What do you mean?"

"Depending on Metatron's actions, you might be in for a world of pain. Better prepare yourself."

UI's smile remained unwavering.

"What?"

"The 314 has appeared."

"No way..."

UI's grip tightened on the collar of Krishna's suit, his words laced with venom.

"You're quite the woman, aren't you? For a rebel battleship to come charging to your rescue... you must be quite the asset."

"That's not true. I'm just a liaison. Nothing more than a crew member."

"Finally, the truth spills forth. But your confession is meaningless now."

"That can't be... you're lying, right?"

"Would everyone be scrambling like this if it were a lie?"

Krishna found herself dragged forward, bent under UI's iron grip. True to UI's word, the corridors were a hive of activity, crewmen darting to and fro in their normal suits, a dance of controlled chaos.

"What's coming...?" Krishna breathed, her entire body trembling as she looked over UI's shoulder at the approaching floor, where the man-machine Bromb Texter Zero stood imposingly amidst the dazzling light.