

# GAIGEAR 4

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Kadokawa Bunko "GAIA GEAR VOL.4"  
Released 1992.02.01

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Novel Translation and Book Layout by Zeonic|Scanlations

First Edition: November 2024

# GAIA GEAR

4



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# 1

The crackle of static cut through the cockpit as Affranchi Char's sensors picked up Messer Met's signal, the first sign of his squad mate since their atmospheric descent. Without hesitation, Affranchi and Madras Caria's Air Force One launched into a rescue operation. Their rendezvous point: the Jutland Peninsula, once Danish territory. But the moment they made contact with Messer's team, the trap snapped shut.

The timing was uncanny, almost as if Messer's group had been deliberately used as bait.

"Six signatures?!" Affranchi's eyes narrowed at his magnified tactical display, counting the enemy signatures materializing to the west. If this was indeed an ambush, logic dictated there had to be more lying in wait.

"Messer, do you copy? Link up with Madras's unit!" Affranchi's voice cut through the Minovsky particle interference that clouded their communications.

Through the static came Messer's rage-filled response.

"Over here! Madras! Rey, Saes! Take flight!"

A grim smile crossed Affranchi's face at hearing his comrade's voice. Then a thought struck him.

"Could it be him?"

His mind flashed to their brief encounter during atmospheric entry - UI Urian piloting that new model, the Bromb Texter. Its deceptively simple design suggested it was built with atmospheric combat in mind. If that was the case, they'd need to strike first and seize the initiative before being overwhelmed.

The moment that thought crystallized, his sensors exploded with warning signals.

The flash of incoming missiles and beam weapons lit up his display.

Something clicked in Affranchi's mind - an almost electric sensation. In that same instant, his Gaia Gear's beam barrier had

already deployed, extending forward to meet the threat. The incoming fire erupted into a fireball kilometers ahead, which the Gaia Gear burst through moments later.

"WOOOAAHHH!!!"

Affranchi's battle cry tore from his throat as his consciousness laser-focused, drawing out something primal from within.

With a thunderous roar, the Gaia Gear's main display erupted in blinding light as violent tremors wracked the frame. Affranchi pulled his machine skyward, its form arcing through the void as it accelerated from Mach 2 to Mach 3. The maneuver was pure instinct - up, then inversion. His view transformed rapidly: sky to earth, sea to clouds!

The mecha moved not through conventional controls, but through his neural interface helmet, the psycommu, responding to his very thoughts.

"Kuh-hah!"

A sharp gasp escaped his throat as several streaks of light appeared like trailing comets through the rapidly shifting landscape. The moment his mind registered them as threats, the Gaia Gear's systems responded. Its reaction time surpassed even the computer's calculations, the difference lying in the split-second between Affranchi's intuition and the computer's processing.

The Gaia Gear's bomber pod responded with a whisper-quiet launch, releasing several needle-like missiles into the chaos. In that precise moment, his heightened consciousness locked onto what he sensed was a formidable opponent.

"That's the target we need to eliminate!"

Though his consciousness couldn't redirect the already-launched needle missiles, his instincts proved true. With a metallic screech, one of the minimally-explosive payloads, scored a direct hit on the leg of UI Urrian's Bromb Texter. While not fatal, the impact was precise.

UI's reaction came as a sharp intake of breath followed by what could only be described as an irritated click of his tongue. The moment UI's concentration broke, the Bromb Texter spun 180 degrees, disrupting the formation of the five trailing Gussa units.

Those five Gussa units slid across the terrain, clearly targeting Madras's machine.

"Here they come!"

Before Michel Aiken could finish his warning, Madras had already unleashed the Air Force's sole weapon - its beam cannon - toward the Gussa formation.

The beam cut through the air in a fan pattern, slicing through the treetops and splitting the Gussa formation apart.



Two Gussa units pulled upward, and in the next instant, the thunderous explosion of a man-machine's fusion reactor lit up the sky. The expanding shockwave and brilliant flash slammed into the Air Force unit, disrupting the aerial dogfight between the Gaia Gear and Bromb Texter above.

"AUGH!"

The impact drew a pained cry from Krishna Pandent, the young crew member positioned to Madras's left.

"You idiot! What are you doing?!" A woman's sharp voice cut through their comms.

"That you, Rey?!" Krishna shouted through the violent tremors.

"Stop talking! You'll bite your tongue!" Madras barked, even as he caught his own lip between his teeth.

Though the shockwave brutally buffeted the Air Force unit, they somehow managed to avoid crashing into the ground below.

"Damn it all!"

Madras quickly disengaged the attitude control system as it fought to stabilize the craft - forcing stability now would have torn the wings clean off. Instead, he wrestled for control manually.

"Over here!"

"Below!"

The voices of Rey, Messer, and Saes cut through the Minovsky particle interference with startling clarity, as if they were practically on top of them.

"Monitor status!"

"Yes, sir!"

Krishna and Michel kept their eyes glued to their tactical displays, scanning intently.

"Jump aboard!"

"We're running on fumes! We've got one shot at this!"

"Drop your altitude a bit more!"

The desperate calls from Messer and Saes spurred Madras into action.

"Hold on! Opening the hatch!"

As he reached for the docking bay controls, Krishna's voice rang out with urgency: "There! Forty degrees down to the left!" She'd spotted the three man-machines, the Zorin Soul and two Dochadi units, in a depression roughly ten kilometers from the heliport.

"Enemy units!" Michel's warning pierced the tension.

"Damn... it won't open!" Despite his words, Madras swung the craft around toward Messer's position.

"The hatch—?!"

"That's right!"

Before Madras could finish explaining, Krishna had already leapt up and manually released the hatch leading to the rear bay cabin.

"Opening the hatch now."

"Please hurry!"

Madras and Michel could barely spare a glance, their attention consumed by the targeting systems as enemy units closed in with deadly intent.

## 2

Krishna sealed the bridge hatch before grabbing the docking bay handle, pressing the button beside it. The mechanism released with a heavy mechanical thud, and daylight flooded in as the vulnerable space expanded above them.

"Starboard hatch open!" she called out.

The Air Force's beam cannon fired in rapid succession, its flashes illuminating the bay cabin in strobing bursts of light.

"Messer! Get in here!" Madras's voice thundered through Krishna's headphones.

"Here goes!"

Krishna pressed herself against the bridge-side wall, knowing she'd have to manually open the port hatch. With a thunderous whoosh, the Zorin Soul's massive frame appeared in the open hatch space - only to leap past it. Messer hadn't been confident about landing in the bay cabin with just one hatch open.

The air crackled and roared as the Zorin Soul launched interceptor missiles from above Krishna's head. The fact that he still had missiles in reserve was nothing short of astonishing.

Krishna disengaged the handle lock and threw her whole body into turning it, muscles straining, her breath coming in sharp gasps..

"Hah! Ngh..."

The space slowly widened, finally offering enough room to accommodate the man-machines.

Above them, the Gaia Gear emerged from a fireball. The Bromb Texer hadn't sustained critical damage, but the Gaia Gear faced it with unprecedented agility, keeping its movements in check. Wrapped in its beam barrier to counteract atmospheric interference at supersonic speeds, the Gaia Gear released sand barrels to cut off pursuit from the Bromb and its two supporting Gussas.



When timed correctly, the sand barrels created a perfect barrier against enemy missiles and beams. A string of fireballs bloomed across the sky where they collided.

In the Bromb Texter's cockpit, Ul sat in stunned amazement. Today's enemy was different - overwhelmingly faster.

"What is this?!" Ul's frustration mounted as he repeatedly lost sight of his target, catching glimpses of only his allied Gussas. "Could they have mastered the psycommu?!" The thought wasn't voiced - in battle, such realizations needed to stay unspoken. To speak them was to invite death.

"There!"

Somehow he caught the Gaia Gear's shadow darting between clouds. Ul responded to the presence - the "presence" - emanating from that silhouette.

"Funnels!"

With a metallic shriek, four mind-controlled missiles converged on the Gaia Gear from all directions. But Affranchi's consciousness easily countered these weapons, guided only by raw, uncontrolled impulse. The Gaia Gear's beam barrier intensified slightly, becoming visible for just a moment. The funnels connected with a thunderous crash, detonating one after another in a cascade of explosions.

"Now!"

Affranchi's will focused to a razor point as the Gaia Gear's beam rifle aligned with the Bromb Texter. In that instant, Ul realized his funnels had been reduced to dust.

"Tch!"

He sensed the beam's heat like a blow to his brain and jerked the Bromb aside. The near-miss of beam particles peppered his hull with a staccato of impacts, creating pinhole damage. Even the strongest armor couldn't escape such wounds completely.

"Gaia Gear!"

Responding to Ul's will, the Bromb twisted into an ascent, its wing verniers extending from its backpack to demonstrate maneuverability surpassing even the Gaia Gear.

The Zorin Soul's landing sent shockwaves through Madras's craft. Krishna's grip on the handle was torn away, her body lifting from the bay cabin floor.

"Ah!"

"What happened?!" Michel and Madras's voices struck her ears simultaneously.

To her horror, Krishna watched as the hatch and docking bay edge began to mercilessly slide away.

"I'm falling!" she screamed.

Though her cry should have reached Messer Mett in the newly-docked Zorin Soul, there was no response. He and Totto Göring were focused on the approaching Gussa.

With a defiant roar, the Zorin Soul's beam rifle expended its final energy in one last shot. The Gussa, caught off guard by the Zorin Soul's sudden appearance, took Messer's shot directly. Its thigh punctured, the machine hung in the air for a moment before plummeting.

In the wake of that takedown, Rey and Saes's Dochadis leaped toward the Air Force's bay cabin. But then--

"What the-?!"

Rey spotted Krishna's body floating through the air and extended his Dochadi's manipulator. Though slowed by the limited energy reserved for attitude control, Rey's piloting skills had improved. Her manipulator caught Krishna's body as they fell from a height of barely fifty meters, the Air Force craft visible just above them.

Krishna clung to the manipulator's fingers as branches whipped past, tearing at her overalls. The manipulator moved protectively around her.

"Krishna!" Rey's voice boomed through the Dochadi's external speakers.

"Rey?!"

As Krishna responded, the Air Force craft above her unit attempted to accelerate. Another flash of light pierced the air nearby, and Krishna's back slammed into a tree trunk.

"Ugh!"

Her body struck the canopy, the dense branches cushioning her fall somewhat. Though she grasped at passing branches, she couldn't stop her descent.

"That idiot!"

Rey had turned when she felt an impact from behind, having lost sight of Krishna in the flash. The Air Force craft streamed overhead.

"Rey!"

"Wait up!"

At Saes's cry, Rey forced her machine into one final jump.

"Just a little more!"

Below Rey's field of vision, Messer and Saes's units were firing thin beam rifle lines in all directions while tearing away the battered bay cabin hatch.

"Go for it!"

With a final thruster burst, Rey hurled her machine into the gap behind the other two units, landing with a resounding crash.

"Touchdown!"

### 3

Affranchi sensed the Bromb Texter's pursuit even as he noticed its beam rifle's weakening output. Yet he could still feel the savage intent radiating from the pursuing machine.

Without hesitation, he launched needle missiles from the pods mounted on the Gaia Gear's thighs, letting his machine plummet in the same direction as the projectiles. In one fluid motion, he tucked the Gaia Gear's left arm close while banking in the direction the Bromb had dodged the missiles.

Always moving counter to human prediction.

"Ugh!"

By the time UI registered the movement, the Gaia Gear's beam saber had already sliced through one of the Bromb's wing verniers from behind. The explosion rocked the air as the machine lost its footing, its overwhelming power now working against it as it hurtled toward the ground at terrifying speed.

Affranchi seized the moment, targeting the enemy units who'd hesitated at the Bromb's predicament. His beam rifle spoke, and a manipulator arm went spinning away from one of the machines in a shower of sparks.

But that attack had been a mistake. In that instant, Affranchi lost sight of where the Bromb had slipped away to.

Still, his heightened awareness told him the remaining enemies were severely weakened. He pursued the retreating Madras unit, his magnified monitor showing a single Gussa sliding above the ash-brown forest canopy.

"It ends here... but UI lives..."

Though Affranchi could pinpoint the direction of UI's "presence," he knew the operation was over now that Madras had retrieved Messer's team. He never expected to destroy or severely damage five of MHA Gayjisu's man-machines.

"Madras!"

Affranchi twisted the Gaia Gear into descent. The craft skimmed the dull green earth below, both hatches torn away.

"Honestly..." Affranchi felt his tension drain away as he regarded the Air Force unit with a wry smile. The three man-machines crammed inside looked like frightened infantry taking aim from an armored car. But the Air Force, originally a pure space carrier, had heavy armor only on its deck - the rest could be pierced by a single rifle round.

No shield at all.

"Messer, get the man-machines into storage position."

"We've got bigger problems! Krishna's gone missing!" Rey's angry voice cut across Affranchi's order.

"What do you mean?"

"She fell from the hatch. I caught her once with my machine, but she got blown away in an explosion. She's gone!"

"Krishna is--?! Madras, is this true?" Affranchi brought the Gaia Gear's manipulator against the Air Force's bridge as he demanded answers.

"Michel's searching now... she's not here."

Through the gap between the Zorin Soul and two Dochadis in the bay cabin, Affranchi could see Michel searching. The man-machines' cockpit hatches opened, revealing the three pilots who might once have been traitors - but there was a fourth figure emerging from the Zorin Soul.

"Should we go back to search?!" Madras called out.

"No... we can't return to the battlefield. Not for a crew member who might not even be..." Affranchi caught himself, realizing how cruel his pragmatism sounded.

"I had her in my Dochadi's grip!" Rey protested.

"Rey, you did well. But we were in combat. Right now, the three of you, the man-machines, and our extra passenger take priority over Krishna."

As the words left his mouth, the desolate expanse of the North Sea suddenly filled his field of view.

## Chapter.02

### Earth Invasion

# 1

Skimming low over the North Sea, Affranchi watched the Air Force One and his Gaia Gear press northward. Through the craft was missing bay cabin hatches, he could see the three man-machines lying sideways in the swirling air currents - like bodies in coffins, he thought. The sight filled him with a cold emptiness.

"Krishna is gone... dead..." The thought was poison. It seemed impossible that her plump form had been sitting with Madras on the bridge mere moments ago.

Yet Affranchi had rejected his and the others suggestion to search for her. He couldn't risk multiple lives and precious man-machines to confirm the fate of one person. That was his judgment as a unit commander.

But when he weighed the value of the three rescued pilots against Krishna's life, his decision felt far from absolute. He remembered reading something in a historical novel, "Those who betray once will surely betray again."

In reality, he could imagine it being true. If Krishna had been destined to become a proper pilot in the near future, she would have been far more valuable than these three pilots. Yet for his undermanned unit, recovering three functional man-machines outweighed a single crew member.

Weighing human lives to military assets felt like a grave sin. But facing the reality before him, retreat was the only option.

"What a cursed thing..."

Affranchi switched the Gaia Gear to automatic flight and removed his helmet while maintaining rear visibility - a violation of protocol when expecting pursuit. But the fatigue from projecting his consciousness so intensely had left him drained. He needed relief.

The overcast sky seemed heavy enough to let his mind unwind. He retrieved a bottle from beside the survival kit under his seat and drank glacier-sourced mineral water. The coldness shocked him awake, the

liquid absorbing into his mouth like silk. Beyond the tilted bottle, thick clouds rolled past.

He sighed and glanced again at Madras' craft. Its flight was stable. A shadow moved past the bridge window.

"Good enough," he muttered meaninglessly, then called up the current flight course on his computer display. Without radar, position was calculated using terrain memory base charts, accumulated engine output and duration, factoring in atmospheric pressure, temperature, and wind direction variables.

"Well then..."

As he found a moment to breathe, his body reminded him of basic needs - biological imperatives completely disconnected from Krishna's loss. Such human physicality saddened him. The perfection of his pilot suit's waste management systems offered comfortable relief, but once freed from such mundane concerns, the hollow feeling of Krishna's loss returned to haunt him.

Yet he had nothing to cling to.

"Miranda..." The name barely left his lips before another replaced it.

"Eva..."

The name stirred something in him. On the other side of Earth, Everly Key's vivid form surely still drew breath. The thought made Affranchi want to drown in the ocean of his own physiology - a desperate desire to escape reality.

But reality would not allow him to purge all his sentiments so easily.

## 2

Affranchi's melancholy evaporated as he spotted something strangely white along Norway's North Sea coastline. Intrigued by the unnatural whiteness of what appeared to be shoreline, he guided the Gaia Gear ahead of Madras's unit and descended for a closer look.

Hovering in place, he magnified the white line on his monitor. His spine turned to ice as he recognized what had accumulated to create that pale border.

"Bones?! And not just fish..."

'Massive' was the only appropriate word for the scale. The coastline stretching east to west had become a mass grave of bleached remains.

"Whales... seals and sea lions too?"

The bones of these massive creatures had been carried in by the waves, piling up into mountains that now formed the coastline itself. While the Skagerrak Strait naturally channeled weakened marine life to this point, this accumulation was beyond comprehension - a graveyard born of ocean pollution.

"Is this still ongoing...?"

He wondered if he'd simply been too tense earlier to notice similar formations on the Danish coast. The South Pacific waters where Affranchi grew up, while polluted, had never presented such a devastating spectacle. He'd seen reports of ocean pollution from the last century creating scenes like this, but it seemed impossible that such conditions could persist for over two hundred years.

"The seas are still in this state..."

Shame washed over him as he realized how focused he'd been on tactical concerns, neglecting to consider Earth's current environmental state. It struck him that their man-machines should at least carry radiation and chemical detection equipment.

"This makes it clear how absurd talk of resuming Earth migration really is."

His training at Metatron had taught him that humanity's growing numbers exceeded Earth's habitable capacity. But seeing such direct evidence of Earth's critical condition drove the reality home on a visceral level.

The two units made several course corrections to ensure they'd evaded both MHA and Earth Federation Forces radar before turning east into the Scandinavian Peninsula. Deep within the fierce coastline carved by fjords, they observed more shores of settled bones.

Finally, tracing the contours of the land, they made their way back to Hamar.

### 3

"Welcome back. I'm truly glad to see you."

Affranchi embraced each of them as they descended from the Air Force's bridge - Messer Mett, Rey Seias, and Saes Konsoon.

"Are you really, though?" Messer's skepticism showed through, though he still puffed out his chest for the benefit of the watching ground staff.

"Some might say we need you as combat strength, but that's not it. It's painful when people who've come to know each other fall out over trivial matters."



"Trivial matters? Reyzam's death wasn't trivial to us. It was everything," Messer shot back as Saes and Rey moved to flank him.

The crack of Affranchi's palm against Messer's cheek split the air.

"You bastard!"

Messer's fist and Saes's body whipped toward Affranchi like lightning. But he was faster, his kick sweeping Messer's legs while simultaneously striking Saes's thigh. Both stumbled, their upper bodies flailing.

Rey's kick grazed Affranchi's side, but he twisted slightly, making her stumble before stepping back.

The three regained their breath, trying to find their fighting distance.

"Don't be childish. Was Reyzam's death our fault?! My poor leadership?! If that's how you view the death of a trained pilot in actual combat, you're no better than street thugs. You can't run from life that way."

"Ugh..." Messer groaned at both Affranchi's fierce reaction and his words.

"Messer!" Saes lowered his stance as he saw Messer frozen in place, his chance to strike lost.

"You know... my head's still spinning..." Rey said with a hint of resignation.

"Rey, your movements were impressive. And the way you three move together... Isn't it time you grew up and fought alongside us instead?"

Affranchi relaxed his guard and looked up at the man standing on the Air Force's ramp. The giant, Tutto Göring, flashed his white teeth in a grin.

"They've met their match with Affranchi here," Tutto said, casually stepping down from the ramp to clap Messer's shoulder.

"I saw this man's skills from inside a police cell. I've heard how you all got mixed up with this Metatron business, but in the end, isn't it your freeloading attitude that got Reyzam killed?"

"If he hadn't become a man-machine pilot, he wouldn't have died in battle."

"Instead, he'd have been worked to death in forced labor like me, probably castrated before being killed... That's what happens to the weak-willed anywhere. That's what Affranchi's saying. You've got no right to resent becoming pilots."

Tutto turned to properly greet Affranchi.

"Has to make you laugh, doesn't it? Running into each other in a place like this."

"Indeed. I'd imagined we'd meet somewhere more ordinary, like a space colony."

"Well, Affranchi, these guys are still shocked over losing their friend. Try to understand how they're feeling."

"They've been through hell since descending to Earth. But it wasn't for nothing. Above all, meeting you brought them back to us. I'm grateful."

"Anyone would get pissed seeing how MHA operates up close."

"That bad?"

"Treatment looks good on the surface, but their ideology is rotten."

"So we're even now, right?" Saes brazenly whispered in Totto's ear.

"What's that?"

"I mean, Affranchi thinks he's helped us out, so now he'll work us to death... we're in his debt."

"Quit talking stupid!" Totto's fist connected with Saes's stomach.

"Totto?!"

"Leave him!" Totto kicked at Rey's hip as she moved to help Saes.

"That's not how we do things here. Show some respect."

"Heh heh heh... sorry 'bout that. Old habits die hard." Despite looking down at Affranchi, the giant was genuinely apologetic.

Rey spat but still helped Saes up.

"Let's have some tea, for now," Affranchi said, guiding the giant by the waist toward the prefab building beside the runway.

"What about Krishna?" Madras asked Affranchi.

"We'll discuss that after hearing Totto's story."

"Krishna's missing?" Kross-Hansen Stinsrud and Bjor Staff turned pale.

"A lot happened. Rey tried desperately to save her, but..."

Affranchi's comment surprised Rey. He hadn't forgotten her report and was sharing her efforts with others. For someone like Rey, who only knew superficial relationships, having her actions acknowledged and shared meant everything. It satisfied something deep in her soul.

"Affranchi...?"

"What is it?"

"Nothing..."

Rey smiled at Affranchi, beginning to think that maybe this young man could be trusted after all.

"So these are our infamous problem children..." Kross-Hansen watched Affranchi lead the four away, asking Madras and Michel.

"That's right."

"They seem rather spirited, don't they?" Bjor said mischievously.

"Totto was apparently their old captain. They might look well-behaved now, but can we trust them?"

Michel groaned, but Madras silently patted his shoulder.

"They're useful in combat, right? Maybe we can start trusting them with more responsibility," Kross-Hansen said, though his face showed concern.

"Don't think so. Michel, the Air Force and machine maintenance come first."

"Got it..."

"Kross, refuel their man-machines too. They're running on empty."

"Right!"

"I can't leave Affranchi alone with them, so I'm heading over."

Madras slapped Kross's back and ran toward the prefab.

"We should keep an eye on things too. Bjor!"

This time it was Kross-Hansen who smacked Bjor's behind, sending her after Madras.

## 4

Totto recounted how he had been treated as a political prisoner, brought down to Earth by the MHA Gayjisu fleet to perform forced labor in the development of the Nouveau Paris region.

"...What an absurdly antiquated strategy," Madras remarked with a bitter smile.

"Well, sure, but it's brutal. They say Paris used to be quite the metropolis back in the day, but now it's all submerged under a lake, there's nothing left at all. And get this, making space colony deportees work just enough to cover their transport costs? That's all part of MHA's population reduction scheme."

"Population reduction...?"

"Aligns perfectly with the Earth Federation government's original policies, doesn't it? Now, through my own intelligence network, I've uncovered what MHA's really planning. Once you hear this, Messer, you won't have time to be so damn defiant anymore."

"Why's that? MHA's pushing forward with their Earth Settlement Plan, right? I thought if we collaborated with them, something might work out," Messer jabbed at Affranchi, still appearing attached to his own plan.

"For heaven's sake, you think it's brilliant just because you came up with it? Such naive thinking. Would you be fine losing this?" Totto

suddenly grabbed Messer's crotch, who had been leaning against the wall.

"Cut that out!" Messer pulled back his hips, batting away the mans hand, but anger burned in Totto's eyes.

"Seems like quite the intelligence network you have. What exactly did you discover?" Affranchi inquired.

"Overheard it from the guards, and it's absolutely insane... Ever heard of genetic cleansing?"

"You mean castration?" Affranchi cautiously asked.

"Yeah. I saw them myself the day I arrived at Nouveau Paris, men who'd undergone it. They were like dolls, smooth and pristine, but somehow... vacant. That's when I started to understand what kind of organization MHA really is."

"You can't be serious. They're actually cutting off men's equipment in this day and age?"

"That's the policy for anyone who can't make it as a MHA regular soldier. Those of us cast off from the Earth Federation and dumped planetside? That's our eventual fate."

"But what about the prisoners who were with my brother? They haven't been...?"

"Obviously not. Why do you think they're still so energetic?"

"This is beyond belief..." Madras turned to Affranchi with a skeptical expression.

"Yes..." Bjor's expression was equally uncertain.

"Well... There's no need for such wasteful, excessive measures. They could just have robots do the work."

"Ah, but that's just it, Chief. Remember what I said? Population reduction... Plus, there's MHA's aesthetics to consider. That's the real trouble."

"Aesthetics?"

The word seemed ill-fitting coming from Totto.

"It's human supremacism, you see. Just like Chinese eunuchs, or homosexuals and lesbians, historically speaking, they've all made their aesthetic contributions, right? So naturally, a group with that mindset would reject using robots."

"Quite the secondhand education you've got there."

"I told you, didn't I? That professor among the prisoners? He taught me all this," Totto retorted to Messer's sarcasm.

"Ah... that professor they beat up... Say, what about the women? Do they take their wombs?"

"Seems so. They say they'll never bear children or age... That's MHA's aesthetics for you... Heh! Hehehe..."

Having shared what he considered his duty to report, Totto seemed to relax. His rigid posture loosened.

"Their methodology certainly aligns with population control theories. Rather than being uniquely MHA's idea, it seems like something someone would eventually attempt... But why is MHA going to such extremes?"

"It's about building a new empire, isn't it? And for that, they need to select their ideal human specimens?" Madras questioned Totto.

"Yeah... I heard them mention something specific, the 'Gaia Emperor.' Apparently, it's about making Earth independent from the space colony alliance. But this isn't like what everyone's been thinking, you know, where they just let Earth Federation government bigwigs from the space colonies settle down and do as they please. Like you said, they're selecting for specific human traits, and above all, there's this 'MHA aesthetics' thing."

"Is this connected to why they chose Europe as their bridgehead?" Bjor interjected.

"Exactly. Partly because it's humanity's cultural center, but there's more. Captain Dargol, MHA's boss? He's obsessed with Wagner and plans to make Bavaria the spiritual sanctuary of the Gaia Emperor. They're starting by taking control eastward from Nouveau Paris."

"Wagner?"

The name meant nothing to Affranchi.

"The professor mentioned him. Said Wagner was a decent composer back in the old century, but he was too provincial, only wrote music that attracted strange folks," Totto concluded with a hint of pride, playing the role of a commoner showing off his knowledge.

"Hmm..."

Affranchi felt he was finally hearing the core motivation behind MHA's actions, something he'd never learned through Metatron.

"This is ridiculous. Metatron gave that man-machine the name 'Gaia Gear' simply because 'Gaia' was a beautiful name, the Earth Goddess. How dare a group like MHA twist it into something like 'Gaia Empire,'" Madras protested, sounding more like a passionate youth than his years would suggest.

"But Madras... remember that the goddess Gaia herself was born from Chaos, from pure disorder. Perhaps this was one possible destiny," Affranchi responded, momentarily forgetting about Krishna as he tempered Madras's outburst. He made a mental note that he would need to investigate both Wagner and Bavaria further.

## Chapter.03

### Fall in Love

# 1

Several days had passed.

When Krishna awoke, she noticed the room was slightly too warm. Likely because both the window and door remained firmly shut.

Human thoughts don't always flow in neat, logical patterns.

"..."

She felt relieved that the pain throughout her body had considerably diminished. She carefully turned her head on the pillow, testing her range of motion.

The wallpaper pattern seemed out of place for a hospital...

French windows dominated one wall.

Sunlight filtered through their curtains, creating lazy circles of warmth that circulated through the room.

"It's spring, isn't it?"

The furniture arranged on the opposite side of the bed showed signs of age, but had clearly been well-maintained.

"I have to get up..."

She forced herself to verbalize the thought she least wanted to consider.

It ranked equally with another unwelcome question: where exactly was she?

She had regained consciousness several times before reaching this level of mental clarity.

And she felt as though she'd experienced a flood of dreams.

Yet her last true memory was being ejected from the Air Force, colliding with a tree, and then... now.

Everything else felt fragmented, disconnected.

Considering what she might have to face next, it would be safer to just stay here, greedily consuming more sleep in this bed.

She knew she must be somewhere under the jurisdiction of MHA, the direct enemy of Metatron, her anti-Earth Federation government organization.

Of course, while the Earth Federation Forces was supposedly Metatron's primary adversary, the reality was somewhat different. MHA, originally a specialized police organization within the Federation government, had begun to assert influence even over the central government. They now effectively controlled the Federation Forces, which had devolved into little more than a job-placement agency.

And Krishna had been rescued by UI Urian, an officer from MHA's Man-Machine Corps.

As she slid her lower body to the edge of the bed, the lingering pain confirmed that all her limbs were intact.

"Ah, I can move...!"

While this brought her joy, she felt dejected about her own fragility, so why had she slept for so long?

"Beautiful..."

Peering through the French windows, she saw a well-ordered garden dominated by a willow tree, surrounded by meticulous rows of rose bushes.

Though the window was locked from the outside, its construction seemed crude enough that she could probably force it open if necessary.

There was a living room next door.

Empty...

While the thought of surveillance cameras made her tense, they weren't visibly obvious, so Krishna entered the bathroom and boldly stripped off her pajamas.

She remembered the nurse who had dressed her in what appeared to be military-issue clothing. Recalling the woman's cold demeanor...

Frustrated by the consciousness of being watched, she tried to act as normally as possible.

A massive mirror covered the wall opposite the bathtub.

She examined her full reflection.

Considerable bruising marked her body, but the marks had already begun to blend into her brown skin. The scrapes on her back weren't deep either.

As relief washed over her, she couldn't help but admire the beauty of her brown-tinged skin.

That moment of self-assurance prompted her to turn on the shower full blast, attempting to wash away her current anxieties.

But as the hot water stung her bruises and scrapes, it served as a sharp reminder of the harsh reality that awaited her.



## 2

The intercom chimed just as Krishna stepped out of the bathroom, as if it had been waiting for precisely that moment.

She felt no particular aversion to such surveillance. After all, she was a captive here. Not letting such circumstances breed resentment, that was her philosophy of life. Growing up in the slums of the space colonies, she'd learned long ago that letting trivial pride or shame cloud your judgment was a swift path to corruption. She firmly believed that there were certain principles one must maintain even in the direst circumstances, and letting emotions sharpen needlessly would only lead to poor decisions.

"Yes... whatever you have available will be fine, thank you," she responded to the inquiry about meals.

During her circuit of the room, a female soldier brought in her meal. It consisted of what appeared to be porridge, accompanied by scrambled eggs mixed with bacon and ham, with a side of steamed vegetables.

"Would you like anything else? I can bring more if it's not enough."

Krishna, noting the two types of juice provided, felt quite satisfied. "Thank you, but I'm curious. Where should I have the bill sent?" The last words were a subtle probe directed at her captors.

"That's under different jurisdiction, I'm afraid I wouldn't know," the woman replied. Unlike most Waves who typically maintained minimal conversation while executing their duties, she seemed more talkative.

"I see... While this treatment seems rather unusual for a prisoner, I'm genuinely grateful for the hospitality."

"You're free to leave this room, you know? Strange situation, isn't it?" The Wave remarked casually before departing.

Indeed, it was exactly as the Wave had said. Krishna finished her meal contemplating this peculiarity, then decided to venture outside the room.

The immaculately swept corridor reminded her of a deserted countryside hotel. She could walk straight to the entrance and across the gravel courtyard without anyone stopping her.

The building must have been several centuries old, genuine stone construction, not the molded plastic typical of space colonies.

The sound of metal work caught her attention from the left.

An ancient-looking man, possibly over a hundred years old, dressed in a worn suit with frayed elbows, was pruning rose bushes.

"Hello..."

"Ahyup..."

The old man proved equally taciturn.

"I'm new here, but this building is quite lovely, isn't it?"

The old man crouched down, disappearing from her line of sight. The snipping sounds continued near the base of the bushes.

"...Used to belong to some Federation Forces bigwig," came his delayed response, long after she had forgotten she'd asked.

A single willow tree in the back garden had burst into fresh spring growth, its cascading branches painted in beautiful lines of verdant green.

While the garden had iron railings, one side was blocked by a row of antiquated apartments, all deserted. The other side opened onto gently rolling pastureland where a small herd of cattle and sheep stood motionless.

The overhead sunlight enveloped everything in a warmth that hinted at approaching heat, creating an eerily quiet atmosphere.

Having grown accustomed to the constant background hum of the space colony, this afternoon garden stroll allowed silence to seep into the very core of her being.

Chirp-chirp-chirp!

"Oh..."

Finally catching the sound of birdsong and wingbeats, Krishna searched for their source.

At the main entrance stood a guard post with the shadow of a Federation Forces regulation uniform visible inside.

"Going somewhere?"

A soldier, fresh-faced enough to seem straight out of training, called out to her.

"Just taking a walk. Is that allowed?"

"Go right ahead."

The young soldier opened the small gate in front of the guardhouse.

"Watch out for the stray dogs."

"Right..."

The soldier had misinterpreted Krishna's puzzled expression and offered this warning instead.

The road stretched hundreds of meters in both directions, with a densely wooded median casting shadows between the lanes.

The untended trees gave off an unruly impression.

The asphalt was severely cracked, with weeds sprouting through the fissures, their dead stalks forming lines across the surface.

"Has it been left untouched since the forced migrations during the early space colony era?"

While Krishna's assumption wasn't unreasonable, the neglect wasn't quite that ancient.

This town had its own cycle, people would settle here illegally, only to be arrested by the Federation government's special police force known as Manhunters.

Yes, these special police were the predecessor to MHA.

The side facing the pasture was separated by only a token fence, more symbolic than functional.

The opposite side was lined with uninhabited apartment blocks and what appeared to be private residences.

A deep mechanical roar cut through the silence as something massive approached from an intersecting street, the unmistakable sound of military machinery. Though she couldn't yet see the source, the ground beneath her feet trembled with each advancing moment.

She leaned against the fence, backing toward the pasture. In an explosive instant, a cloud of dust erupted from the corner barely twelve meters to her right. Through the billowing debris emerged a massive metal behemoth.

Her breath caught. The machine dwarfed any conventional tank she'd seen, its bulk so immense it simply pushed aside the substantial trees in the median strip like twigs. The grinding of metal against wood filled the air as the steel giant executed a precise ninety-degree turn.

While it moved on caterpillar treads, the machine's smooth motion suggested hover capabilities as well. Once aligned with the straight stretch, the rectangular bulk surged forward with impossible speed, bearing down on Krishna before halting with a shuddering groan of stressed metal.

The screech of steel against asphalt sent fragments skittering past her feet. Krishna's muscles tensed as she took in the towering vehicle. It seemed cobbled together from multiple blocks, giving it a distinctly alien appearance. The rear section loomed like an industrial crane, adding to its threatening profile.

A metallic impact resonated from within the machine, followed by the whirl of internal mechanisms. The sound of shifting weight overhead drew her gaze upward just as a dark figure emerged.

"Are you unharmed?"

"Yes?"

Backlit by the harsh sun, UI Urian's sharp, commanding features looked down upon her from above.

### 3

The figure on the upper deck moved with fluid grace, sliding down the ladder-like structure along the side. He traced a path across the air intake and caterpillar cover before landing with practiced ease before Krishna.

"I... I'm sorry to have caused you concern... thank you," she said, taking a small step back as she met UI's intense gaze, squinting slightly against the glare.

"Why didn't you run?"

"Run? I--"

The question made Krishna suddenly conscious of her position.

"Check the engine. After that, we'll have dinner at Maison Orly," UI commanded.

"Yes, sir!"

The troops who had appeared atop the vehicle dispersed to either side of the hull at his word.

"Let's walk."

His hand brushed her waist, guiding her toward the building she had emerged from, Maison Orly.

"Why is that?"

"You mean why I didn't escape?"

"Yes..."

"Well, I'm not fully recovered yet, and I don't know the area... I'd need to research things first before attempting anything like that."

"That makes sense."

Still wearing his helmet, UI showed Krishna his first genuine smile, teeth flashing white.

"I think I heard in a dream that you were demoted because of that last operation. That was about you, wasn't it?"

"That's right. Made contact with the Gaia Gear but let it slip away. Lost an allied unit too. That's why I got this, the Bushing Nugg. Made me its captain."

"Must be disappointing for a pilot to be relegated to ground operations?"

Krishna offered this common perspective.

"But this is a man-machine ground support tank. I can tinker with man-machines whenever I want, so it doesn't feel much different."

"Then you've just gotten more work, haven't you?"

"True. Especially since one of the man-machines is the Bromb Texter."

"Your man-machine?"

Krishna recalled the agile machine from that battle, now understanding why it had moved with such precision, it perfectly matched Ul's style.

"The Bushing Nugg has deck space for three man-machines, plus maintenance parts."

"I see..."

"It's more than just a carrier. How should I put it... it's interesting. The beam barrier system has been perfected too."

"Hehe... you're like a child with a new toy."

Krishna felt a warmth in her chest as she gazed up at Ul's striking profile. He seemed more mature now than when they'd met at the Helas colony in Side 2, where he'd drifted in on a glider.

"A toy?"

Ul's expression shifted to mock offense before he burst into hearty laughter.

The sudden sound made Krishna flinch involuntarily, her body reacting to deeply buried childhood memories. She'd learned early that when adults laughed so openly, it often preceded sudden violence or angry outbursts, a crude intimidation tactic used by the oppressed adults in her world. It was a cowardly method, but in the slums where she grew up, such adults were all she knew. Ul's unreserved laughter, despite his refined upbringing, struck too close to those memories.

"Hmm?"

Ul's laughter faded as he noticed her reaction.

She hurriedly plastered on a forced smile.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh... I just wondered if you should be so casual with someone like me..."

Krishna glanced back at the massive machine as she spoke.

"I appreciate your concern, but you're overthinking things. You've had it rough, haven't you?"

Ul's expression took on a knowing look, the eager wisdom of a young man trying to show his empathetic side.

"Yes... that's true."

"There's no need to be afraid. You've been cleared of all charges. You're free to do as you please."

The words struck Krishna as utterly unexpected.

"But I'm a Metatron crew member. The interrogation..."

They had reached the gates of Maison Orly as she spoke.

"About that... I owe you an apology. What I'm about to tell you might make you hate me, but I don't want to lie or hide anything..."

UI stopped walking and removed his helmet, carefully gauging her reaction.

Krishna remained silent.

"Everything we know about Metatron came from your testimony. So, well... they've lost interest in you."

"What do you mean?"

Krishna struggled to process his words.

"Hypnosis. When you regained consciousness, we used suggestive hypnosis. Afterward, we erased your memory of being hypnotized. That's what we did."

"I... see..."

Krishna stood dumbfounded.

A violent tremor ran through her body as the sense of violation took hold.

Though she caught a flicker of remorse in UI Urian's eyes, she fled from his gaze, rushing up the steps to Maison Orly's entrance.

"How could you!"

It was all she could think to say.

She ran down the straight corridor from the entrance, not stopping until she reached the veranda overlooking the back garden.

The railing finally halted her flight.

A sudden gust of wind stirred the willow branches before her, as if in sympathy with her turmoil.

## 4

She stood in silence.

Even she wasn't certain how much of her own past she truly remembered. But if others had ways to access memories unknown even to herself, so wouldn't that fundamentally distort the very nature of existence?

This philosophical musing helped steady her turbulent emotions as she fixed her gaze on the willow tree with its fresh spring leaves. Without this anchor, she knew she might give in to despair and flee.

Yet even with the declaration of her innocence, she questioned the wisdom of hasty departure. Patience was needed now. This calculated restraint helped her maintain composure.

"Will you... will you refuse to see me now?"

She had heard UI's approaching footsteps, sensed his presence. She'd even caught his hesitant breath before he spoke those words.

"Will you refuse to see me now?"

Krishna felt as if those words had struck the back of her head. Her body swayed forward over the railing.

"Of course I will!"

She hurled the words at the ground visible in her downturned gaze.

"What pleasure do you take in excavating a past I don't even know? Knowing things about me that even I don't..."

Though she addressed the ground, every word was meant for UI behind her.

"It was only Metatron-related information. We didn't extract anything else... In fact, MHA's organization respects Metatron's cautiousness. They compartmentalize their organization so thoroughly that no single crew member knows the full picture. You only spoke about things you consciously understood."

Krishna felt an unexpected warmth in his tone that made her slowly turn toward him. Yet seeing his intense expression, she knew she still couldn't accept this.

"Earlier, you said you had no interest in me."

"As Metatron staff. You personally are different... Regarding the information you shared, you gave quite accurate data about the airspace where you trained in man-machine operation. However, we couldn't pinpoint its location."

Krishna's heart jumped at his words.

The positions of the moon, Earth, and constellations are crucial for navigation. Knowing these would make location identification simple.

"You're still a rookie pilot. You've only been trained to determine position using the mothership, moon, and Earth as reference points. You never mentioned constellations. In that sense, you're not yet an accomplished pilot."

Krishna found herself nodding at his explanation while fixating on the movement of his well-formed lips.

"..."

"The hypnosis must have exhausted you. You slept for four days."

"..."

"If you're determined to leave, you'll need various supplies. I'll arrange them. But don't rejoin Metatron."

"I suppose not."

Though part of her felt regret, Krishna still bristled at his words.



"Don't be angry. Now that we can deploy the Bushing Nugg, MHA will operate independently of the Earth Federation Forces methods. The purges will become more severe."

"What do you mean?"

"As an independent organization, MHA plans to establish its own empire, the Gaia Emperor, to counter the space colony alliance. We'll build an empire of new humanity on Earth, carefully managed to avoid mankind's past mistakes. They'll even implement isolation policies against those trying to descend from space colonies."

"Are they serious?"

"It's historical necessity. While the empire's name is still under discussion... the Earth isolation policy will be implemented."

"But... they still need people, don't they?"

"Of course. However, the system will exclude the incompetent and resistant elements, accepting only capable collaborators."

"...So I'm to be excluded?"

"I can protect you now. I have the Captain's approval."

Krishna found herself unable to look away from Ul's intense gaze.

"Is that my only path to survival..."

"Nothing's certain. I believe human potential is quite broad. But joining Metatron would be unwise."

Krishna remembered how once, when Affranchi Char heard her breathing, it had reminded him of another woman. In that instant, she had instinctively rejected everything about him, thinking, "Affranchi is a man who has nothing to do with someone like me..."

Contrary to that sense of inadequacy, here was the youth who had infiltrated the Spasias for reconnaissance at Side 2's "Helas," now grown into a man...

Perhaps it was the workings of time, or more likely, the necessary preparation for their hearts to draw closer. Such time is needed between a boy and a girl.

And now that time seemed ripe. Even if it was an illusion, Krishna found herself wanting to cling to it.

"Yes..."

She let out a small breath before asking,

"Could I rest for a while?"

# 1

Air Force 1, Madras' unit, descended even lower as it penetrated the airspace above Liège, once Belgian territory, now a city consumed by verdant overgrowth.

"It's unsettling to see an abandoned city. Feels like we might see ghosts."

Joe found even Michel's voice irritating.

The two sat on either side of Captain Madras in the cockpit. To keep himself from snapping at Michel, he focused on the rolling hills passing beneath his window.

Krishna consumed his thoughts entirely. He was aware of his own heightened nerves because of it.

There had been no word from her.

While the European district was said to have the highest population of illegal Earth residents, the infrastructure hadn't been restored enough to support life as it had been at the end of the previous century, making communication impossible.

If that situation somehow brought him one step closer to Krishna, he could accept it.

But Joe's hopes were betrayed.

Today's Air Force 1 flight path had circumvented the Danish territory where Krishna had disappeared, continuing south to arrive here instead.

Neither Madras nor anyone else showed any intention of searching for her.

His companions' attitude only fueled Joe's irritation.

"This area used to be prime land, you know. That's why both Germany and France coveted it."

Michel bristled at Madras's flippant remark.

"Here we go!"

Madras shouted.

The natural forest expanded rapidly in Air Force 1's front windscreen as they descended toward the wasteland on the outskirts of Liège, as if about to collide with the trees.

The craft bounced several times as the brakes engaged, violent tremors rocking the bridge.

"Is this safe?!" Joe's shout was unnecessarily loud.

"What's wrong?"

Madras asked, already releasing the control stick despite the intense vibrations.

The aircraft's nose plowed into the forest edge before coming to rest.

For Madras, it was a routine landing, but Joe's hysteric outburst had startled him.

"No... it's nothing. Sorry."

Embarrassed by his own outburst, he hastily stood to escape Madras's puzzled stare and made his way to open the bay cabin hatch.

"Did you know? During the First World War in the last century, when the German army of 120,000 violated the neutrality treaty and invaded, 40,000 Belgian troops resisted for over ten days right here in Liège."

"Oh really? You must have studied that in the book you were reading last night?"

Michel responded.

"You're annoying. Just quietly listening to your elders would make us old folks happy enough."

Madras gave a wry smile, then asked, "How is he?"

referring to Joe who had disappeared into the bay cabin.

"Love sickness. He can't forget about Krishna."

"That's the trouble with serious types. We even have cute girls like Bjor back at Hamar..."

"He doesn't even see them."

"Was it really like that? With Krishna?"

Madras opened the hatch beside the bridge and climbed down onto the weed-covered ground to inspect the aircraft.

"You know how it is... Sometimes you don't realize you're in love until they're gone. That's what this is."

Michel jumped down from the craft after him.

"Looking good. Get the man-machine to camouflage the aircraft."

"Yes, sir!"

Air Force 1 sat with its nose buried in the forest, having crushed down the overgrown weeds beneath it.

## 2

"It's just as you can see. The acid rain damage is still visible in these trees."

Michel ventured into the forest, examining the trees.

"The space colony era began over a hundred years ago. Aren't those just regular dead trees?"

"Natural die-off doesn't happen like this in this region. Look, they're completely withered down to the roots, all dried up."

"Huh. Amazing they're still standing."

Madras looked up at the cluster of dead trees he indicated, letting out a thoughtful grunt.

"When did this rain fall?"

"Must be from at least fifty years ago."

"Where would such rain even come from?"

"Remember when I said this was good land? The soil itself is contaminated with chemicals. Even the greening from excessive fertilizer isn't natural."

"Hmm, I see."

"Haven't you noticed how few birds and insects there are? You know, the European continent has a history of deforestation and reforestation since humans began farming here. They've been repeating this cycle for over three thousand years."

Michel strode purposefully through the sparse undergrowth while Madras watched from atop a fallen tree.

"So, the Earth's forests weren't natural to begin with?"

"Virgin forests disappeared almost instantly by the latter half of the twentieth century. Even before that, this area was already artificial forest."

Michel stopped, surveyed his surroundings, then headed back toward Madras.

"So what? It's the same as space colonies then?"

"That's probably why we accepted space migration so easily. We were confident we could create forests with artificial soil. Moreover, advances in biotechnology and science in general made humans overconfident."

"And that's what destroyed Earth? Modern humans were arrogant toward nature."

"Please don't say MHA represents that!"

Michel stopped beneath the fallen tree, looking up at Madras.

"But... couldn't you say MHA was created by a bunch of specialized fools gathering together?"

"Hehehe... You mean people wanted to pilot man-machines so badly that they needed companies and organizations to manufacture them?"

"It's about the social environment that creates such needs. It's like sailors, or the people who built space colonies, they just loved building massive things."

"That's true."

Michel sighed. He understood the nature of scientists all too well.

"The biggest cause was medical advancement leading to abnormal population growth. That produced the worst results."

Madras jumped down from the fallen tree and headed back toward Air Force 1.

"It's an uncomfortable truth, but humanity managed to completely pollute Earth in just fifty years, from the twentieth to early twenty-first century."

Ahead of them, three man-machines were covering Madras's craft with branches and propping fallen trees against it.

This wasn't work suited for man-machines.

"Hey! What's so interesting about making man-machines carry trees?"

Keran stuck his upper body out of the cockpit hatch, scowling as he complained.

"The mismatched scenery is entertaining to watch."

Madras glanced at the hatches of the two identical machines following Keran's, understanding that he was voicing complaints on their behalf.

"That's enough! Go scout ahead. We'll investigate the city area by bike."

"Roger! Regroup in an hour?"

"Right."

"Keran, we can't get the bikes out. Move that tree by the hatch."

Michel, climbing up to the bridge, shouted when he found the cabin hatch blocked by a propped-up tree.

"Understood! Saes! Handle it!"

"Huh?"

Saes, who had been equipping his machine with shields, poked his head out of the hatch with a lackadaisical response.

"Shape up! Shape up! Rey! I wasn't asking you!"

Keran bellowed through the external speakers.

If anyone had been nearby, maintaining secrecy would have been impossible. But Keran was the type who rarely considered such things.

Rey's machine, which had moved to remove the tree instead of Saes, stopped sluggishly.

"Rey, get ready."

Saes's husky voice came through the external speakers as his machine began moving one of the trees propped against Air Force 1.

"That'll do."

As Madras was climbing up to the bridge, Keran's machine bent down to approach him, and he leaned out of the hatch to ask:

"Why does Affranchi like those types?"

"Ah... Maybe because he's an island-bred country boy, he sees us as organizational men and dislikes that? It's a reaction to that."

"I consider myself a city man, you know."

"Hmm. I was just discussing this with Michel, city people are humans isolated from nature. We were talking about how that might have led to Earth's destruction."

Madras stood at the bridge hatch, explaining to the stern-faced Keran.

"Yeah... The raw, unrefined state of nature is kind of unsettling."

"That's exactly the problematic modern sensibility."

"In that sense, MHA is impressive. Trying to build an independent nation on this rough Earth."

"But if humanity multiplies on Earth again, regeneration would be impossible."

"Understanding that logic is why we're doing this dangerous work, isn't it?"

Keran retreated into his cockpit, smoothly moving his Dochadi away from above Madras's head.

The three Dochadi advanced, trampling the meters-high weeds, then ignited their tail nozzles and vanished into the southern sky.

### 3

Joe and Madras rode electric motorcycles, silent machines with power equivalent to 150cc gasoline engines, capable of running continuously for six hours.

The bikes zigzagged through the tall grass, erasing the tracks left by Air Force 1's landing as they went. After completing this task, both bikes headed toward the city of Liège.

Historic cities like this typically harbored illegal residents. Madras and Joe's mission was to locate such people and gather intelligence on MHA.

The city's neo-classical architecture of brick and stone had become a warren of unchecked vegetation growing wherever it pleased. Yet, looking carefully, one could spot traces of human passage.

Wheel tracks, when found, indicated the presence of MHA's "Manhunter Units," the sweeper teams that regularly came to apprehend illegal Earth residents.

However, the roads along both banks of the Meuse River that bisected the city showed no such signs.

"What a stench..."

The dead river's putrid smell permeated the air. Joe bristled at the odor, deciding that keeping his body in motion would help steady his nerves.

"The river must have changed course somewhere upstream."

Madras remarked grimly.

He brought his bike to a halt along a path bordered by ivy-covered stone walls. Several frogs hopped across the cracked asphalt.

"Music! Joe! Kill the engine!"

They had reached an intersection, and a breeze had carried the sound to them.

"What? Really?"

Joe's previously vacant expression snapped to attention.

"Lost it..."

Madras clicked his tongue as the wind died.

"This way."

Madras turned right at the corner and continued straight along the sidewalk.

"They're using camouflage..."

Joe looked where Madras had indicated with his chin.

"Ah...!"

The path appeared deliberately obscured by dead grass, yet showed signs of foot traffic.

"?!"

Joe's consciousness finally sharpened to match that of a frontline soldier.

"Wait! Isn't that a sheet?"

A window on the fourth floor of a building stood open. While not unusual in an abandoned city, something white flickered in the shadowed interior.

"A sheet?"



Madras reversed his bike to look up in the direction Joe pointed.

"You're right. A sheet."

Madras dismounted as he spoke, with Joe following suit. They concealed their bikes in the building's shadow.

"You think someone's there?"

"Definitely... They must be aware of us. Either they forgot about the sheet, or they know Air Force 1 isn't MHA's."

"But we landed quite far away. Could they hear the engines from here?"

"Depends on the wind. On Earth, sound can travel incredible distances when it's quiet."

Madras stopped at a position diagonal to the building across the street, where he could observe it clearly.

The ground floor showed remnants of two shops, what appeared to be a grocery and a general store. A wooden bar sign hung facing the alley beside one of them.

"That's it... It's an operating establishment."

"The Louvain? How can you tell it's running?"

"See the alley beside the sign... The way the paper trash has collected in the wind, doesn't it look a bit too deliberate?"

Now that Madras mentioned it, Joe could see it too, though there wasn't a hint of human presence. The century-abandoned shop had lost all its glass, and ivy seemed to have invaded the interior.

"We'll come back tonight."

Madras gave Joe a gentle push toward the bikes as they retreated.

## 4

Keran's team hadn't conducted an extensive reconnaissance.

They'd found nothing.

"Intel at Hamar suggested MHA was aggressively securing the north. Was that a lie? Maybe we shouldn't have trusted someone sketchy like Totto Göring..."

Keran was sulking, but he fell silent when he noticed Rey and Saes's sharp glares. To the duo, Totto, whom Messer had brought, was their "big brother."

"This northern region is Germany. Given its history as an industrial powerhouse in the last century, its territory MHA absolutely must control."

Madras popped the last bite of his bacon sandwich into his mouth and reached for his coffee.

"But can they really make Earth completely independent from the space colonies?"

Saes asked skeptically.

It was a simple question, but his doubts were natural. Since space migration had taken root, implemented to address urgent Earth pollution and population issues, conventional wisdom held that living on Earth was troublesome.

Unlike the pre-modern economic structure that had to expand while fearing environmental pollution, the space colony era offered infinite space as its stage. This guaranteed unlimited expansion of human economic activity, normalizing life in artificial environments.

As a result, people generally came to view Earth as a sanctuary, meant only for regeneration as humanity's birthplace.

Neither Saes nor Rey had found direct contact with Earth's nature particularly pleasant. Though the meal on Ireland's coast had been delicious, they saw it as an environment they couldn't adapt to.

This sentiment, beyond just meeting Totto, had contributed to their return to Affranchi. Humanity had transformed.

"Make it like Earth used to be. That's all there is to it."

Madras said simply.

"Since our ancestors did it, we can restore it, right?"

That was Keran.

"Yes. And within another hundred years, Earth will again be on death's door from pollution. But humans originated on Earth, so Earth migration tickles something instinctual in us. Give this bait to anyone, ideologist or rationalist, and they'll defect to MHA. That's why, conversely, MHA plans to exercise authority, select people, and maintain Earth with an appropriate population."

"The logic makes sense, eh? We're just deadweight."

"Don't deprecate yourself like that."

Madras raised his voice at Saes's dismissive words.

"Listen, Saes. MHA alone wouldn't be a problem. But what happens when MHA establishes its independent Earth nation?"

"That's fine. We can live in the space colonies."

"It's not that simple. Human thinking is influenced by and expands upon ideas. If humanity starts believing MHA's population selection policy is correct, every space colony will begin selecting people. Then you'll have slaves, workers, merchants, politicians, bureaucrats... a rigid class society."

"Priests and thugs too. Born a thug, die a thug?"

"That'd be terrible."

Rey took Saes's attempt at levity seriously.

"It would be terrible. Like the Dark Ages. Witch hunts, Red Purges, slavery, all of it."

"So Metatron wants to crush organizations like MHA and preserve Earth completely?"

Rey concluded.

"Exactly. Lose Earth, and our understanding of human existence crumbles."

"But I don't want to die for that."

"Then head back to space and loaf around again?"

Rey's face darkened at Keran's words.

"Stop teasing. They're finally developing a sense of purpose. Ready to move out?"

Madras checked his watch and called to everyone.

"Right... This time, you two take point. Got it?"

Madras addressed Saes and Rey specifically.

Joe, fretting over his civilian clothes, grew frustrated with his flagging spirits.

"It's a mission. No point in endless worrying."

With Keran and Michel staying behind, Madras, Joe, Rey, and Saes departed on four bikes equipped on Air Force 1.

The season had turned mild, the air barely cooling even as night fell.

## Chapter.05

### At the Tavern

# 1

The insect chorus rang out vigorously from unseen corners of the ruined city. Unlike the clean impression of the forest, their presence suggested to Madras that Earth's environmental upheaval had altered even insect behavior, driving them to colonize urban spaces.

Madras, Joe, Saes, and Rey advanced with tense shoulders through the dew-dampened grass that had sprouted between the cobblestones.

As Madras began to cross the street after scanning the building silhouettes floating in the darkness, Joe touched his arm.

"I hear music."

Madras sensed Joe's growing timidity.

A female vocal track drifted through the darkness, barely audible, like something crawling through the night.

"Can't dance to something like this."

Rey muttered this to Saes.

"...?!"

Joe's nerves frayed even at this casual comment.

But Rey was afraid of the darkness too. She stayed close enough to feel Saes's body heat, making such remarks to steady her own nerves.

"Captain?!"

Joe halted Madras as a streak of light flashed before them. Madras's flashlight had briefly illuminated the Louvain sign before clicking off.

That momentary light only made the darkness feel more absolute.

Joe's right hand brushed against rough cast iron, a handrail. Below it lay an area well accessing the basement, from which a faint light leaked.

"Alright..."

Saes and Rey, still moving as a pair, overtook Madras and Joe as they rounded the building's corner.

"Nothing to fear once you know people are here."

Rey's voice carried a hint of excitement as their pace quickened through the weeds.

"At this point, better leave it to them."

Madras said, trying to soothe Joe's unease.

## 2

"This is the spot." Saes's voice emerged from the darkness between the buildings.

Madras and Joe peered toward the source of the voice, but the absence of light made them question Saes's words.

"There's a usable bike lying on its side among the alley weeds," Saes continued.

The darkness in the two-meter gap between buildings was thick with the pungent smell of rotting vegetation.

"...This way. There's stairs."

"Is it safe?"

"Yeah... it's dry. People have been through here."

Joe found their animal-like behavior unsettling, their movements too predatory for his taste.

"No way..." Saes's muffled voice came from slightly below and ahead of Joe.

"...?"

A rusty metal fitting creaked, and suddenly a dim red light revealed Saes's tall figure and Rey's pale face floating in the darkness. Saes's right arm wrapped around Rey's waist, concealing his pistol from the front.

"...?!"

Madras and Joe tensed as low voices filtered out from inside the building.

"Just passing through... didn't catch any names..." Saes was saying, playing his part. "But someone told me if you come to this town, this is the place to get a decent meal."

As he spoke, Saes made a show of kissing Rey, the gun now hidden against the small of his back.

Another low male voice responded from inside.

"Thanks. You really helped us out," Rey called out cheerfully, still pressed against Saes's shoulder as they disappeared through the doorway.

Madras and Joe followed them down the stairs.

"You people!"

A sharp voice cut through the reddish light.

From over Madras's shoulder, Joe caught sight of a man training a gun on them, positioned between them and Saes and Rey.

"They're with us," Madras stated, gripping the edge of the door before the man could close it.

"They're my friends," Saes added from behind the man.

"You didn't say there were four of you."

"You never asked how many," Rey snapped, feigning indignation.

"You meant to deceive us from the start."

Though gaunt-faced and thin, the man's eyes glinted sharply from deep-set sockets, and his muscular frame appeared lithe.

"You think we could get this far fighting against MHA?" Madras challenged, getting right in the man's face as if willing to bet thousands of dollars on a single play.

"...?"

Uncertainty flickered in the man's eyes.

"Jacob!"

A middle-aged woman rushed out from the back.

"Fares! What do you make of these people?"

Before the thin man could finish his question, Saes stepped in front of the woman who had run out.

"You think we could get this far fighting against MHA?" Madras challenged, getting right in the man's face as if willing to bet thousands of dollars on a single play.

"...?"

Uncertainty flickered in the man's eyes.

Then came a knock at the door.

"You two need to leave," Jacob said to Madras and his companion before opening it.

"Mind if I drop in?"

At the sound of that voice, Madras and Joe spun around reflexively.

"?!"

In the red lighting, Joe realized he recognized the sharp features of the young man's face.

"Who told you about this place?"

"I was told to mention Reutlingen?"

As the young man answered, Madras and Joe had already drawn their weapons.

"He's MHA!" Madras shouted.

But his voice was overlapped by Saes's cry from behind.

"Krishna is here!"

"?!"

Joe's mind reeled in confusion.

"UI! That was his name!" Madras suddenly remembered.

But by then, UI Urian was already disappearing into the darkness of the alley.

Madras tossed his flashlight into the air as he burst into the alley. The falling light illuminated UI's back.

A gunshot rang out.

Joe, though concerned about Saes, waited until the flashlight fell and died in the weeds before turning back.

"What's going on!?"

"Rey is trying to catch Krishna."

Even as Saes spoke these words, he was already rushing toward the back of the bar, where gunshots and screams had erupted.

### 3

Several shadowy figures burst out of the bar, colliding with each other in their panic. Joe pushed against the flow, making his way into what appeared to be the bar's lounge. A sharp crack split the air as wood splinters exploded from the left pillar, spraying past his face.

"Ugh!"

A sharp pain lanced through the left side of his head.

"Krishna, why?!" Rey's voice cut through the screams and groans from the right. On the floor, more than a dozen figures crawled on their bellies, desperately trying to escape.

Joe pressed forward against the tide of fleeing patrons, keeping low as he dove toward the center of the lounge.

"That's it, Joe! Go left! Behind the counter!"

Saes, crouched under a chair two seats away, and Rey, hidden under a table further back, watched Joe's movements intently. A glass tumbled nearby, amber liquid spattering across the floor as Joe scrambled over several prone bodies.

"Police? Military?"

The patron's demanding question struck Joe's ears.

"Nothing like that! Krishna! It's Joe! Answer me if you're here!"

His shout echoed as he crawled under two tables. Bullets concentrated on the spot right in front of him.

"Gah?!"

Joe covered his head with both hands, feeling something sticky on his left palm. The heavy boom of Saes's gun thundered through the space, its familiar report oddly reassuring to Joe's ears.

"MHA?!"

"Is it true?!"

Voices called out from the entrance, followed by the sound of Rey's running footsteps. More gunshots followed her path as Joe charged toward the left wall. The floor was a mess of spilled whiskey, salami, salad, and dressing.

With a grunt of effort, Joe hurled a nearly-full whiskey bottle, sending the bottles lined up on the counter crashing down.

"This isn't a lie, is it?!"

He called to Saes, who was advancing on his elbows, pressed against the far right wall.

"Krishna is behind the counter."

"Saes! There's a back door!"

Rey's voice came from somewhere ahead of Saes.

"Krishna! Answer me!"

Joe couldn't help but verify what Saes and the others were saying. He ran and threw himself stomach-first onto the counter.

"Who—!"

The gunshots roared in Joe's ears with deafening force, but through the muzzle flash, he clearly saw Krishna's face.

Krishna was shooting at him. The shots missed.

In the dim light, Krishna's wide eyes, half-melded with the shadows, were frozen in place, transfixed by Joe's gaze.

"Why?!"

Joe's body, contrary to his will, fell back into the lounge like a ricocheting ball.

"Why would you?!"

He screamed as he rolled, knocking over tables. Another sharp crack split the air as bullets struck the table Joe was using as cover. Wood fragments exploded into dust, getting in his eyes.

"Damn it!"

Blinking rapidly, Joe glanced toward Saes and emptied his magazine to provide cover fire. As Saes slid into position, Joe curled into a ball, changing magazines across his stomach.

"Pull yourself together, Joe!"

"Working on it," Joe replied through his tears.

"Get down!"



Joe, left eye still closed and streaming tears, looked toward Fares's voice. She was holding a submachine gun, sending a stream of bullets hammering into the counter.

"Stop! That's my lover!"

Joe's desperate cry was futile. A wet, strangled sound like a crushed frog came from behind the counter, followed by another pained grunt.

"Our comrade is there! Don't shoot!"

Joe had risen to his feet.

"Joe!"

Madras, positioned next to Fares with her submachine gun, raised his upper body above a table to reprimand him.

"Rey!"

"Yeah!"

Saes and Rey dove in from beside the counter. Joe rushed to the counter where Krishna had been, peering over.

Empty.

A sharp click of Rey's tongue cut through the air, painfully real as she ran toward Saes, who was trying to open what appeared to be a hidden door leading to an adjacent room.

"They escaped through there?!"

"Damn!"

Saes pulled back as the sound of ricocheting bullets echoed several times from beyond the door.

"Two escaped. Krishna too."

"Why was Krishna even here?"

"You saw her, didn't you?"

Saes, still breathing hard, checked Joe's neck and examined his head and forehead.

"Bad wound?"

"No, just grazed," Saes reported to Madras, indicating the wound on the side of Joe's head.

"So Krishna was with three others, and then that young man, UI Urian, showed up too?"

"When I first noticed Krishna, she looked really surprised and tried to hide behind a man next to the counter, and then Rey..."

"When I asked what she was doing, one of the men sitting over there asked if we were Metatron, and I shouldn't have reached for my gun..."

Rey ran her fingers through her hair, raking it in frustration.

"Pietro, disinfect this Joe's head wound..."

Fares called out to a young man who was organizing the returning patrons in the shadows of the entrance corridor.

"Ah, yes!"

Joe's ears were still ringing, and more than anything, he couldn't calm his emotional turmoil as he sank heavily into the sofa.

## 4

"The two men at the counter, they're dead?" Madras asked Rey.

"Lost my cool. Even finished off the one who was still breathing," Rey replied, her face showing remorse.

She seemed impossibly energetic now, a stark contrast to her earlier demeanor of darkness and timidity toward the incomprehensible. When faced with concrete situations, her actions became crystal clear.

"What are your orders, Captain?"

"Saes and Rey, take the bikes back to First. We'll follow shortly."

"Yes sir!" Saes responded without hesitation.

"Standby with the Dochadi. I'll request Keran's assistance."

As Madras pulled out the radio from his jacket, Saes and Rey pushed their way through the crowd gathering at the entrance.

"What about the Minovsky particles?" Joe asked while Pietro, the young man with refined features, cleaned the blood from his forehead and hair.

"We're fine. That young man Ul clearly hadn't anticipated this situation either... Hey, Madras here!" Madras ended up shouting into the microphone.

"Ugh..." Joe winced as Pietro cleaned the wound where the wood splinter had grazed him.

"Ngh..." The pain gave Joe space to think.

Krishna... she must have been attracted to Ul since their first meeting...

With that realization, the situation started to make a little more sense.

"And yet..." Joe thought, fighting through the sting of antiseptic on his wound. He still couldn't fully accept it.

After all, she hadn't disliked Affranchi either.

"Do you know about the MHA that landed in Nouveau Paris?"

"Yeah. We've been pursuing that fleet," Joe answered as Fares thrust her face close to his.

"Hmm. And?"

"And if MHA establishes an independent nation on Earth, the planet's population will increase. We're here to prevent that."

"I see..."

"Keran Mead will be here shortly in a man-machine."

"A man-machine?" Fares questioned Madras accusingly as he tucked the radio back into his inner pocket.

"We don't have a choice. MHA already knows about this place. You're...?"

"Fares de Minne. I run this establishment and serve as a contact point for the local anti-Earth Federation movement... I'll admit it. If MHA's using our comrades' codes to scout us out, we'll have to abandon this place."

"That's right."

"This MHA plan for Earth's independence, it differs from the Earth Federation government's policies, doesn't it?"

"It's far more sinister. While they claim to consider Earth's regeneration, their policies would introduce racial discrimination and a class system, essentially reviving feudalism."

"That's what I thought. It would be disastrous if people started currying favor with MHA to secure their privileges on Earth."

Fares's expression turned melancholic.

"Whatever kind of movement you're running, things are about to get more complicated."

"Indeed... Jacob! Pietro! We're getting out of here."

"Got transportation?"

"We do... Are you people Metatron?"

"Yeah..."

"I'd heard you were a violent private army, but you seem different."

"Well, we've got guys like this one," Madras said with a wry smile, eyes flitting to Joe.

"Let's go, Captain."

Joe stood up, tired of being the subject of conversation.

"Well then..."

Fares extended her hand, and Madras returned the handshake.

"Three Air Force units of the same type you saw this afternoon are scheduled to rendezvous with us. If you're willing to cooperate, keep an eye on our movements. An interesting young man named Affranchi Char is in command. I'm Madras Caria, Fares."

"That's an old-fashioned name."

"I get that a lot."

Madras and Joe left through the same entrance they'd come in, parting ways with Fares's group.

A distinctive rumbling drone cut through the air, approaching with such intensity it seemed to dim the starlight.

"They're here!"

But it wasn't Keran Mead's Dochadi or Saes's group.

"Captain!" Joe's voice came out pathetically.

"This is what happens when you're indecisive, Krishna's gone over to the enemy!"

As Madras spat these words, a strange, sharp whine pierced the air, and searchlights swept across the weed-choked road, illuminating the abandoned buildings.

# 1

Madras and Joe weren't the only ones who reacted to the searching beams of light. Onboard Air Force 1, Keran's Dochadi also spotted the illumination.

"Tch!"

The instant Keran saw the light, his finger was already on the missile trigger. The missiles mounted behind the Dochadi's shield launched into the night.

He had to act fast, the homing systems could still lock on at this range.

"...?!"

In the Bromb Texter, UI had been operating the searchlight and sensed the missiles' presence. Instead of climbing to escape as most pilots would, he kept his nimble machine in a low-altitude flight path.

With a thunderous roar, the Bromb Texter's underbelly smashed through an old apartment building's roof.

Two deafening explosions followed as the pursuing missiles seemed to strike the Bromb Texter directly, but their excessive speed made it impossible for them to adjust their trajectory quickly enough.

The missiles slammed into the ground structures with devastating force. While the anti-aircraft missiles carried relatively small warheads, their twin explosions cast ghostly silhouettes of the city buildings against the darkness.

"Hmph!"

This was exactly as Keran had calculated. He launched a third missile.

The projectile struck the Bromb Texter's shield near the shoulder with a resounding impact, but thanks to the defensive barrier, it wasn't a fatal blow to the machine.

"Damn!"

UI, whose reflexes were practically superhuman, had launched his own spread of missiles just before taking the hit. But by then,

Minovsky particles, anti-electronic countermeasure particles, had already begun flooding the airspace.

Neither pilot could tell which machine had released the particles first, as both units were equipped with automatic response systems. The release had likely been simultaneous.

Because of this, Keran managed to avoid a direct hit from UI's missiles, but couldn't escape the shockwave of their close-range detonation.

"Ugh!"

Though momentarily pale, Keran scanned the display created by his night-vision cameras. The Minovsky particle-saturated airspace caused severe jamming, sometimes even "dirtying" the camera's light reception.

But now, the distance between the combatants was minimal.

The battle's explosive flashes were visible even to Saes Konsoun and Rey Seias, who were retreating down a street several hundred meters away.

"They got him!"

"No, he's fine, but the enemy's fast," Saes replied, bringing the bike to a stop. As he watched the Bromb Texter disappear, his body trembled with barely contained rage.

"That's the one who was there when Reyzam went down!"

Saes recalled his comrade's name, killed during their atmospheric entry battle, the memory cutting like a knife. He finally had time to process it all.

"He's fast, but it's nothing we can't handle..." Rey responded, revving the bike's engine.

"We've got to avenge him!"

"That's why we went back to Affranchi, isn't it?"

This was the raw emotion driving them both.

No matter what they were told, they couldn't care less about Metatron's ideological struggle against the Earth Federation government.

Their consideration of selling out to Messer and MHA had been merely a survival tactic, just as following Affranchi's orders was now. Even if their old boss Totto rejoined them and they returned to Affranchi's organization, that's all it would ever be.

Though circumstances had put them back in man-machines, the means to achieve their ends didn't matter to them.

Instinctively, they preferred choosing a way of life that would have made Reyzam proud.

This superficial adaptability was their defining trait, and paradoxically, it made their way of living fundamentally consistent.

## 2

"Where are you?!"

The brief exchange between Keran and UI had ended in a stalemate.

"Not bad..."

Keran felt his fighting spirit surge, a sensation that pleased him. The enemy man-machine had likely taken cover among the tree-lined streets below.

He decreased altitude.

His machine staggered as its feet crushed through the trees with a grinding crunch. As he stabilized the unit, he throttled the main engine down to idle, trying to mask his presence.

The only way to get a clear view would be to move into the street.

Keran initiated a slow walking motion with the Dochadi. Though tense as he watched the near-daylight-bright display, he recognized his own excitement at finally encountering a worthy opponent.

While he'd been conscious of his internal resistance to events centering around Affranchi Char, with enemies like this showing up, Keran couldn't care less about the surrounding circumstances.

For a born man-machine pilot, having this humanoid machine and enemies like this was all one needed for a fulfilled life.

"But when did something like that get into the city? Didn't see it during the day's reconnaissance..."

He cursed his oversight.

"Madras and his group are idiots, and so am I."

Even while they'd been away with the Air Force, he hadn't felt they'd been lax in their surveillance. Yet until Madras's request for deployment came in, they hadn't noticed a thing.

They hadn't considered the classic tactic of transporting man-machines via ground vehicles.

In this sparsely populated continent, such a method of transport seemed unthinkable.

"...?!"

When Keran spotted a human shadow darting near the Dochadi's feet, it was already disappearing into the darkness behind a building to the right.

He'd been so focused on watching above that he'd neglected to guard the ground.

Frustrated with himself, Keran made the Dochadi jump. Though he knew this was dangerous against an enemy unit, when he caught a glimpse of light, he accelerated further.

As he turned the machine toward the light source, he shifted the beam saber to the shield-bearing arm.

He fired the beam rifle as a feint. His instincts proved correct.

The fired beam collided with an enemy blast.

A tremendous flash erupted as the accelerated high-energy particles collided, briefly illuminating the ghost town of Liège like daylight, raining streams of searing energy across the darkened cityscape.

Keran and Ul's man-machines faced each other across a single street.

"Damn!"

"Hyaaah!"

Though their battle cries couldn't be heard, the two giants closed the distance instantly, their beam sabers' edges clashing.

The sound resembled shorting high-voltage current. A single crackling flash.

That was the only sound.

The beam collision, more intense than rifle fire, scorched the buildings on both sides. Weakened brick and stone walls crumbled as superheated winds ignited anything flammable.

By then, the two man-machines had separated far to either side.

Through the waves of heat rolling in from hundreds of meters away, Madras glanced back at Joe.

"You alright?"

"I'm fine!"

Though blood was seeping from Joe's forehead wound again, the damage wasn't as severe as it looked.

Having a sturdy body as his only merit wasn't such a bad thing.

Their bikes wobbled whenever thick weeds caught the handlebars, releasing the stench of rotting vegetation.

Nevertheless, Madras deliberately chose routes unfavorable for bikes as he headed toward where the Air Force waited.

Joe struggled to keep up, following the sound of Madras's bike, the quiet electric motor proving inconvenient in this situation.

Still, the two bikes managed to slip out toward the suburbs through the darkness.

Just then, there was a low rumble.



Hearing Keran's engine approaching from behind, Madras flashed his bike's headlight.

Keran's machine moved slightly ahead overhead.

At barely five meters altitude, Keran's unit slid side to side before executing a complete roll.

He was asking them to check his machine from the outside.

"?!"

There were no signs of sparks or flames on the unit.

Moreover, maintaining constant altitude even during the roll proved the machine's control systems were fully operational.

"Well done! Don't think you shot down the enemy, but that's fine," Madras muttered to himself, tensing as he considered the complications ahead.

Behind them, the city's flames grew larger, beginning to scorch the sky.

### 3

Though relieved his machine showed no signs of exploding, UI felt himself growing irritated as he anticipated trouble ahead.

Indeed, his concerns proved justified when he caught sight of his mobile base, the Bushing Nugg. The Bushing had activated its lights along the man-machine deck's side to receive UI's unit, standard procedure according to the manual to secure landing space.

However, the manual didn't specify this had to be followed during combat. Young soldiers, earnest and excited by their first deployment, always followed the manual to the letter. This was practically announcing their position to the enemy.

"This is what you get with a makeshift team!"

Suppressing the urge to shout, UI landed the Bromb Texter beside the Bushing Nugg's rear deck and opened the hatch.

"Kill those lights! You want us to get shelled?"

"Sir!"

The young soldiers responded with rigid formality, not realizing they were being criticized.

The Bromb Texter's feet landed on the deck with a heavy thud. UI positioned it carefully to avoid touching the two Guzzas.

Overwhelming military might typically meant a massive organization. The larger the organization grew, the more human energy was expended simply maintaining it.

When an organization became large enough to span a person's lifetime, people became mere cogs in the machine, thinking only of preservation and prolonging its existence.

They acted while forgetting the organization's true purpose. The organization itself forgot its reason for being.

This temporal hollowing-out of organizations, though widely recognized, repeated endlessly throughout history.

Whether bureaucratic or private enterprise, it couldn't be prevented or improved.

This fatal flaw in human-made organizations remained uncorrected even in the modern era.

Descending by wire-trap to the deck, UI asked, "Where's Gamien and the others?"

"Sir, not back yet!"

"I see... Maintenance might be tricky, but hurry. Think I took a hit to the left shoulder."

"Sir!"

"Keep lighting to a minimum. We might deploy again soon."

"Sir!"

UI headed to the bridge without acknowledging their responses.

"Glad you're safe..."

"Yeah. No results. No kills either..."

Gerant Alsa, the main pilot, responded with characteristic precision.

"It's a Metatron man-machine. A Dochadi..."

Gerant reported, peering at the computer display.

"Gamien went into the Louvian. Would like to hear what they learned."

"Should we remain on standby then?"

Gerant showed surprise after confirming all console panel instruments were operational.

"Scared?"

"Not at all. We have no intel suggesting major enemy forces in this area. Besides, resistance fighters wouldn't approach the Bushing Nugg, would they?"

"What makes you so sure? The resistance likely has anti-tank missiles at least?"

"But..."

The young man showed his first signs of tension at UI's words.

"If they're resistance fighters who've contacted Metatron, wouldn't they naturally have received weapons?"

"Yes... that's true."

UI internally sighed, watching the radar screen turned pure white from Minovsky particle jamming.

The Bushing Nugg began moving slowly, circumventing the city center where the fire had grown larger.

"Wouldn't going straight through the fire get us closer to that inn?"

Gerant had grown anxious since the weapons supply was mentioned.

"No. They'll come out this way from the alley behind the inn."

UI's intuition proved correct.

Shortly after, two figures emerged from the grass along the fire-reddened road, waving both arms.

UI felt pleased seeing Krishna's lithe form seemingly dance through the darkness.

"Stop here."

Before UI could open the rear hatch, Gamien Haegerich entered, breathing heavily, sheltering Krishna behind him.

Krishna offered a light salute from behind him.

"Learn anything about Metatron at the inn?"

"Sir! Customers mentioned something landed in the northern pastures."

"I heard that too."

"Hmm. We're looking at aerial combat then."

UI's statement was followed by a grin.

"...?!"

Though it seemed dismissive, there was something predatory about it, like a cold-blooded animal licking its chops at the sight of prey.

Gerant and Gamien were startled by UI's expression. Gerant gripped the controls while Gamien rushed out to the man-machine deck.

Krishna saw this side of UI for the first time.

"Why would you...?"

She wanted to ask, but there was an intensity about UI that rejected such questions.

"Krishna, operate the anti-aircraft guns here."

"What?"

UI ignored Krishna's slight hesitation.

"I'm calling Konstan."

With that, he left for the deck.

Krishna watched his back, frowning at the thought they might have to fight Joe and Madras.

Though she'd imagined this possibility, she hadn't truly believed she'd face it in reality.

She'd fallen into bed with UI amid such ambiguity.

His youthful, rough caresses had been stimulating, providing temporary comfort when she was emotionally damaged.

Above all, she'd been exhausted.

Ending up aboard the Bushing Nugg afterward had simply been the flow of events.

If there was anything like a reason, it was merely spite toward Affranchi Char.

To Krishna, Affranchi, with his endearing qualities, had been far more appealing than someone like Joe.

But Affranchi's attention had always been focused on Miranda Howe, and after the accident in Denmark, she hadn't felt he'd truly searched for her.

These were things one could sense even while in captivity.

Given that, though selfish, Krishna had no choice but to go with the flow.

Those feelings had left her viewing the situation ambiguously.

That's why seeing Joe's face and hearing Madras's voice at the Louvian had struck such a deep wound in her.

"This is bad...!"

That single thought summed it up, she realized she was standing in an impossible quagmire.

"UI knows my position, that's why he made sure I couldn't leave the bridge."

Krishna sank into depression while adjusting the remote-controlled gun's targeting.

"Are we set?!"

Constan Perneke burst in from the deck, taking the seat beside Krishna.

"Are we engaging the enemy?"

"Looks that way. They'll be here soon."

Krishna answered, suppressing her painful emotions.

## 4

In the Air Force's cabin, Rey and Saes's Dochadis had already returned and were moving into launch position.

Their tail nozzles' exhaust flattened the surrounding grass and nearly sent Madras and Joe's bikes flying.

"Damn it!"

Joe cursed his bike as it wobbled more than necessary while he rushed up the aluminum ramp leading to the cabin.

"Saes! Watch where you're blasting that thrust!"

The communication wire connecting the cabin and the man-machines was still live. Joe used the mic to shout at Saes.

"You look pretty banged up. That's what happens when you push yourself too hard."

Saes's mocking voice stung Joe's ears.

"Tch! Keep talking!"

As Joe peered into the bridge,

"Still no contact from Affranchi's trailing units?"

Madras was asking Michel, who'd been watching the ship.

"Nothing at all... Joe, seal that hatch! We need to land Keran's unit."

Michel barked orders without even noticing Joe's bandaged forehead.

"Yeah, yeah..."

Before Joe could close the hatch, Keran's unit touched down on the rear deck.

A deep boom resonated as the vessel shuddered heavily. Madras waited for the vibrations to settle before pushing the throttle.

Air Force 1's massive frame lifted with surprising grace.

"Joe, can you manage?"

"Of course I can."

Joe felt unnecessary sympathy in Madras's words as he pulled out the anti-aircraft missile control panel.

"I'll show you, I'll shoot down that man-machine and capture its pilot alive."

"That's what we need. I want to know why the enemy suddenly appeared right in front of us."

Michel moved to the rear deck to service Keran's unit.

Of course, there wasn't much he could do in this situation, but even slapping on some air-seal tape would ease his mind.

With a deep rumble, the Air Force gained altitude, holding at several dozen meters.

Rey and Saes's Dochadis took up flanking positions on either side.

"Rey, Saes, cover us!"

Through the Minovsky particle interference noise came their acknowledgments of Madras's command.

"Roger that!"

## Chapter.07

### Colors of Defeat, Colors of Night

# 1

The engine's high-pitched whine should have been kicking up a ferocious storm of sand and dust all around them, but instead, the darkness devoured every speck, leaving no visible swirl from the bridge's vantage point.

"How's it looking, Konstan? Any damage on the Bromb Texter?"

"Sir! I've already replaced the damaged armor plating."

"Good. We're heading out immediately. Get the Gussa fired up as well."

"Yes, sir! But Guillaume hasn't returned yet!"

Inside the vehicle, the mechanic dared to utter something more over the internal comm line.

"Once the Gussa's are fired up, switch immediately to anti-air combat positions. Krishna, put on your helmet."

For Ul, there was no room in his mind for crew members who failed to regroup by now. He barked the order at Krishna, seated before the console panel to his left.

"Ah, y-yes!"

Krishna had been so busy double-checking the controls for anti-air armaments that she had completely forgotten such a basic precaution. Embarrassed and unsettled, she hurried to fit the helmet over her lustrous black hair. Feeling the cool press of the helmet's inner lining, she realized how rattled she was. This turmoil within her was unusual, and she was keenly aware of it.

"Guillaume's here!"

"Where?"

"Over there!!"

Gerant, a pilot aboard the Bushing Nugg, pointed toward a figure bolting out from a far-left alley. In the faint glow leaking from Liège's distant, flame-scorched ruins, the form emerged in a world dominated by heavy darkness. Ul's eyes, unnaturally sharp as if carved for nocturnal hunts, detected Guillaume instantly.

"Guillaume must be injured, right?" Krishna ventured, worry creeping into her voice. She and Guillaume had both been out scouting at the Lauban Pavilion. The thought of him returning wounded sent a tremor of concern through her.

"If he managed to make it back, he can fight. Gerant, you got that?" Ul didn't wait for her reaction. He clapped Gerant's shoulder with a firm hand and stepped toward the rear deck without the slightest hint of concern for her anxieties.

Krishna's stomach knotted. Ul's brusque demeanor and the metallic taste of imminent violence filled her with a queasy dread. She felt cast aside, like a tool to be tested or discarded at will.

"Are we identifying friend and foe solely by the shape of their man-machines?" she asked Gerant, trying to steady herself by voicing her doubts. Deep down, she knew that neither Metatron's nor MHA's man-machines ever truly felt like "enemies" to her. Now they were under attack by Affranchi's forces, and Krishna clung unsteadily to a fence of contradictions.

"The monitor should tell them apart," Gerant answered, flicking his gaze over her. His look implied that this woman, an adversary until yesterday, lacked the stomach to gun down her former allies.

"I can see them, but if their man-machines are fast, I'm not confident..." Krishna's voice wavered, her throat scratchy and tight. She was trying to dismiss Gerant's doubts but had no solid ground to stand on.

"At the very least, lay down some covering fire. Otherwise, Ul might just put a bullet in your back," Gerant warned quietly as he flicked a switch on a secondary comm line.

"Eh?" Krishna's eyes widened.

"Ul's a strict man," Gerant continued, voice low and serious. "When it's life or death, anyone would be. If you don't fight properly, he might just do it, shoot you from behind, *Krishna Pudent*."

The line Gerant had opened wasn't linked to the rear deck. It was the frequency used for man-machine communications. He intended for the enemy to intercept this transmission, letting them know Krishna was here. If that knowledge prompted hesitation in their attack, it could serve his own ends.

"If you could manage to shoot down even one of Metatron's man-machines, we'll acknowledge your position among us."

"Bromb Texter, moving out!" Ul's voice boomed through.

"Y-Yes, sir!" Krishna blurted, pressing down her panic. Gerant took heart that Ul made no remark on his exchange with Krishna. His silence felt like tacit approval of Gerant's scheme.

"Gamien, move out! Guillaume, we're going!"

As the three man-machines launched, their departure caused the Bushing Nugg's hull to jolt and shiver. Freed of their weight, it sprang upward a dozen meters, then settled into its normal ground-level cruising altitude..

"Right, two o'clock!" Krishna called out, spotting a glowing silhouette, likely one that had split from Air Force 1, through the flickering monitors.

"Alright, all hands, anti-air combat!" Gerant barked.

Gerant was relieved to see Krishna's prompt reaction, believing his intimidation had worked. In battle, one extra set of capable hands could mean the difference between life and death.

## 2

When Krishna spotted the incoming man-machines from aboard the Bushing Nugg, the pilots of those two enemy units, Rey and Saes, simultaneously caught sight of the flashes from UI's units.

"So that traitor's down there, huh!"

Rey spat, her voice roughened by disgust. They had intercepted Gerant's mention of Krishna. But before Rey could voice more fury, Minovsky particles thickened to combat density, smothering radio contact under heavy static.

As Saes's machine climbed higher, Rey surged forward in pursuit, brandishing her shield to protect her man-machine's main body. The beam rifle's output indicator blinked at maximum. Rey's heart hammered.

"That Krishna, bold as brass, is now pointing guns at us!"

Rey's words were acidic.

Blood thrummed hot in her veins. It hadn't been long since she'd tried to rescue Krishna after the younger woman fell from the Air Force. Now, less than ten days later, Krishna had turned her back on them. This betrayal was unforgivable.

Krishna, younger than Rey's group, had been a far more legitimate member of Metatron's staff. To have her betray them after descending to Earth was a slap in the face. If it had been someone like them, with checkered histories, it would make sense. But Krishna's defection struck Rey as a profound violation of trust. Rey had believed that ordinary, honest people would never backstab their allies.

"Don't you dare!" Rey snarled, chasing Saes's unit as they readied for combat.



Gerant's plan to frighten them into holding back had failed. Instead, Rey and Saes grew bolder, more ferocious, more primal in their resolve. Their fury and instincts were honed for war, not cowed by threats.

In an era long past, there was a misconception that complex machines required cool, intellectual pilots, rational thinkers to operate such intricate technology. But that was the legacy of a technology-obsessed age. Real combat, by its very nature, was not an intellectual exercise. It demanded animal instinct, raw nerve, and visceral combat sense.

"Damn them!"

Madras and Joe, observing from the Air Force's bridge, cursed the reckless duo. They watched the bright trails of the two units streak toward enemy territory, driven by simple, violent resolve.

"They're out of their minds!"

Joe, awakened from his shock at meeting Krishna again at the Louvian, watched the fiery trails of the two units' tail nozzles streak into enemy airspace, presumably where the source of the enemy transmission was.

If he stayed lost in questions about Krishna's motives, he might die without learning her reasons for leaving. Joe understood that now.

"What's the status on Keran's unit?!"

Madras shouted toward the rear cabin, where Michel Acken wrestled with maintenance tasks.

"I need a bit more time just to get the beam launcher operational," Michel answered coolly, steady under pressure.

"Keran, Krishna's planning to lay down anti-air fire against us from that ground support machine!"

"So what if she does. Let Saes and Rey handle Krishna," Keran scoffed, a sneer in his voice. Joe felt that sneer like a blade across his heart.

"But what will we tell Affranchi?" Joe's voice rose, nearly hysterical.

"Affranchi has given up on her."

"That's just how it turned out, not what he truly wants!"

Madras, ever so slightly more sympathetic, called that out. Joe took a strange comfort in that mild kindness.

"But face reality, Joe. Krishna has betrayed us. Leave her to Saes and Rey. Don't get mad. Don't hold a grudge."

His words, though tough, were an attempt to soften the blow for Joe. They offered a bitter kind of understanding.

"Yeah... I get it," Joe managed, voice hollow. But inwardly, he howled wordlessly. His eyes bored into the night-vision monitor,

searching for some sign of Krishna. Why wouldn't she come back? After all the training, the cooperation, why choose betrayal now?

Madras banked the Air Force sharply, a low-altitude turn to withdraw. The tension thickened with every passing second.

"We've got incoming!" Joe announced suddenly, spotting enemy man-machines and their ground support closing in. If cornered, he'd bomb them himself if it came to that.

"Krishna, if it's come to this, I'll finish you off myself," he whispered, guiding the camera toward the ground. But the darkness revealed nothing, and the Air Force streaked onward through the gloom.

### 3

Saes and Rey skimmed their units dangerously low, scraping rooftops of ruined city structures. Through their night-vision monitors, they caught the faint glow of tail nozzles. Their leader, Messer Mett, wasn't here, and that only sharpened their determination.

"Tch!"

Saes clicked his tongue, hurling sand barrels into the air ahead, their glittering payload drifting like malicious fireflies. Rey plunged forward, weaving into that corridor of missiles, as Saes swung low. If the enemy detected trap, they would surely veer off to one side or the other. Whichever way they chose, the pair planned to ambush them. It was a risky game of cat and mouse.

But their strategy was more than just routine. They knew that their opponents, like Ul and Keran, were streetwise fighters, prone to feints and misdirection.

As if on cue, two of the three enemy machines retreated upward when confronted with the sand barrels. Rey lunged at that opening, slipping beneath one enemy unit and cutting it down with a swift burst from her Vulcan cannon.

A violent flash, a savage jolt, and the crippled enemy vanished into the night like a comet extinguished mid-flight.

"Heh!" Rey smirked. But her Vulcan's muzzle flash had given away her position to the remaining enemies. Anticipating their return fire, she twisted her machine in a fluid arc, prepared for the counterstrike.

As the second enemy unit unleashed a flurry of missiles, Rey dodged them deftly, pushing into a close-quarters melee. In that fleeting interval...

"Ugh!"

Saes gasped, recognizing the foe before him as none other than Ul's Bromb Texter. They locked horns barely twenty meters above ground, dodging looming towers and collapsed spires. One high rise could end them both if they slipped.

Their Vulcans barked once, bright and deadly. Then they whirled to face each other again, weapons flaring in the darkness.

"Damn!" Saes's nerves prickled. Every move felt razor-thin. Shield rattling from air resistance, Saes unleashed another volley of missiles.

He cursed himself the moment he fired. Ul's unit did not loose any missiles under these conditions. By firing first, Saes had simply announced his position. Ul's machine was already closing in.

"So that's how it is!" Saes growled.

He braced his beam rifle at hip level and opened fire, simultaneously brandishing a beam saber. Ul's unit lunged from the flank like a predator closing on wounded prey. Saes tried a desperate maneuver, firing the rifle, slashing the saber, but Ul's beam met Saes's in a blinding, seething vortex of luminous particles.

"What the hell—!"

Saes screamed, panic shredding his calm. He fired wildly, but the interference between the beams turned the cockpit displays into a searing hell of white light.

"Damn it all!"

In that radiant chaos, Saes glimpsed the Bromb Texter's feral visage, looming through the swirl of energy. Its face seemed to grin cruelly, as if congratulating Saes on his valor.

"You bastard!"

His last cry never fully formed.

Ul's blade cut deep, dissolving cockpit and chassis into molten slag. Half the Dochadi's forward section melted away, its broken remains tumbling silently into Liège's outskirts, swallowed by the night.

More slicing beams scorched the air, hissing like heavy rain on a tin roof.

"Reinforcements?!"

Ul's machine spun gracefully through that barrage, evading as if dancing in mid-air.

The one who'd unleashed that volley to challenge Ul's combat zone was not Rey, it was Keran Mead.

"Hmph!"

Even as he twisted nimbly, Ul recognized this new foe as the same one he'd encountered earlier. He minimized the Bromb's output, using its shield like an air-brake to decelerate, intending to let the enemy's dive overshoot.

But the enemy also slowed, descending smoothly without being tricked. UI's tongue clicked with admiration.

"So that's the kind of enemy you are!"

In that fleeting moment, UI spotted Gamian's machine locked in a saber duel with another enemy.

"They're evenly matched..."

Pausing a second, UI kicked off a nearby building and spread another wave of sand barrels into the forward airspace. Keran's unit drifted sideways at low altitude, as if prepared for a grappling match rather than an aerial chase.

"A pilot who knows he can't win in aerial combat," UI mused coolly. If that was so, UI had no intention of falling into the trap.

"He must've run out of heavy weapons by now."

UI thought not of the enemy before him, but of the one Gamian faced. Since Gamian was holding on, UI decided he could expend all the Bromb's firepower to take down Keran here and now.

"Alright!!"

He almost licked his lips at the prospect.

He released missiles in three distinct waves to confuse Keran, forcing the enemy into multiple evasions.

"There!"

UI deployed the funnels, remote weapons guided by his own neural impulses.

They mirrored UI's intent precisely, weaving through every dodge Keran attempted.

"Ugh!!"

For Keran, who prided himself on being a career pilot, both his confidence and caution crumbled under the crushing weight of UI's arrogant yet laser-focused will. A white flare enveloped his cockpit, but just before that annihilating brilliance, he felt a hopeless dread, as if he had always known it would come to this. There was no escape from these streaks of light.

"Damn it all..."

This was the decisive moment where machine performance overshadowed human skill. No matter how Keran tried, human ingenuity could not prevail here. As his consciousness went white, he recalled no past life memories. He simply ceased to be.

Funnels typically strained a pilot's mental energy, limiting their use to once per battle. But UI's logical, deliberate style of attack allowed him to wield them coolly and effectively, without mental fatigue.

"Hmph!"

UI let out a derisive snort.

Keran's consciousness and body vaporized without even registering the pain or awareness of destruction, even more swiftly than Saes had.

Keran's unit exploded, its fusion reactor's detonation erasing a significant portion of Liège's ruins.

The night blazed as bright as noon, carving a ribbon of fire across the wounded European landscape.

## 4

"They got him?!"

Madras, Michel, and Joe groaned as Kerran's transmission dissolved into static. High above the city, a colossal corona of superheated energy flared into being.

"We'd just finished repairing that unit!"

Michel's voice cracked, half sob, half fury.

"What the hell is Affranchi doing?!"

Joe shouted, rage and grief warring in his heart.

"Enemy, below and to the left!"

Madras barked, cutting off Joe's lament. He had spotted the Bushing Nugg escaping the ruined city, skimming close to the ground like a predatory beetle scuttling away.

"What?!"

Joe's hands clenched reflexively around the trigger. Yes, something was there, a hulking, half-tank half-craft, probably their ground support. In this lawless European frontier, nothing was surprising. There was no room for doubt or mercy now.

Before the Air Force's belly hatch could fully open, Joe loosed missiles at the fleeing shape.

"Take that!" he roared, forgetting Krishna might be inside.

The Air Force twisted violently, trying to dodge man-machine attacks and incoming artillery from the Bushing Nugg. Joe's aim was cruelly precise. A direct hit seemed inevitable.

But at the last instant, the missile detonated meters above the Bushing Nugg. The shockwave hammered down, churning the wilderness around it rather than shredding its hull.

With a thunderous crash, the Bushing Nugg lurched violently but sustained no direct hit, pressing onward.

Inside, Krishna screamed. "A-are we okay?!?" She clutched her console, heart galloping.

"That should have been a direct hit, but the barrier activated!" Gerant's pale face gleamed, half in terror, half in exhilaration.

"Amazing! A barrier! It detonated right above us, right?!"

Konstan cheered, equally awed. Neither had ever experienced such a phenomenon.

"Incredible..."

Gerant spun toward Krishna. "They tried to kill you too, y'know! Don't hesitate! Take 'em out!"

"Wh-what?! What?!"

Krishna's eyes darted over the controls. The Air Force's thermal signature blinked on her Vulcan cannon's targeting panel, Minovsky distortions flickering across the screen. In a haze of dread and shock, she squeezed the trigger.

A monstrous rattling flood of artillery fire surged forth. Krishna's mind froze, horrified by her own action. The Air Force, once her ally, now coughed flames from its rear. She slammed her eyes shut.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" She cried soundlessly, tears gathering but unshed, voice locked in her throat.

"Gamian! If you can hear this, withdraw! The enemy bomber's down!"

Konstan called out.

Just then, UI's voice cut clearly through the Minovsky static.

"Bushing Nugg! Confirm the bomber kill and hold position. Gamian, regroup with me!"

"I... I've become a cog in UI's war machine," Krishna realized. The thought weighed on her chest, heavy and suffocating, an undeniable truth settling like molten lead inside her.

## 5

UI surged toward Gamian's unit, which remained entangled with Rey's man-machine. But Rey noticed UI first. She was hardened by real combat experience, after all.

"Dammit!"

Rey attempted to break away, which opened a window for Gamian to target her more easily.

"Don't shoot her down! Take the pilot prisoner," UI's voice lashed Gamian's ears, crisp even through the muffled comms.

"UI?"

Gamian gasped, momentarily startled. In that split-second, UI's Bromb Texter fired a scorching beam. It tore into Rey's machine,

slicing from hip armor to shoulder plating, leaving twisted metal and scorched circuitry in its wake.

"Ugh!" Rey jolted violently as the impact rattled her cockpit. Fear and despair swelled in her throat. "Guess I'm coming to see you, Reyzam!" she cried, half delirious, trying desperately to eject the cockpit core. The explosive bolts fired, but the core refused to separate from the chassis.

"Saes!"

She screamed into the darkness, knowing there'd be no answer. Blackness encroached on her vision as the battered machine plunged into the woodland that had reclaimed the outskirts. The main engine roared one last time as it burrowed further into the earth, then fell silent.

"Damn it..."

Now just a trapped core module, Rey's display was reduced to a single forward view. Half her monitor showed only ground and grass. The emergency lamp glowed faintly, painting the cramped cockpit in dim red light. She hit the hatch release button.

With a dull, muted thud, the charges blew. The hatch should have blasted free, but it didn't budge. The core rocked once and then stopped.

"It won't open!!!"

At the same time, Air Force 1, flaming from a beam strike, sank helplessly into the distant forest's edge. The craft slowed but couldn't recover to full flight. The bridge shuddered with failing systems.

"We can't give up over something like this! Affranchi! What are you doing?! We've lost both Keran and Saes!" Madras's voice was tight with grief and anger. Joe tasted panic as he watched systems die. All they could do now was escape the burning craft and try to survive on foot.

"I cut the main engine! It shouldn't blow," Michel yelled, trying to reassure them. Nuclear fusion engines rarely exploded unless the beam hit them directly or overheated their internals.

Joe hefted a machine gun. He couldn't stay here. He leapt from the bridge's open hatch into the cool night air, landing roughly in the dark forest below. If he survived this, he would find Krishna and learn her reasons. If she truly meant to abandon them, he would do the unthinkable. That grim resolve settled over him like a funereal shroud as he vanished into the shadows, the hiss of distant flames and machinery lingering in his ears.

# 1

"Could that be them?"

Fares de Minne narrowed her eyes at the craft slicing down through the darkness. She guessed that Madras and the others must be aboard that descending Air Force. Before UI Urian's MHA crew had reached the Loubant Inn, there'd been no reports of any aerial vehicles. That meant UI's team must have entered Liège using some rumored ground-support machine, and thus the crashing air unit was likely Madras's.

"Jacob!"

"It's going to be bumpy! Don't bite your tongue!"

Their antique replica jeep, lit only by a combat-ready red lamp, rushed headlong through the forest with scarcely any visibility. Yet Jacob Verhaeren, hands steady on the wheel, didn't ease off the accelerator.

The Air Force, seen earlier spitting fire, had now dimmed its flames and vanished beyond the woods.

"Not going to explode?" asked Fares.

"If it does, at this distance we'll be instantly swallowed by a sea of flame," she answered herself, voice grimly calm.

A damped rumble rolled through the forest, muffled by the wall of trees, making the darkness shudder around them.

"We're fine," Fares said softly.

When their jeep burst out of the forest, they saw the Air Force, half its wings gone, plunged nose-first into the opposite tree line. Fuel and oil still burned faintly along parts of its frame, outlining its silhouette in dim, flickering light.

Jacob swung the jeep around to the aircraft's prow.

"Madras! Madras Karia!"

Fares called out.

"Madam!"



Jacob attempted to hush her, he used the same address he did at the Louvian, but Fares shook off his arm and shouted again, "Madras!"

The sharp crack of a gunshot rang out, its echo quickly fading into the night.

"We're not enemies! The Louvian has set up shop right here!" Fares shouted over the fading echo.

"For real?! Fares de Minne, is that you?"

Madras's voice came from somewhere in the darkness.

"Oh... how could you mistake this voice of mine?!"

Fares imagined Madras must be rather more scatterbrained than he looked. She jumped off the slowly moving jeep.

"Over here! The Air Force's burning engine sounds are echoing like crazy. Sorry if I startled you. Are you all right?"

Like ghosts drifting through quivering shadows, Madras, Joe, and Michel emerged. Their faces were drawn and haggard, almost spectral. Fares couldn't help but smile wryly at their haunted appearance.

"I never thought you'd have such impeccable timing," she said.

"Aah... you're too kind," Madras replied and reached out his hand. Fares gripped it firmly.

"Glad to see you alive. You..."

"It was the worst kind of battle... We shouldn't stay here. It's dangerous," Madras said, leaning into Fares's support as they headed for the jeep.

"Those MHA manmachines, right? Not all destroyed, it seems."

"Hmm..."

Madras accepted Fares's help in silence and shuffled toward the jeep.

"Captain?"

Michel started to say something, but then noticed Joe standing transfixed, staring at the burning Air Force. He tugged on Joe's arm.

"Let go. I can walk," Joe muttered dully, listlessly shaking off Michel's arm, dragging a machine gun as he moved forward.

"It's 'cause you were late this happened... We couldn't find Krishna after that..."

Joe's muttering accused Affranchi for not arriving sooner. Michel, glancing at the jeep's red lamp that gleamed like a demon's eye, refused to let go of Joe's arm.

Affranchi Char, who had advanced into a nearby airspace to support Madras's team, had arrived just moments too late to save Saes and Keran. Calling it ironic fate would be too poetic. In truth, it was just how these accumulations of bad timing piled up.

## 2

"Captain Carço! We might take sniper fire, gain altitude and keep moving!"

"Char?! What are you going to do?"

"I'll scout the ground. Stand by at the next rendezvous point."

"That's reckless, Char!"

Ignoring Rodriguez Carço's protest, Affranchi peeled his Gaia Gear away from Air Force 2's back and plunged rapidly downward.

With the deep roar of thrust, the Gaia Gear moved freely now. Affranchi overlaid the coordinates of the explosion he saw minutes ago onto a computer-generated map, then matched it against real topography captured by the cameras. He also had the computer calculate his thrust and directional variations to pinpoint his position. Without radar under Minovsky interference, this method had inherent errors, the atmosphere caused deviations. Bridging that gap required good cameras and a pilot's intuition.

"So Madras's team fell without achieving anything..."

Seeing Liège's battle-scarred streets, Affranchi could only conclude that.

"But it can't have been that long..."

A late-rising moon hovered near the horizon, he sensed he'd only be making himself a target for enemies likely lurking below.

"No... wait...!"

He circled Liège twice, straining to parse faint rescue signals amid the Minovsky static.

"Rey's machine?!"

He couldn't pinpoint the exact source, but a feeling washed over him. He sensed a hostile presence, thick and dark, lurking down below.

"Ul... is that you?"

He muttered to himself. The feeling wasn't clear enough to be sure. It was more like "Something hostile is definitely out there."

If he was right, the enemy must have locked sights on the Gaia Gear, which had approached from above. Affranchi hesitated. Another gritty sensation gnawed at him. Something else muddled his perceptions, a second presence. He chose to ignore that vague interference, he needed to confirm what sort of enemy had given Madras's team such a hard time.

If sending Madras's team ahead had led to disaster, that was Affranchi's error in judgment. He felt he must take responsibility by investigating personally. This was a kind-hearted decision but weak for a commander. Ever since declaring his position aboard Mother Metatron, Affranchi should not have been piloting the Gaia Gear. But because he was so well-suited to its psycommu system, the brainwave amplification device installed in the suit, he could never abandon it.

Affranchi's fascination with the Gaia Gear outweighed his interest in building an effective organization. As a result, here he was, risking himself to save just one pilot, Rey, and forgetting the larger strategic picture.

By doing so, at this moment, Affranchi decisively rejected returning to space. He stepped into the trivial, emotional world on Earth, abandoning the role of "Supreme Commander" waiting in Metatron's orbit. Whether right or wrong, no one could say now. But this was simply the kind of young man Affranchi was.

The treetops glimmered faintly in the moonlight.

"Over there?"

Affranchi found it strange that the enemy waited in that spot. For an ambush, it seemed too clever, too well-informed of his movements.

"No... that can't be it," he decided instinctively.

He aimed his beam rifle in the direction he sensed the foe and fired once.

In a flash, a muffled beam discharge tore into the darkness.

The enemy he expected didn't move.

Affranchi sharply cut speed, letting the Gaia Gear drift as if hesitating.

"Will they take this bait?"

He allowed the Gaia Gear to fall freely, making himself a prime target for a sniper.

A late warning signal chattered in his ears. His own intuition outpaced the computer's slow analysis.

"A normal foe, then," Affranchi murmured sadly. Before the computer finished its warning, he fired another beam shot.

A deep, heavy blast.

He destroyed a man-machine piloted by an ordinary pilot, watching it break apart and crash.

Affranchi placed that falling wreck between himself and the enemy he'd first sensed. Lowering altitude to the treetops, he hovered among the young trees, half-concealing the Gaia Gear's frame. He

regretted crushing the newly grown forest, but he couldn't afford to hesitate.

"Yes... it's UI," He realized more clearly now. The hostile aura became sharper in his mind.

Several searing beams sliced through the night, vaporizing treetops into airborne splinters and illuminating the forest's canopy. The shots were precise. But the Gaia Gear had already zigzagged out of harm's way, reacting as soon as Affranchi sensed the will to fire.

"So..."

He couldn't understand the enemy's next intent. A black shape lunged at him, some new tactic?

"Confusion?!"

Affranchi comprehended that the enemy's mindset had shifted into a chaotic malice he couldn't easily predict. It startled him, his purity couldn't imagine such malice.

"A core!?"

The object leaping into the air was a cockpit core, the Dochadi's cockpit module.

At that instant, Affranchi grasped everything that had happened on this battlefield. There was a pilot inside that core, he could sense it.

"Damn it."

He clicked his tongue in anger. UI was using the enemy's own wounded ally as a shield.

The Gaia Gear's shoulder-mounted bomber bots unleashed a horizontal volley, intercepting missiles that tried to exploit the cockpit core's drop trajectory.

The blasts churned the air with the sounds of violent explosions and light.

"Keh!"

Affranchi accelerated. Fully aware he was stepping into the enemy's trap, he reached out with the Gaia Gear's left hand and caught the cockpit core. He cradled it without letting down his guard.

"...?!"

But the hostile presence receded. Affranchi glimpsed a flash of retreating thrusters skimming over treetops. The beam rifle's effective range was too short at ground level this dense atmosphere to snipe the escaping foe.

"So fast?!"

The last enemy delivered a single strike, realized it failed, and retreated. Such cleanliness of action. After gauging Affranchi's capabilities in a single exchange, the enemy used the cockpit core as a shield to escape, just as he had used the falling enemy unit as cover.

A foe who could instantly gauge an opponent's strength and leave without hesitation belonged to an excellent combat pilot. Such enemies always return more terrifying than before.

"Ul... Even with improved machine performance, he himself has grown..." Affranchi noted, imprinting that reality in his mind as he lowered the cockpit core to the ground.

With a heavy thud, the core settled into the Earth, And he used the Gaia Gear's manipulator to force the hatch open.

### 3

"Rey! Can you hear me?"

Peering inside the cockpit core, Affranchi called out. Rey groaned faintly, unable to move. He swept a flashlight beam over her pilot suit and found no external wounds.

"I can't treat you properly until we get to the rendezvous point. I'll have to transport you like this, okay?"

Rey nodded weakly and murmured something.

"Huh?"

"Saes and Keran... they're both gone..."

It sounded like that. Exactly the losses Affranchi had feared.

Yet hearing directly about their deaths in battle still came as a shock.

"I'm sorry... I was tied up by requests from Mother Metatron and couldn't move quickly enough," Affranchi began, then stiffened at the sound of an engine approaching. He drew his pistol, heart pounding. With his mind shaken, he couldn't read "the aura" of whoever approached, so he stood guarding the cockpit hatch with gun raised. Tensing with self-reproach, for frontline pilots like Rey, this was all he could do now: protect her physically.

"Affranchi! It's Madras!"

The voice carried over the engine hum. Relieved, Affranchi understood that Madras's unit had survived, at least some of them, to come find him.

"Madras and the others are here," he said to Rey, switching on his flashlight and waving it up and down.

The jeep driven by Jacob emerged between the trees. Affranchi saw Michel and Joe, and felt some relief that at least the crew was alive in this bleak situation.

"You're alive!" Affranchi cried, hurrying toward the jeep while glancing back at Rey. "I'm sorry. Really sorry. Rey's in that cockpit

core. I want to move to a point where we can meet Air Force 2 and figure out our next step."

As Affranchi embraced Madras and shook his hand, he continued, "...But Keran and Saes..."

"Rey told me," Affranchi said. "Michel, Joe, I'm sorry I was late."

He squeezed their hands and bowed his head.

"Rey's alive?!"

Michel and Madras ran to the cockpit core, calling out to her.

"That pilot's inside there?"

The woman in the jeep's passenger seat asked Affranchi.

"Yes, severe bruises only, I think. I'm worried about fractures."

"Jacob."

"Right."

Before Affranchi could say more, the woman tapped the shoulder of the thin man at the wheel. He hopped down and hurried to check Rey. She followed, ignoring Affranchi entirely.

Affranchi felt oddly dismissed. Before the fight, he'd sensed hesitation, and now that feeling of uncertainty returned in full force.

"Hey, let him examine you," the woman said to Michel, who started to protest at Jacob's approach.

"Jacob knows orthopedics. Let him have a look."

"Oh, really? Then thanks," Michel replied, accepting Jacob's examination.

Affranchi glanced at Joe, huddled in the jeep's rear seat with a machine gun.

"You hurt?" he asked.

"Huh? No. I'm fine," he answered, showing a flash of white teeth that seemed strangely drained.

"That's Affranchi?"

Hearing Fares's voice, Affranchi turned toward the core.

"Yes, that's him."

From her tone, Affranchi grasped how faint an impression he made. It stung his pride.

"They're the resistance who hid in Liège. We've helped each other out," Madras introduced them.

"I see... My people owe you. I'm sorry."

"Fares de Minne... So, the MHA moved in fast. This battle was quite something, but somehow..."

Fares trailed off and Affranchi understood her implication. He shook her hand formally.

"As you suspected, Metatron isn't functioning smoothly. And now Affranchi's unit has lost its precious Air Force and man-machines, and pilots. We've never suffered such devastating losses."

"Hmm, tough luck," Fares said dryly.

"Yeah... So, how is she?"

Affranchi looked toward Jacob as he emerged from the cockpit core.

"She's badly bruised, no broken bones. I put on a poultice, but she shouldn't move much. We need a proper facility to re-examine her."

Jacob, apparently skilled in both martial arts and orthopedics, had done a thorough job.

"Thank you," Affranchi said. After introducing himself to Jacob, Affranchi told Madras and the others where to meet Air Force 2.

"I'll carry the cockpit core with Rey. You follow in the jeep."

"At that place, it won't take more than thirty minutes. We'll be right there," said Jacob, who knew the terrain.

"Thanks. Unfortunately, man-machines aren't convenient for carrying injured people," Affranchi said, feeling the combat unit's awkward limitations. He placed a foot on the wire ladder.

"Madras," he whispered as Madras came closer.

"Yeah?"

"What's with Joe?" Affranchi asked softly, glancing at Joe who still sat in the jeep.

"I hate to tell you, but... the MHA's ground support machine we fought... Krishna might have been with them... We even heard her voice. She might've shot us down," Madras reported.

Affranchi, gripping the wire, nearly stumbled. He steadied himself and looked into Madras's eyes.

"Hard to believe, right? But the enemy told us over the radio. We heard her voice. She might have been the one who downed us."

"Krishna... with MHA?"

Affranchi instinctively felt it could be true, though logically he rejected it.

"I see..."

"You believe it?" Madras asked doubtfully.

"It must be true if you and Joe both heard it... Then I have no choice but to accept it. It's all the commander's fault."

Affranchi groaned, pressed the switch, and rose up to the Gaia Gear's cockpit.

"So my indecision led to this," he murmured, recognizing a painful clarity: insight without foresight, a vulnerability in himself.

## 4

Affranchi and the Gaia Gear arrived at the rendezvous point with Rodriguez's Air Force 2's first.

"Don't wake her unnecessarily. Let her sleep as long as she can, it eases the pain of bruises," Affranchi said. He left the cockpit core intact on the ground and set up a nighttime tent while waiting for the jeep. The Air Force deck had sleeping space, but ever since descending to Earth, Affranchi's unit often chose to sleep on solid ground whenever possible. It happened naturally.

Sitting on a camp bed under the tent, Affranchi sipped coffee from a brass mug.

"Krishna interfered, did she..."

Madras's report had shocked him, the warm coffee in its brass cup made him reflect anew on the sensations he'd experienced in tonight's battle.

What particularly bothered him was the second sensation after initially detecting the enemy in the forest.

"Everything I felt above Liège was real... I'm certain of that... But that strange sensation of interference before combat was human malice... no, hatred... that kind of thing..."

When the word 'hatred' occurred to him, Affranchi could identify the source of that will.

Above all, recognizing it as coming from someone he knew made that sensed impression terribly sad.

"That interfering sensation was Krishna's..."

Once you know someone's presence, it can't be erased.

He didn't want to believe it, but he couldn't deny it. The knowledge only forced Affranchi to confront his own position.

"I push people away... Those who admire me, I fail to recognize, and end up driving them off..."

Perhaps a shallow thought, but it rang true enough to him. He lay back on the camp bed, staring into the darkness beneath the tent. The chill night air on his feet kept him painfully awake.

"You picked a good spot," said Fares de Minne after stepping down from the jeep.

A pair of low hills ran east-west, open fields spread north-south, and a thin line of forest concealed the Air Force and provided windbreaks. It was a comfortable campsite.

"Jacob, treat Rey and the others," Fares said.

"On it."



After being introduced to Rodriguez Caroço's team, Jacob took Rey to a tent and started treating her bruises. Madras's team set up their own tent, and Joe disappeared inside it. Affranchi noticed none of this, his gaze fixed on the tent ceiling, waiting for sleep.

But Affranchi's thoughts drifted to Miranda Howe, whom he'd left aboard Mother Metatron.

"I need your help, Miranda... Things have come to that point..."

Meeting a woman like Fares made him yearn for Miranda's support. At least it wasn't Everly Key this time.

Footsteps approached.

"Caroço said to bring fire over here..."

Michel arrived with a portable gas stove and a pot. He halted at Affranchi's feet.

"No need... Go to Joe's tent instead. Best not to leave him alone, right?"

"Ah... yes, that's true..."

Michel understood Affranchi's mood. He answered lightly, but Affranchi knew Michel was trying to comfort him. Michel took the stove and pot back to their tent.

Affranchi sat up. Through the trees he saw the orange glow of a lantern and silhouettes shifting in its light. He waited, listening to the hiss of gas and the sound of a pot settling onto the stove. The everyday clatter and the aroma of vegetable soup felt impossibly unreal to him now.

Spooked by his own feelings, Affranchi grabbed his brass mug from the ground, trying to warm his hands on the remnants of coffee.

"She seems to have regained her senses," said Madras, stepping into the lantern's glow and coming near Affranchi.

"How's Joe?" Affranchi asked.

"Can't sleep. Time will fix that," Madras said, sitting down on a camp stool, pulling out a can of peanuts, and crunching them slowly. The crackle of peanuts sounded unbearably forlorn.

Affranchi stood suddenly. Rey, supported by Jacob and Fares, stumbled toward Affranchi's tent. He moved to meet her, gesturing for her to sit on his camp bed.

"Earlier I was too out of it to ask... So what do you think about tonight, Aff?" Rey asked, shrugging off Jacob's and Fares's helping hands and speaking in a low, hoarse voice.

Affranchi braced himself. "Aff" was what Rey's comrades called him. He had to face her squarely.

"It's all my responsibility. I'm not speaking abstractly. Ever since I fled Mother Metatron, unable to fully command it, hating the job of

'Supreme Commander,' I came down to Earth. Everything stems from that."

Rey's head drooped and she swayed. She didn't look like she was thinking deeply, just that her nerves were raw and frayed.

Affranchi felt a pang of sadness. He had driven a woman to this state. If Keran had a family, they too would be suffering similarly.

"...Then..." Rey's voice was low. She leaned back, then suddenly flung herself forward.

"You bastard!!"

Her fist slammed against Affranchi's cheek with a dull, fleshy whack!.

"Rey!"

Madras tried to intervene, and Michel rushed out of his tent, but Affranchi waved them off.

"It's fine!"

"Take that!" Rey snarled, swinging again, ignoring her own pain.

With sharp cracks and dull thuds, the sound of flesh striking flesh continued.

Affranchi took it silently. Everyone else watched without interfering. Jacob and Fares exchanged glances and disappeared into the tent where Michel had left the pot. Inside, Joe had propped himself up and stared wide-eyed at Rey and Affranchi.

"Organization is complicated," Fares murmured to Joe, sitting down by the pot.

"But that young fellow is supposedly Char, huh?" Jacob stirred the soup, eyeing Joe.

"That's how it is," Fares said, glaring at Jacob's wry grin.

"I admit Char has power, but it's personal. If he's a Newtype, that's even more so. Newtype abilities are individual, they can't be spread through an organization."

Fares wanted Jacob to explain more, but just then:

"Ugh... Uwaaa!"

A bestial sob tore through the darkness. Rey's voice.

"...Not only Reyzam, but Saes too... Both dead!" Rey moaned, collapsing against Affranchi. Her knees buckled.

"I'm sorry, Rey... Please, rest now. Nothing else will happen tonight. Just rest..."

"Ugh... Fuh..."

Rey, supported by Affranchi, sank down onto the camp bed. Madras and Michel stepped away and returned to the soup tent. Joe crawled back into his sleeping bag. The pot's steam rose silently between Fares, Jacob, Madras, and Michel.

"So what do you mean that the ability only focuses on the individual?" Fares asked Jacob.

"Ah, martial arts skill is personal. Even if there are secret techniques, rarely does a successor surpass the old master by much. Modern sports once broke records repeatedly, but that's because it was a technological race. When you hit the body's limit, records stagnate, just like in martial arts."

"So Newtype abilities are like martial arts, directed inward, personal?"

"A bit different, but yes. The point is that the method of becoming a Newtype can't be taught to others. It's an individual journey, not something an organization can distribute," Jacob explained.

Madras and Michel silently watched the pot's steam, absorbing these words. Meanwhile, Affranchi pulled a sheet over Rey on the camp bed, knelt beside her, and said something too quiet to catch.

"It's all right... Go back to the others," Rey's trembling voice drifted over. "I'll spend the night here with Saes..."

"Get some rest," Affranchi said, and it seemed he kissed her gently. Those by the pot sensed it, shoulders drawing closer. Fares glanced at Madras and flashed a quick white-toothed grin.

# 1

"Madras, do you remember that guy UI? From the very first time we met him, he called out to Krishna like they were old friends," Affranchi said after finishing a simple meal of vegetable soup and bread.

Michel had brought up Krishna again during dinner, and this was his response.

"Huh? Yes, I remember. A flashy dresser, a bit of a pretentious-looking fellow," Madras replied.

"So, you're just going to let things turn out however they will?!"

Michel complained, tossing his empty plate into the cooking pot in frustration.

"Yeah..." Affranchi's voice slipped into that drawn-out sound, as if tired. "We have no time to worry about such matters. I'm going to explain tomorrow's operation. Meet me on the bridge of Air Force 2."

Affranchi bent forward as he left their makeshift tent. He peeked into the one where Rey rested, then headed off toward the grove where Air Force 2 waited.

"He's in a hurry..."

Seeing Fares stand up, Madras murmured quietly.

"Isn't that good? Maybe he realized it's time. Didn't you figure this would happen?"

Fares began gathering up the dirty dishes, intending to clean up after the meal.

"You should listen in too, Fares. Come on."

"Is that allowed?"

"It's fine. Joe, call me if anything happens, all right?"

Madras called out to Joe, who remained curled in his sleeping bag. Then he took Fares along toward the Air Force.

"At Hamar, they had some back-and-forth with Mother Metatron, but it's too late now to start panicking. We still need to search for Keran and Saes's bodies, yet that doesn't even cross his mind."

"That's old news. Modern warfare is a dirty business. I'm sure he's realized that too," said Fares.

"Maybe..."

Madras's misgivings would soon be validated when he heard Affranchi's plan.

Inside Air Force 2's bridge, Rodriguez Caroço's pilots and mechanics had gathered, making it a bit cramped. After Affranchi finished explaining the mission, they all sighed, equal parts relief and dismay, causing the stuffy air to quiver.

"The main challenge after the missile attack will be uniting the second wave of man-machine forces," Affranchi concluded.

At this, Fares de Minne, a newcomer to their circle, raised her voice first.

"Missiles on Nouveau Paris?!"

"As a resistance member, does that bother you?"

Affranchi stood before a display centered on Nouveau Paris, printing out the map of where the second wave from Mother Metatron would descend.

"That's not the point. Carpet-bombing the MHA occupied zones with a mass of missiles is too reckless!"

Madras couldn't help but agree. It was indeed a brutal strategy.

"When was this decided?"

Michel's voice rose, indignant.

"After seeing tonight's results. Rodriguez, send code SS-42 by laser to Mother Metatron."

"Wait a second..."

Madras grabbed Affranchi's arm.

"Caroço, send the code," Affranchi said, not shaking off Madras's grip, understanding his feelings.

"Then our recon meant nothing? Keran and Saes died for nothing!"

With hollow cheeks and eyes that bore exhaustion, Madras looked utterly defeated.

"That's not true. It was meaningful. Without you, we wouldn't know how widely tanks like Ul's are deployed across the continent. At Hamar in Norway, we never got that intel."

"Metatron's main plan was to destroy MHA with manmachines, avoiding large-scale environmental damage!"

Michel pressed on.

"I don't want any more needless casualties. We've realized that if we don't settle this in one decisive stroke, we'll be the ones wiped out. Besides, Mother Metatron shows no sign of supplying the

reinforcements we initially expected. That leaves only this option, to force their cooperation through these means."

"So the old-timers in orbit betrayed you? Or was your plan too rash from the start?"

"Both," Affranchi said calmly. "That's why I apologized to Rey."

Affranchi glanced at Rodriguez and the console panel. The message was simple, coded. Transmission completed, Rodriguez now waited for Mother Metatron's reply.

"Large-scale missile strikes will ruin the vegetation that's slowly recovering in Europe," Fares pointed out.

"Reports from Totto show MHA already damaging forests. We discussed such tactics at Hamar with Kross-Hansen and got Admiral Azaria's approval."

"Mother Metatron's been observing from stationary orbit."

"Then they know we can't afford to wait."

Affranchi wanted to voice his fears about Mother Metatron's situation but held back. On the frontline, sharing personal speculations was taboo.

"We have a reply. Decoding now, give us a moment," Rodriguez said.

He then turned to Madras.

"Madras, Affranchi didn't mention it, but there's another reason."

Rodriguez's look asked permission; Affranchi nodded slightly as he moved toward the hatch.

"With the ionosphere improving, we can intercept transmissions from Asia at Hamar. Looks like Hong Kong MHA is on the move too."

"Hong Kong MHA!"

Everyone fell silent, speechless.

"They're approaching Europe's eastern gateway, so it's said. Just a small fleet..."

Rodriguez received a decoded memo, gave a grim smile, and stood.

"Air Force 3 will meet us as the vanguard of the second wave. The rest of the Air Forces and man-machines will descend into Europe after the missile barrage."

After reading it to everyone, he handed the paper to Affranchi.

"The old farts in space are getting it together. Messer and the others will deploy from Hamar. Tomorrow, we'll have simultaneous missile bombardment, encirclement, and second wave convergence. Get some rest; we have little time."

"Sir!"

Everyone on the bridge saluted. Affranchi smiled and descended the steps.

## 2

"Affranchi..."

Madras and Michel followed him outside. Fares also left, after bidding the Air Force 2 crew goodbye, and went after them.

"See? Just as I said," Fares commented from the foot of the rampas Madras held out his hand.

"We're stuck in an information vacuum. Anyone would be upset."

"But you should also use your imagination to consider what others are dealing with," she added with a slight smile. Then she walked over toward Affranchi, who stood as if waiting near Rey's tent. The dew-laden grass clung to her feet.

"Yes?"

"If your people are spread widely across Europe, I have a favor," Affranchi said.

"If possible," Fares answered.

"After the missile strike, Metatron's second-wave manmachines will drop around Nouveau Paris. Some will be shot down. We'd like you to help retrieve their pilots, to aid them. But before that, I need you to pull your people out of a 100-kilometer radius around Nouveau Paris."

He handed Fares a printed map.

"By when?"

"By dawn."

"Time?"

"I can't say exactly, but better finish by around 9 AM."

"That's too little time for such a tough job. And you want it done discreetly so MHA doesn't catch on, right?"

"Sorry. You guessed it."

"Then I need to move to somewhere with phone access immediately," Fares said.

"Please do. I don't want to involve allies I've just met as collateral damage."

"Thank you. Wish we'd met earlier."

Fares folded the map and tucked it into her pocket, winking at him.

"Hamar should send more accurate intel on the SS code. If you intercept it, you'll grasp our full plan."

"I see. I'll try," she replied. She seemed impressed by how different Affranchi was now compared to her first impression of him, he was decisive. A good woman knew how to recognize change.

"Fares..."

Madras, stunned, looked back and forth between Affranchi and Fares.

"You're good with that, Madras? I understand now that what's happening at Nouveau Paris is tactically inevitable. You don't want to just let them do as they please, do you?"

"Of course not," Madras muttered.

"Jacob! We're heading out!"

Fares shouted toward their tent, then turned to Affranchi with a nod and slipped an arm around Madras's waist as they headed to their jeep.

"Madras and Fares... So that's how it is?"

Affranchi asked Michel as he watched them walk away.

"Who knows? I sure don't," Michel answered.

"So Madras was waiting for a woman like that," Affranchi mused.

"You dislike her?"

"Just the opposite. She's smart, strong..."

He felt a sudden rush of emotion, as if seeing the shape of a man-and-woman relationship for the first time in a while. Embarrassed, he cut himself off and turned toward their tent.

Madras was always too dutiful, accepting his ideological stance easily but never comfortable with loving a woman who shared his organization. Now Affranchi saw a change.

The tent, sealed to keep out light, had grown muggy from even a single lantern's warmth. Joe lay curled on a camp bed, clutching his sleeping bag tight.

Seeing Joe's hunched form made Affranchi recall the adult aura Madras and Fares had exuded, and he felt his own vulnerability once again.

"Better sleep what little I can..."

Affranchi murmured to himself, unrolling his sleeping bag.

"What's that?"

Michel, bumping into him as they readied their bedding, asked.

"Nothing..."

Affranchi slipped inside his sleeping bag, glancing at Joe's restless form out the corner of his eye. Michel lay down between them.

"It's true. We lost Keran and Saes, and now the Air Force is gone," Michel said after a pause.

"Yes... Sometimes you have to take bold measures to break a stalemate," Affranchi replied, eyes closed. He wondered when Air Force 3 would arrive, hoping to catch a bit of rest before then.

"Madras didn't command poorly. MHA's ground-support tank was stronger than expected," Michel continued.



"I know. If I'd arrived one hour earlier, Madras's team wouldn't have been annihilated," said Affranchi.

"Then please tell him that. If you know it, let him know."

"Thanks for the advice," Affranchi answered. He already realized he must show more appreciation.

The jeep's engine noise faded into the distance. A little later, Madras returned to the tent.

"Sorry, Madras," Affranchi said softly. "Michel scolded me. He says I rely on you all too much and never show enough gratitude..."

"I didn't say it like that," Michel mumbled, half-asleep.

"Heh... what's this all of a sudden? Besides, you're still lying down."

Madras chuckled, setting up his sleeping bag before extinguishing the lantern and crawling in beside Affranchi.

Through the sleeping mat and bag, Affranchi felt the reassuring solidity of the earth beneath him. Even an hour's rest on this ground would restore him, he believed.

Madras shifted closer in the darkness.

"Hey... you didn't intentionally send Krishna to MHA, did you?" he asked quietly, using a tone reserved for just the two of them.

Affranchi, growing sleepy, tried to parse Madras's odd suspicion.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because your reaction was too indifferent," Madras said.

"If I were capable of such plots, I'd have crushed MHA more skillfully and worn the face of a true Metatron leader," Affranchi grunted, a bit more awake now.

"That's not really an answer."

"I said I could understand Krishna's actions, remember?"

"Oh... You mean as a woman?"

"Yes. Get some sleep now," Affranchi sighed.

"Right..."

Madras's sigh and breaths were swallowed by the darkness, as were Michel's and Joe's soft snores. The darkness felt heavier.

"What's her plan...?" Affranchi wondered.

Krishna's presence with UI might mirror Affranchi's own aimless journey that led him from the South Pacific island into space. He, too, had drifted without a clear goal before ending up heading an organization close to a military faction. Though his birth had a complicated background, perhaps they shared a certain purposelessness.

"If I was bound by fate as a clone of the historical figure Char Aznable, then my life on that South Pacific island was a shadow existence."

Aflanche began to feel the earth's pulse fully against his back.

"But just as I fled from island life, perhaps for Krishna, life with Metatron was the shadow existence she fled from... yet I long to return to my shadow part, the island..."

This led him to imagine that Krishna too might return to her shadow self.

"However, just because cloning is technically possible, I've come to understand that adults who believe in the Char Continuity Operation and anti-Federation movements are just beings bound by convention. Then I realize that my shadow existence - being raised by Gaba Suu and marrying Everly Key, was actually my entire truth..."

While this might seem like narrow thinking, isn't it more dangerous when people are bound by illusions created in the past?

Especially the habit of prejudice...

Isn't animal society fundamentally about protecting offspring born from male-female relationships? Shouldn't we be wary of everything else, even as attributes of wisdom?

Affranchi smiled bitterly. Yet here he was, shouldering an organization called Mother Metatron and confronting humanity's dire problems.

"It's inconvenient that I must solve these problems. And if it's done by some other personality inside me, then I wouldn't exist at all. I can't allow that. I'm Affranchi Char, Everly Key's husband..."

He pressed his back against the earth, feeling its grand pulse. Imagining Everly Key on the other side of the world, her heartbeat echoing through the ground's fabric, comforted him.

Then there was something.

Not a sound, but a sensation. Every cell in his back formed a thread connecting him to Earth, seeking Everly Key behind the globe.

"Everly!"

In that warm southern tide's blue, her brown form wavered.

Affranchi's entire being raced toward the pulse of that floating body.

The scent and radiance emitted by that young, taut flesh held within its depths a wave-like blood pulse, welcoming him.

He sensed it.

"Ah! Just being buried in Every would be perfect..."

However, his physiological cry remained covered by the massive shell of real-world entanglements, unable to reach the woman.

"I'm going back."

Suddenly, a crewman called out in the dark.

"Affranchi Char! Air Force 3 is here!"

### 3

Affranchi and his group revved up their electric bikes, their hearts racing with the engines' roar through the pre-dawn air. As the team halted, their lights stabbed the dimness.

"Seems heavy. Maybe they brought supplies," Michel yawned, rubbing his eyes.

"Headlights on!"

At Affranchi's order, several bike headlights cut slender beams across the barren ground. The eastern sky faintly glowed, outlining the horizon.

A single Air Force craft appeared. It should carry only three man-machines, yet from Michel's guess, it seemed more like a cargo-laden ship. The atmosphere hinted that Michel was right.

With a deep rumble, Air Force 3 skated just above the ground before settling at the rendezvous point.

"Reinforcements from Mother Metatron..."

Affranchi dismounted and felt the tremor of the hover nozzles through the earth. He disliked relying on that organization, but to finalize this battle, their support was vital. A smell he didn't want to inhale, of the organization, hung in the air.

With a thunderous roar, nozzles blasted rocks and dust. Once the landing gear anchored to the earth, Affranchi swung onto his bike and approached Air Force 3.

Its bay hatch opened. A single Dochadi rose up and hovered off, darkness hiding its movements. No deck lights, just shifting silhouettes. The Dochadi began camouflaging Air Force 3.

No bridge lights either; only the red glow of their bikes lit the ground below.

"Good work! Glad you made it safely!"

A sense of camaraderie among Air Force pilots seemed to energize Madras. He charged up the lowered ramp and leapt into the bridge.

"Michel, looks like just one man-machine. The rest must be supplies. Hurry and check," Affranchi ordered.

"On it!"

Michel dashed up the ramp. Mechanics from Air Force 2, who'd come by bike, crawled under the frame to check the landing gear, their flashlight beams dancing

Affranchi confirmed nothing suspicious and followed the others up.

"Here, these are the admiral's confirmations,"

Miranda Howe greeted him at the hatch, businesslike, extending a file.

"Hm... Thanks. They didn't give you a hard time, did they?"

Affranchi tried to sound detached. Miranda, holding a penlight over the file, helped him read.

"Different standpoints: space and Earth. Hard to explain," she said.

"This message is considerate of my position, but says nothing of what comes after this operation, despite Admiral Azariah's personal note..."

Affranchi felt Miranda's body heat close by and was glad, though he remained ice-calm in his mind.

"Yes..."

Miranda offered no reassurance, halting her words.

"If you know something, please tell me,"

"Nothing concrete. But the old admirals feel your presence gives Metatron a new cohesion. That's why they accepted a bombing plan now."

"So they're not wholeheartedly supporting it?"

"Exactly..."

Miranda slipped past Affranchi and went down the ramp, heading toward the craft's nose. He followed silently.

The mechanics had moved toward the tail nozzles, their flashlights no longer visible.

"Miranda..."

Affranchi lightly embraced her from the front, resting his face against her chest. He drew in her scent and warmth, her hand on his shoulder reassuring him.

"It's tough, isn't it?" she asked softly.

"Sure is. I never thought I'd see you at such an hour... I'm happy."

He spoke into her bosom. Then he raised his face, gently pressed his lips to hers.

"Okay?" Miranda teased. "It's not good news I have to share."

"Hmm, It might be the report I'm hoping for."

Affranchi said, flipping through the file. Miranda shone the penlight for him.

"Oh..."

Miranda reached for Affranchi's lips. "Sorry, I got lipstick on you." She wiped it off gently.

"It seems the old guard plan to offer Mother Metatron, this huge warship, to the Federation in exchange for amnesty. They'll let the anti-Federation charges slip and fold themselves into the government."

When she finished, Miranda's finger left his lips. Affranchi stood stunned, but not shocked.

"No proof, just whispers..."

"It aligns with what the admiral's note implies. So the grown-ups want to quit, huh?"

"That's adulthood, I guess. And I guess the original staff aged enough just waiting for Char Aznable's clone to regenerate," Miranda said.

"So my initial unease with Mother Metatron was justified," Affranchi murmured.

"Will you give up?"

"No. The missile barrage is set. MHA will move. The second wave will come. We can't run now."

He shrugged and slapped the file closed.

"Everything okay?"

From the ramp, Madras's voice called.

"Fine, we're done,"

"Great," Madras said, sounding pleased, perhaps thinking Affranchi and Miranda had a private moment.

That too was one layer of truth. Affranchi had no intention of telling Madras, a dedicated Metatron staffer, about Miranda's revelations.

## 4

Some time earlier.

"It's impossible that they only sent one reinforcement," crackled Captain Bijan Dargol's voice from the darkness, over a covert radio.

"Understood."

His voice was gloomy as a general in the shadows.

Krishna sat hunched at the anti-air gun seat in Bushing Nugg's bridge, listening to Ul's conversation.

"One last personal thought?" Ul said.

"Is it safe if we're overheard?"

"I don't believe they can break through our decoder."

"Speak."

Krishna perked her ears, forgetting her fatigue.

"I sense the enemy will use missiles."

"That's what you think... You know why I sent you there?" Dargol asked.

"Yes, sir! I've completed checking all interception missile bases."

"Then that's all."

Communication ended.

The Bushing Nugg raced full speed toward Nouveau Paris.

"Krishna, get to bed. That's an order."

"Yes..."

"Lieutenant Urian, please do the same."

"Ah, I'll take you up on that. The enemy's full-scale attack will come soon. Don't neglect radar surveillance," Ul warned the pilot Gerant Alsa, who was thrilled to return to Nouveau Paris, where his lover waited, and so full of energy.

Krishna went behind the bridge to the cramped bunk area, lying down on what looked like an old-style sleeping shelf.

"...?"

Ul dragged a folding chair into the narrow passage beside Krishna's bunk and sat down.

"This is MHA's special tonic. Good for nerves and the eyes," he said, offering a brass cup.

"If it keeps me awake, that's a problem."

"It's fine."

Krishna sipped, feeling oddly at ease despite Ul's forwardness.

"What's this about?" she asked.

"I just wanted to look at your face... Is that so wrong?"

It was a bold statement, but not unpleasant.

"Metatron would never attack Nouveau Paris with missiles. They hate large-scale environmental destruction. They planned a difficult man-machine fight to take down MHA."

"That was until yesterday. Metatron doesn't show its true colors to young members like you."

"But..."

Krishna, reminded that she never truly saw Metatron's depths, fell silent. She felt a sudden sense of betrayal.

"I get that you tried to like Metatron, but it's not so noble."

"Why?"

"Looking only at Captain Dargol's aim to establish an independent nation on Earth, MHA might seem to ignore Earth's natural regeneration. But that's not quite right. Humans always need an enemy to ensure humanity's eternal survival, to put pressure on the Federation government, complacent atop its democracy of common citizens."

"Creating evil to maintain tension?"

"Not evil. MHA only thinks about humanity's eternal survival in Earth's sphere. This goal should be fundamentally the same as Metatron's."

"But their methods differ,"

"Of course. I told you about that, didn't I? Metatron is an organization that's essentially a collection of common rabble's confusion, rigid at the top and immature below, no guiding aesthetic."

"Aesthetic? Organizational theory?" Krishna was baffled.

"Aesthetic, morality, call it what you will. As the organization grew, Metatron unconsciously became a mini Federation government, with rigid thinking and an immature body."

"That still doesn't connect to Metatron launching a missile attack on Nouveau Paris."

"When an organization becomes huge and starts making decisions based on coordinating various people's opinions to find the greatest common denominator, seeing last night's combat unit annihilation will make Metatron rush to settle things."

"Ah..."

"Consideration like wanting to avoid human casualties leads to such decisions."

"You're saying that's trivial judgment? Without aesthetics?"

"That's right."

UI gently rested his face on Krishna's chest and continued, "The issue is that with time, the former vanguard becomes conservative. Militarily, it's not wrong to strike MHA even at the cost of destroying Europe's recovering forests. But the moment that operation is implemented, Metatron will be branded as far-right extremist. Their leaders won't anticipate that, and they'll just blame each other."

"And MHA bringing Metatron down to Earth is forgivable?"

"Forgive or not, after winning, MHA will declare independence. No one can judge them."

Krishna had no immediate response to this. She too had sense that Metatron had the problems UI pointed out. The elderly at the organization's top had become full-time Metatron activists, naturally becoming conservative. Among Metatron's members were followers of the Principality of Zeon, who had plotted Space Colony independence in the early Space Colony era.

At the same time, there were followers of other ideologies and organizations.

Factions sprouting there and becoming a hotbed of conservatism was a typical organizational habit.

"But if MHA and Captain Dargol have aesthetics they believe in, why won't they tell the world about them?"

"Try doing that and see. All sorts of riffraff would gather at our new nation on Earth, making it a worthless state. The captain's vision of an Earth independent nation is one of highly selected elites. A group of people who can appreciate Wagner. Without selectivity, we'd repeat Federation and Metatron's history.

For the first time, UI directed a sharp gaze at Krishna as he rested both elbows on the bed.

"Then what about those forced laborers?"

"They're just construction and civil engineering drones. Once the work is done, they'll be sent to the gas chambers."

"What?!"

Krishna sat up, shocked by how casually UI mentioned something so terrible.

"We've entered an age where people must be selected. Metatron does the same thing."

"Metatron does?"

"Think about it. The dubious nature of Metatron's Char Operation has hints of white supremacy. Wagner is merely a metaphysical symbol in the form of music, but the Char Operation is blatant."

"I'm a woman with Asian blood. You can't say that."

"Organizations show superficial compromises during their growth process."

"That's... Are space colonies just dumping grounds for abandoned people?"

"At the start, yes. And in the future, it'll happen again."

Krishna thought of her slum-like colony, Helas, and realized the hopelessness of it all. Krishna had believed Metatron's activities were necessary for fundamental reform after seeing humans living in old-century conditions even in Space Colonies.

But now she was realizing that might be wrong.

Of course, she didn't believe everything in UI's logic. But there was some truth in his reasoning.

"...I really am caught between it all," Krishna muttered.

UI climbed into the upper bunk, leaving her alone with her confusion.

"It'll be dawn soon," he said from above.

"Yeah..." Krishna answered absently, wishing she could sleep.

She thought of Affranchi, who had Miranda Howe like a mother-figure by his side, and the scent of marriage hovering around him. That terrified Krishna. She tested Affranchi by revealing her alliance



with UI, unconsciously using the situation. The outcome no longer mattered, but it had forced her to fire on Madras and Joe, exacting a cruel price.

"Ugh... Uuuuh!"

Unbidden, tears ran down Krishna's cheeks as the Bushing Nugg rattled on. She wept herself into an uneasy sleep that lasted only a few hours.

For at that time, from geostationary orbit, Mother Metatron unleashed a concentrated missile barrage on the environs of Nouveau Paris.

"Missiles detected! All hands up!"

"Prepare anti-air combat!"

Shouts rang out. Krishna leapt from bed, forgetting her grief. She scrambled back to her gunner's seat.

Gerant cried out, "There! Look!"

Roughly ten kilometers out, dozens of white streaks lanced down silently from the dawn sky, descending vertically before leveling off and heading southwest, vanishing beyond the conifer forests.

"If we can observe this many here, how many missiles did Metatron use overall!?"

UI howled in dismay, realizing the interception bases he'd checked were far too sluggish to respond.

"If any of those are nuclear, Metatron's the enemy of mankind!"

He yelled, but inside Krishna's head, she fiercely denied that possibility.

# 1

The chain of explosions shook the earth to its very core. They gouged deep wounds into the soil, scorched forests to blackened skeletons, pulverized stone-built structures into gravel and dust, and transformed once-gentle farmlands into a barren wilderness.

If it is "natural" for the land to rebuff human interference, then one could almost say these hellish flames and scorching winds were a means to return the world to an ancient past. Indeed, for the Earth Federation government, who had been publicly denying the existence of cities like Nouveau Paris until the planet's ecology recovered, this catastrophe ironically restored the official narrative they had clung to. It was as though reality had been forced back into the box they had claimed was truth all along.

Captain Bijan Dargol's MHA faction had hoped to establish an independent Earth-based nation, precisely by making use of those unacknowledged towns as footholds. Compared to high-ranking Federation officials who sought to bend the laws in secret or exploit their privilege to gain exclusive rights to Earth's resettlement, MHA's ambitions were oddly transparent, easier even for an organization like Metatron to confront and manage.

Yet part of Europe's slowly regenerating forests had been incinerated, and though the region was sparsely populated, tens of thousands of scattered inhabitants, illicit settlers, all of them, vanished into the inferno. If these horrors had been unleashed by some cosmic decree, mankind and Earth alike would have to bow their heads before such a fate.

But this was no act of nature.

It was the fire wielded by the organization led by Affranchi Char.

Earth's sole stroke of luck was that Mother Metatron had refrained from using nuclear missiles. Metatron's network certainly had the capacity to procure them, considering nuclear power was still used for propelling small asteroids into Earth's sphere. But Affranchi and

Mother Metatron, acting with at least a sliver of decency, strove for "clean" strikes.

Meanwhile, MHA, desperate to build an independent Earth state, stuck to conventional missiles out of fear of radioactive contamination. This grim compromise spared the world a nuclear winter.

All the same, to prevent a stalemate, the bombing had been excessive. There were grave concerns that the aftermath might approach the conditions of a nuclear winter, minus only the radiation. The MHA flagship under Captain Bijan Dargol, the distinctly shaped MHA Gayjisu, managed to survive direct hits and close-proximity blasts by deploying its beam barrier, allowing it to gain altitude and escape immediate destruction.

Inside that ship, Captain Dargol cursed his own misjudgment. He could not ignore the bitter truth: if Ul Urian had not voiced his suspicions about a bombing early that morning, even he would not have made it aboard this ship in time.

"I was too slow calling in Kong Kong MHA..." Dargol bit his lip as if tasting defeat for the first time in his life. "Did I underestimate Metatron, treated them like some civic movement?"

In the violently trembling bridge, Lieutenant Simnau Abahn, one of the tactical aides, turned a pale face to him.

"We made such a naïve assumption?"

"No, sir... We knew what Mother Metatron was capable of. This level of bombardment was always within their means," came a voice from behind Abahn. It was Lieutenant Marissa Najis, her lips dry and cracked.

"Exactly. We were too full of ourselves to properly weigh the simulations," Dargol admitted with a touch of grim self-mockery. "We ignored the results more than once."

"Yes..." Abahn and Najis could feel genuine remorse coloring Dargol's words. The man they had thought aloof and imperious was now openly acknowledging his faults. This capacity to face his own failings hinted at a resilience that might just restore their fortunes. Najis liked that about him, this hidden, human side beneath the aloof facade.

"Estimate how many of our ships remain and how functional the ground-based interception missile sites were," Dargol ordered. "I need projections."

"Yes, sir." The two mid-level officers braced themselves, relaying orders to their subordinates, who struggled to run simulations as the ship continued to shake violently from side to side.

## 2

Rodriguez Caroço's Air Force 2 hovered at a distance, the blinding flashes of the bombing over Nouveau Paris still visible on the horizon. Buffeted by radio interference from the chain of explosions, the crew tried desperately to track enemy movements. Far below them, Affranchi's Gaia Gear was likewise holding its breath in the sky, lurking silent and watchful.

He did not believe this bombardment would annihilate the MHA leadership. His forces were spread along a northern defensive line, while Messer's unit fortified the western front. With this deployment, they planned to intercept any MHA ships attempting escape and then unite with the second wave descending from Mother Metatron. The eastern flank was left open, simply because Affranchi's forces lacked the strength for a full encirclement. After all, leaving an avenue of escape was an age-old tactic. Cornering a foe too completely often provokes a desperate last stand, handing your pursuers a nasty surprise. If some slipped through, they could be hunted down later.

"This is the best we can do..."

The recognition weighed heavily on him, how tragic that he, who never sought leadership, was now forced to display it. Even if people doubted his virtue and capacity, he had no defense. Miranda Howe's words from this morning still pressed on his heart.

"Maybe I made a mistake sending you out into space. Adding someone like you to Metatron did give the organization a new focus, but those old men just took it as confirmation that their movement was noble and valuable, without ever acknowledging what you really brought us."

They had spoken just before his sortie.

"Then I guess I was too hasty deciding to play along as Char's second coming if it made them happy," he replied.

"Maybe so... And maybe I'm the one who pushed you into that," Miranda had sighed.

Still, his survival until now had shown him that both Metatron and MHA had once contained sparks of human ingenuity, genuine virtues among their aims. That wasn't nothing. Yet having witnessed the ambiguity and half-measures of the anti-Federation sentiment festering in Europe, and the total defeat of Madras' unit, he could no longer stomach playing the role of a resurgent Char. As Ul had told Krishna, and as Fares had suggested, Affranchi now knew the true pain of combat. The comfortable hold of the colossal Mother

Metatron, where elderly leaders could indulge their strategic fantasies, offered them no sense of the brutal reality below.

Sometimes an organization forms a cage where inconvenient truths need not be acknowledged. Affranchi saw a path forward: if Metatron, as an organization, could perform some action that let it achieve self-contained fulfillment and then dissolve, he could finally return to Everly. He believed it would conclude naturally if they were allowed to complete this one last mission.

### 3

"All I get to do is wait...?" grumbled Rey, seated on the bridge of Rodriguez's Air Force 2 alongside Madras and others. She was annoyed that she remained cut off from Messer's unit she had hoped to join. Restlessness stole over her, reminiscent of the days she'd drifted as a street gang in the colony, isolated and hollow.

"Are we fine with the shift of the units that deployed from Hamar?" Madras asked Rodriguez, ignoring Rey's frustration.

"Messer's holding a western line near Paris, waiting for the drop units. He's good at this," said Rodriguez.

"Hmph." Rey shrugged her shoulders and snorted. She was in no mood to be impressed.

"Oh, Affranchi was upset he couldn't arrange a funeral for Keran and Saes," he added, hoping to soothe Rey's sour mood.

Madras glanced between Rodriguez and Rey, his mouth twisting into a wry shape. Joe's eyes, red and hollow, flicked open for a moment before he shut them again.

"Hey, I'm picking something up," said Michel, seated before Madras and glaring intently at the radar screen.

"It's the Gaia Gear!"

"The Gaia Gear!" Rodriguez's shout rang out.

Sure enough, the Gaia Gear's outline rose from below into view through the forward window of the Air Force craft. Affranchi's voice came over the comm line.

"I'm moving east. I sense enemy activity."

"Is that so? What about our allied units?" Rodriguez asked.

"They're dropping in. I can feel it," said Affranchi.

"Linking up won't be quick," Michel warned. His radar was only now distinguishing friendly signatures closing in from above.

"Man-Machines, prepare for launch!" Rodriguez ordered his three pilots. The Gaia Gear pushed forward, leading the way.

Rey watched Gaia Gear's imposing silhouette, thinking of the young pilot inside.

"Back when Affranchi told us to become man-machine pilots, he said we delinquents needed to find something worth doing just to keep living..." Back then, it felt like he was just riding a wave of Metatron's praise.

"So, what does Metatron do after crushing MHA, huh?" Rey jabbed her elbow into Madras's side.

"MHA's a secret police force. Wipe it out, cripple Dargol's plan to create an independent Earth nation," Madras recited the Metatron line.

"And after that?" Rey's irritation spiked.

"What, send all of humanity back into the colonies so we can preserve a more harmonious coexistence with nature? If that makes people in the lunar and Earth colonies get real about their responsibilities, maybe humanity will wise up," Madras explained.

"Huh. Aff said something else: even if humanity gets wiser, society's another beast," Rey retorted. Affranchi was called "Aff" by Messer's men as a slight jab.

"You mean the necessary evils of organizations?" Madras ventured.

"Exactly. Every group has a boss, and if the young guys get strong enough, they'll kick the old boss out and start another crew. The factional feuds never end. That's humans for you."

"That's why Metatron stuck to an elite core," Madras said.

"But when punks like us joined up, the unity broke down, right?" Rey pressed.

"No, it just meant the old guard finally became old guard in truth," Madras answered.

"Yeah, and now those old timers look at us like dirt, then shove us to the front lines where we die for their cause," Rey said, voice brimming with resentment.

"Affranchi doesn't see it like that," Madras snapped.

"How would I know that?" Rey scoffed.

"Affranchi's under enormous pressure. That's why he made this call," Madras said.

"Sure he is," Rey muttered, thinking that even if Madras and Affranchi were not alike, they were still on the same team after all. "Anyway, I hate that Messer's not here. It doesn't sit right with me."

"Messer's gotten stronger. That Totto guy has been a good influence," Rodriguez commented.

"Great, so that justifies Saes's death?!" Rey's voice cracked.

"Rey, quit it," Joe's voice rose gently, urging her to calm down.

"Right! Braus! Dekken, Harumel, get ready to launch! Opening the hatch!" Rodriguez's sudden command swept tension across the bridge. Air Force 2 decelerated, readying to launch the man-machines.

## 4

Even at full combat density of Minovsky particles, the Gaia Gear's psycommu system allowed Affranchi to sense enemies. To him, it felt like the faint sound of the cosmos calling, a subtle resonance rather than a tangible sight.

He detected about five enemy ships he believed to be MHA's. Threads of presence stretched out from these masses, the sign of approaching man-machines, surely.

The area scourged by the Metatron bombardment was enveloped in colossal mushrooming clouds. High above, the sky seemed empty, stripped even of the slightest trace of life. It felt like a hollow, a vacuum of silence.

As Affranchi perceived this "emptiness," he understood its significance.

"We should never do this. A world where not even a single bird can fly is death incarnate. To burn away every insect, every bacterium in the soil!"

The memory of the sea came back to him, how even the clearest ocean teemed with plankton and microbes that purified the water and nourished life. Drinking that seawater harmed no one because life's purity lies not in emptiness but in a subtle, living tapestry.

Because Affranchi could feel that truth, he was fundamentally different from Char Aznable, the so-called "son of space." Even with identical genetics, the southern islands that nurtured Affranchi had shaped him into something Char never was.

"If letting this happen was my recklessness, then MHA's dream of privatizing Earth for their own cause, and humanity's complicity, none of it's forgivable."

That thought stung him.

He ordered three of his man-machines, all Dochadi, to fan out about three kilometers to his left and right, forming a line behind the Gaia Gear.

"Incoming!" he warned.

The Gaia Gear surged ahead.

Before them stretched rolling hills once covered in forests. On the ridgeline, a black speck appeared, followed by a storm of tracer fire. The enemy was desperate to break through, whatever it took.

The four man-machines pulled up, evading the lethal barrage, but now they drifted into the zone where enemy units soared above, ready to engage.

"Gotta hold until Messer's southern support gets here..."

Affranchi's unit had to hold out. Otherwise, they'd be forced to fight a losing battle, or retreat. Their opponents numbered over twenty.

"Fall back!" Affranchi commanded. Leading the formation, the Gaia Gear took defensive maneuvers. The enemy had enough man-machines to overwhelm them, yet only left a single battle squadron to engage Affranchi's group while the other four ships maintained a tight low-altitude defensive formation.

In the aerial skirmish between four friendly and three hostile man-machines, Affranchi's side destroyed just one Gussa. He had been too focused on shielding his wingmen from casualties, guarding them from above rather than pursuing the retreating enemy vessels.

"Where are they headed!?"

Frustrated, Affranchi regrouped with Air Force 2, which had remained high overhead, awaiting the end of the skirmish.

## 5

Having reunited with Messer's unit guiding in the second man-machine wave, and now awaiting contact with Air Force 3, where Miranda had been dropped, Affranchi's group assembled in the ruins of Besançon, along the Doubs River in the old French region.

In ancient centuries, it must have been a tranquil town. Now, most wooden and plaster buildings lay crumbled, consumed by nature's slow reclamation. Only paved stones hinted at the old streets.

Affranchi and his people took over the remains of what had once been a stone-built hotel, turning the empty shell into makeshift quarters.

"From the number of intercepted missiles, it's clear they never got their entire missile defense network operational," said Madras, summarizing. "They had plenty of vehicles deployed on land, so they must have been setting up an interception net. But they couldn't finish the job."



"That they tried to move north into old German territory suggests they wanted to rebuild an arms industry base," Miranda Howe chimed in. "Since that plan failed, they'll probably try contacting Hong Kong MHA next to figure out a way to recoup their losses."

"Deep Europe is rugged mountain country, poor but with a rich historical tapestry. During the era of space migration, it was one of the most resistant regions to the move," she continued.

"All we can do is wait for intel from Fares and Kross-Hansen," Affranchi said, dismissing his staff. "Mother Metatron's reconnaissance will come in soon enough."

"Got that?" At the doorway without a door, Totto and Messer appeared, guided by Rey. Affranchi stood waiting.

"Hey, Aff," Messer growled.

"If hitting me makes you feel better, go ahead," Affranchi said, words deliberately rough. "If after that you want to leave Metatron, fine, but I won't lend you a man-machine."

Miranda looked uneasy. Totto raised a hand as if calming the waters. "Messer just wants at least a funeral for Saes."

Totto spoke gently, surprisingly so for a man forced down to Earth by MHA. Adversity had taught him compassion. But Messer remained unmoved.

"We fought and bled together. I'm not saying you killed my friend, but that's how it ended. I've seen it with Krishna too, seems like you treat people like pawns in an army. I can't abide that."

Affranchi lowered his gaze for a moment before replying, "I admit I lack the finesse. I want to wrap this up before Mother Metatron leaves geostationary orbit, so I've been pushing too hard. Sure, I like Krishna, but I can't deploy a whole man-machine unit just for one person. Messer, you understood that, didn't you?"

"I did then, and I appreciated it. But it still felt cold."

"That cuts both ways..." Affranchi suppressed a bitter smile. Messer had a point.

"What's your endgame?" Messer demanded. "Are you going to keep doing this until we're all dead?"

"If Mother Metatron disappears, I'll stop. They'll see they can't control me and give up. That's all I can do."

"See?" Totto said to Miranda and Rey, "He's not as tough as he looks. He's trapped."

"Joe ended up crying his eyes out, and Aff set that stage too," Rey said, voice edged with anger. "And we're supposed to just take it?"

"Too big a problem to solve with a punch," Messer spat.

"Yeah..." Affranchi looked up into Messer's tall stare.

"Bastard!" Messer snapped, and slapped Affranchi's cheek sharply before turning his back.

"So, got any winning strategies to crush MHA?" Totto asked.

"In the worst case, I'll bring down Mother Metatron itself," Affranchi said.

"Those stuck-up old men won't do that!" Rey sneered, splaying her mouth wide.

Affranchi had no rebuttal. He knew it was true.

"Without that, can you pull it off?" Totto pressed.

"If I'm prepared to die in the Gaia Gear..."

"Think you can?" Totto's eyes narrowed.

"I can," Affranchi answered firmly.

"Good. Then do it. If you're willing to go that far, Messer and I will die fighting at your side. Life or death, it's all the same in the end. Might as well make it count," Totto said, slapping Affranchi's shoulder roughly before throwing an arm over Messer's and turning away.

## Chapter.11

### Shadow in Back

# 1

Black rain was falling.

It wasn't just nuclear detonations, any massive explosion could conjure a storm. Now that downpour was splattering across the Bushing Nugg's hull and soon deluged it hard enough to wash off the grime. After leaving Nouveau Paris, UI Urian's Bushing Nugg advanced eastward by way of Paris, gathering up scattered ground troops along its route.

"Gerant, we'll follow this course," UI said, forwarding one of the plotted paths on his display to the one in front of Gerant, the pilot.

"Munchen?"

Gerant, who'd lost all hope of meeting his beloved after the bombing of Nouveau Paris, peered at UI with eyes that looked painfully weary.

"Yes. If Captain Dargol survived, that'll be the next rallying point," UI said.

"Yes, sir..." Gerant answered.

Rain battered the windshield even more relentlessly. Once upon a time, in the European theater, Munchen was primed to become MHA's fourth main base, and it was also the nearest site for linking up with the Hong Kong MHA fleet supposedly headed all the way to Istanbul.

UI himself intended to depart solo as soon as he got the Bromb Texter fully serviced. The displays offered no new incoming intel. UI glanced at Krishna, who was sitting behind him on the bridge, shoulders hunched, face lowered.

"Look, I get why you're shaken by your old friends' reckless attack. But that Affranchi is finally starting to grasp what war really is. If he's a man, that's something."

UI spoke as though genuinely pleased, causing Krishna to lift her face.

"Does seeing the color of fire make you happy?" she asked.

"That's not it. A weak opponent isn't worth beating, is all," UI replied.

Krishna stared at him, wondering if that was simply the way men thought. Before she could say more, UI went back to his display. Even the once-vague Affranchi Char had turned into someone capable of orchestrating such a devastating bombardment, war itself had, perhaps, forced his hand.

A wave of sorrow washed over her at the thought that war might transform people so drastically.

If that's true, then why can't humanity create a non-violent way out of conflict? Instead, all our energy goes into building armies and weapons...

Suddenly, UI shot to his feet.

He looked as though he'd made some firm decision. Without sparing Krishna another look, he yanked open the rear door of the bridge and stepped out onto the deck, where the man-machines were under repair. The expression on his face suggested that, to him, Krishna no longer existed.

"Haaaah..."

Any trace of warmth surrounding Krishna vanished in a flash, replaced by a biting chill. Rain still lashed at the Bushing Nugg.

"This is BN003. Good work," came Gerant's voice over the radio as he greeted someone else. Curious, Krishna leaned toward the side windows.

Another Bushing Nugg broke through the pounding rain from the rear right. The land outside was a lonely sprawl of forests and wasteland. Realizing that even this hulking metal transport carried living people, Krishna felt oddly comforted. It was certainly better than sharing space with someone whose chill left her feeling frozen inside.

She tugged her jacket's collar together and let out another heavy sigh.

"But now I'm an enemy to Joe and the others..." she murmured, closing her eyes.

The Bushing Nugg raced onward, riding its cushion of air.

## 2

It rained in Besançon as well.

Long ago, back in ancient times when Julius Caesar first subjugated it, this city had been a vital strategic point. Now its former grandeur

was lost beneath a sea of tangled undergrowth and saplings. Weeds had crept between every stone, and what remained of many old stone structures had been swallowed by the Doubs River.

On the outskirts, dilapidated wooden buildings poked up through thickets of grass. A few stray patches of paving hinted faintly at the old city layout, but in the rainy haze, what remained of Besançon had reverted into a nascent forest.

Affranchi and his forces had gathered at the overgrown remains of a small airfield several kilometers outside town. You could see tarps, colored to blend in with the trees, standing here and there, covering nearly twenty man-machines. Of the twenty-two man-machines that had dropped in tandem with the bombing of Nouveau Paris, not all had made it this far. Some were shot down by MHA missiles; others had failed during atmospheric entry.

The five Air Force transports that had descended in protective formation with those man-machines all carried supplies. After offloading their cargo at Besançon, three craft remained as support, while the other two returned to orbit. This scarcity of support staff and equipment was the Achilles' heel of Affranchi's unit: ideally, they needed three times as many to properly sustain their campaign.

Hence Affranchi's urgency to launch a swift pursuit. If MHA was given too much breathing room to rearm, his forces would be mired in a slog, or worse, annihilated, before they even realized it. They had no choice but to send the man-machines back out before adequate backup arrived.

Rain-slicked mechanics in ponchos zoomed around on electric bikes, rummaging through tall weeds for crucial parts, trying to get the machines combat-ready.

Affranchi had positioned Rodriguez's Air Force 2 and the Gaia Gear in a separate, even smaller airfield closer to the city. The remnants of a hotel stood in a nearby forest, where his comms team had set up shop.

Because the mountains stretching to the east and south blocked transmissions, they could only pick up MHA's movements in the west. In that sense, it was a poor choice for a rally point, no direct line on the enemy's eastern operations. But from another angle, it wasn't a bad place to lie low if MHA's main forces were converging to the east.

Earlier that morning, Affranchi's group had destroyed one Bushing Nugg and two of its man-machines.

The rain dripping off tree branches was falling as steadily as the rainfall overhead.

Leaping off his bike, Affranchi dashed into the abandoned hotel that now housed the communications team, peeling off his soaked raincoat along the way. The lobby was chillingly cold, even though it was supposedly spring. A few small heaters were grouped around the staff's feet, and stepping in from the cold made that sparse warmth feel almost luxurious.

"Take a look," Miranda said, handing Affranchi a slip of paper.

"Hm?! It lines up with Mother Metatron's intel and what we got from Hamar. No doubt about it. Where?"

"The southeastern Adriatic. We've got about a twenty-percent margin of error. If our intel net was more finely meshed, we could probably push it to ninety, but..."

Cessias Thegis, middle-aged, with typically bright eyes now dulled by worry, gestured to a display.

"Three man-machines are heading for Munich?"

"Almost certainly. Here's the predicted path."

The image wasn't a radar screen but a computer-generated map. It showed the faint signature moving across the Adriatic Sea and over the Alps.

"Incredible we got intel from beyond the Alps," Affranchi remarked. The suspected enemy signal glowed over the Adriatic, plotted on a course over the mountains.

"One of Fares' observers saw them, so I'd trust it. Three man-machines."

"And behind them is the Hong Kong MHA fleet?"

"Likely, yes. We need the eastern Mediterranean data to confirm, but we have to link up with Mother Metatron first."

Miranda brought him his pilot suit.

"When's that happen?"

"This afternoon. We'll pick up Mother's laser comm."

"All right. Then we'll take out that enemy signature. Messer can sortie, right?"

Affranchi accepted the pilot suit. A chill rippled through him as he stepped into a small side room off the lobby, unheated, but at least private enough to change in.

"Miranda, grab me some vitamins and cold meds," he shouted through the door, zipping the last fastener. The pilot suit would fend off the cold better than anything else, but it was far too valuable for everyday ground use.

After swallowing the medicine, he took the disk containing the detected enemy coordinates and hopped back onto his bike. Miranda climbed on behind him.

"You sure you're okay?" she asked, feeling his rain-dampened forehead, but Affranchi simply revved the electric bike, heading toward the Gaia Gear.

"Doesn't feel like you have a fever..."

Her arms looped around his waist, and he felt the soft weight of her body through his suit, a distinct, feminine presence pressed against his back.

It was more stifling than intimate, maybe the rain was putting him on edge, maybe he really was coming down with something. He wished he could enjoy the physical closeness, but couldn't summon the feeling.

They pulled to a stop beneath the Gaia Gear's broad wing, still in its flight mode, and he glanced over at her.

"You're welcome to blame me," he said quietly.

"Blame you for what?" she asked, though clearly she knew. She forced a faint smile, swallowing back the words she might have spoken.

"Krishna. Joe's still not himself."

Miranda let out a small sigh, lips twisting in a pained smile.

"To be honest, I regret what happened with her too."

"Thanks... for being kind," Affranchi said in relief, brushing his finger softly over the back of her hand before dismounting the bike.

"I'm not just saying it for you," Miranda replied.

"Oh?"

After taking a quick status file from one of the mechanics, Affranchi turned back to Miranda.

"I suppose not telling her that you already had a wife might've been mean of me, but it's not that simple. She's... well, the type to get carried away by her own passions."

Climbing into the cockpit, Affranchi said, "How cold. I wanted to be the kind of man even she could rely on. But I failed, and that stings."

"It means something to Metatron that you feel that way," Miranda murmured, lifting her gaze. The rain-soaked air had softened her bright red lipstick into a subtle hue, something that seemed to happen by her design.

"Please manage the rear line with Madras and the others," Affranchi said.

"Come back soon," Miranda replied.

"Mm," he nodded.

She swung onto the bike and took off, leaving the Gaia Gear behind.

Krishna felt that if she didn't talk to UI, she might bolt from the Bushing Nugg entirely. The thought terrified her, so she stepped onto the rain-lashed deck.

She was already regretting the easy compromise she'd made.

"Life on the space colonies was tough, sure, but maybe I was just as pitiful, clinging to things like fortune-telling..."

On the swaying deck, the Bromb Texter and one Gussa stood anchored at the waist. Cranes jutted here and there with mechanics on them, hurriedly performing repairs in the downpour.

"Where's Lieutenant Urian?" she asked.

"In the cockpit," someone replied, holding down a flapping rain cover on either side.

Krishna manipulated the unsteady crane, rising up toward the Bromb Texter's cockpit.

"You're heading to Munich soon?" she asked.

"Yeah. We have to hurry and link up with Hong Kong MHA, or Affranchi's troops will be on us. BN008 and BN006 got shot down by him, apparently," UI said, tending to his console while communicating with the bridge.

"Really?" Krishna replied.

He didn't look up from his work.

"So I guess I won't be seeing you in Munich, then?"

"If the Captain's there, I'll be busy with the counterattack. No telling where they'll station me," he said.

"...I suppose not."

UI still didn't pause his console checks.

"Take care," Krishna said at last, rain soaking her back through as she blocked the cockpit hatch.

"What's this all about?" UI finally rested his hand, raising his face to look at her.

"I'm telling you to stay safe... since we won't meet again, right?"

"Hmph... not for a while, anyway."

His gaze dipped back toward the open console.

"I'm not a spy, you know," Krishna snapped. She saw that subtle shift in him, read it as indifference, and lashed out.

"You're gonna catch a cold out there. Just go inside," UI grumbled.

"I'm fine. Goodbye."



The words left her lips with startling ease. Even she was surprised how simply she could say "goodbye." She panicked, hoping UI hadn't noticed her shock, and quickly worked the crane lever.

With a lurch, the crane descended.

"Krishna! You leaving?" UI leaned out the hatch, a beat too late.

"..."

"You going back to Affranchi?"

"I have no ideals, no real skills, and after this, I can't bring myself to fight a person I've known so...intimately," she shouted back.

She jumped off the crane onto the deck. Looking up at UI, his figure half-visible at the Bromb Texter's chest hatch, she realized she'd never truly heard how he felt about her. Last night's "I just wanted to see your face" had been a lie. She could feel it now.

That realization was colder than the rain pounding her shoulders.

As for UI, he simply had no idea how to respond to a woman in this situation. To Krishna, his confusion looked like rejection.

Yes, part of him still craved her body, part of him sensed there was more to say. But her fierce gaze on him only made him click his tongue.

"Tch..."

It wasn't malice, just the typical reaction of a frustrated young man who didn't know how else to respond. There was also another layer to that tongue-click: the seething desire to defeat Affranchi Char, who might well have been the one to burn Nouveau Paris. UI felt that urge clawing at him, so strongly that it left him cursing himself for not having time to satisfy young, healthy sexual desire.

## 4

The Gaia Gear eased around toward the airfield where the man-machines awaited. In response, the Zorin Soul and five Dochadies rose into the air. Messer's temperament seemed well suited to the old-style, slightly slower Zorin Soul.

During the missile bombardment, he had commanded a combat squad west of Nouveau Paris, effectively guiding the second wave that dropped in. It hadn't been easy. At one point, they clashed with two MHA Gussas, and Messer, accustomed to gravity warfare, had shielded the still-green allied pilots, then singlehandedly downed one enemy machine.

It was no small feat. Yet Messer had been deeply shaken by Saes's death and Rey's defeat. Both had once tried to escape MHA with him.

There was no punching Affranchi to fix that pain, Messer understood now that the problem ran deeper.

"...Impressive. He's more attuned to that Zorin Soul than I am to the Gaia Gear," Affranchi thought, watching Messer's flight. "He even gives it that nostalgic robot flair."

In a strange way, it lifted Affranchi's heavy mood.

"I'm letting circumstances beat me," he told himself. It was a warning to stay sharp.

When thoughts of Krishna weighed on him every time he saw Miranda, it was clear he was losing his edge. The lingering chill in his body wouldn't fade.

Behind him, the five Dochadi bore scorch marks from their balloon-assisted atmospheric entry, and their jerky maneuvering revealed pilots who weren't used to fighting under gravity yet.

Affranchi ordered these man-machines to fly ahead in formation while he took up the rear in the Gaia Gear. Messer's Zorin Soul then made a graceful turn and tapped the Gaia Gear's nose with a hand.

"Affranchi?" Messer's voice came through on the contact line.

"Huh?" Affranchi responded.

"I'm guessing there's a bigger batch of man-machines crossing the Adriatic than we think."

"Could be," Affranchi said. The instant Messer spoke, Affranchi knew the hunch was probably correct.

"I doubt this team alone will be enough."

"Then why didn't you mention it before takeoff?" Affranchi pressed. "I was so worried about the rest of our forces and Mother Metatron that I just accepted that report."

"Heh... Well, it would've looked bad for Commander Affranchi to change deployment less than ten minutes after giving the order. So I kept my mouth shut."

Affranchi recalled Messer's words from the night before, picking up on that same tone.

"You're not being malicious. I appreciate the thoughtfulness, and I mean that," Affranchi said.

"Yeah... I'm willing to believe you," Messer replied, peeling away from the Gaia Gear with a slight flourish.

Once the formation crossed the Alps, mountains and patchy clouds spread below, and the Gaia Gear settled into a trailing position. Beyond the horizon lay the Adriatic Sea, presumably. Minovsky particles thickened to combat levels.

"...?!"

Rather than the enemy simply being close by, it felt like they'd just begun scattering Minovsky particles, meaning they'd detected Affranchi's squad. The next beat of time would close swiftly, right before the shooting started.

Without shifting out of flying form, Affranchi propelled the Gaia Gear ahead of Messer's formation.

He sensed them. The enemy was below. He pushed his suit into full combat acceleration.

With a roar, that surge in speed generated a shockwave that rattled his allies, forcing Messer's man-machines to scatter.

With a sharp flash, a flurry of beams tore through the air where they'd been. Still in flight form, the Gaia Gear plunged straight down.

"Right on, Aff. Unless you risk your life like that, I can't bring myself to trust you," Messer muttered. He split his contingent into two squads, pivoting his camera in maximum zoom toward the Gaia Gear's rapid descent and throwing that feed up on the multi-display.

"Tch!"

Near one thousand meters above ground, six unknown man-machines appeared. Neither the Zorin Soul's nor Metatron's computers had any record of these silhouettes.

"Hong Kong MHA scum! They brought out a new model!" Messer growled, feeling a pang of regret for pushing Affranchi so hard. But not enough to think Affranchi would fail, he trusted the Gaia Gear's capabilities well enough.

# 1

The Gaia Gear, still in flight mode, dove toward the ground at a perfect right angle and unleashed a barrage of barrel missiles. Dozens of superheated projectiles tore through the air like sparks, raining down on the six Hong Kong MHA mobile suits in formation. Yet the enemy pilots, already watching Affranchi's squadron visually, had begun evasive maneuvers and managed to dodge the brunt of the attack.

Skimming past their formation, Affranchi guided his craft mere meters above the terrain, then pulled up sharply. He was counting on Messer and the rest of his own formation to strike at the enemy's flank while he himself drew all incoming fire. He sensed Messer's hopes riding on him and resolved to meet them head-on.

However, instead of counterattacking Affranchi, that unfamiliar cluster of enemy units ascended smoothly, leaving him behind. He thought about launching his funnels but realized the enemy had closed in too much; the timing was wrong.

Turning the Gaia Gear around, using one of the mountain peaks for cover, he suddenly sensed a few of his comrades' presences, awareness he could feel through the psycommu, abruptly wink out. Their shared connection went dead, replaced by a sudden surge of hostile, ferocious will from the enemy.

"They've been shot down?!"

All at once, three orange-red fireballs blossomed in the skies ahead, flaring white-hot against the deep blue background with a ferocious howl. The vanishings he'd felt were the deaths of some of his fellow pilots, their consciousnesses extinguished in an instant.

"What the—!!"

He realized the enemy formation had brushed off his opening salvo and delivered a direct hit on his trailing units. In that moment, they displayed speed and power beyond even Ul's Bromb Texter, an entire squad of them acting as one deadly force.

"Ugh—!"

The Gaia Gear accelerated at the very limit of its shock absorbers, punishing Affranchi's body in the process. It felt as though his organs were being wrenched from his throat and hurled back into his waist. His skull pounded as if his brain and eyeballs were being shoved against the inside of his cheeks. The sensation set his nerves on edge.

"Am I capable of this?!"

Half the machines on his side were gone. He felt a pang of fear. Leveling the Gaia Gear and pointing its nose at the blazing fireballs ahead, Affranchi concentrated on one of the foes breaking away from the conflagration.

"There you are!"

He fired off a single funnel, sending it along the mental track in his consciousness straight toward the fleeing craft.

A colossal flash lit the air.

Then, spotting another enemy form struggling for altitude, he twisted the Gaia Gear's frame and loosed a second funnel.

The second strike landed in a single, explosive and decisive instant.

## 2

If anyone felt the destruction of the two friendly units Affranchi had just taken down, actually sensed it during battle, it would have to be someone with abilities like his own, or a man-machine on par with, or exceeding, the Gaia Gear's capabilities.

"What?"

The man flinched as the presence of his comrades, which had been wrapping around him moments earlier, suddenly vanished, leaving a cold gap behind. Ignoring the wall of two Metatron man-machines attacking him head-on, he slipped away from their fire.

He'd already destroyed three enemy craft at first contact, or so he thought, yet they continued to stand their ground without retreat. In fact, they were striking back.

"Impossible!"

He wanted to believe it was nonsense, but he brushed aside that knee-jerk reaction. He was a pilot who knew better.

Beams and missile trails flared on either side of his cockpit, but those random shots posed little threat. What unsettled him more was that the older-model man-machines up ahead weren't faltering despite his squadron's withering assault.

"Tch!"

He fired a single round from his beam launcher, inflicted some damage, then pulled away. Twisting clear of a rising pillar of smoke, he recalibrated toward the source of that fierce, hyper-attuned consciousness.

"They're here?!"

In that split second, he felt sure he'd be destroyed, yet something gave the enemy pause, granting him an instant's reprieve. That enemy, Affranchi, must have flinched at the pilot's lightning reflexes.

His name was Jiang Wen Fu, or simply Jiang Fu. He commanded the first wave of these new-model Gids Geese man-machines sent by Hong Kong MHA. Captain Dargol had neglected to warn him about any powerful Metatron unit, a severe disadvantage, yet Jiang grasped that oversight. A wise pilot understands the folly of engaging an unknown enemy blindly.

"...?!"

Jiang tried trailing the white craft, letting loose a flurry of shots. He even fired funnels of his own.

"What the—?!"

Two funnels exploded around the white machine. It must have predicted his funnel attack and deployed a defense. Jiang could see the shimmering effect of a Minovsky particle barrier forming around it, and even the peculiar outline of the craft's foot thrusters, all in stark detail. Rather than move along the likely vector, the machine fired reverse thrusters and dropped straight down, positioning itself in front of the two remaining allied units.

"Ugh...!"

Jiang abandoned the chase but hoped his recorder had captured at least some footage of that machine.

What if it goes to a close-quarters man-machine battle?

He worried about the dire result for his side. It was three-on-four, so on paper they might stand a chance, but Jiang didn't like the uneasy flutter in his gut. So he decided on a tactical withdrawal, broadcasting an all-range laser signal to tell his surviving wingmen to pull back. Engaging any further could easily end in their complete defeat.

Yet falling back was no simple feat. Jiang maximized his own Minovsky barrier output, intentionally making himself a target for that descending white unit. Activating the barrier effectively halted his chance to attack, but he had no choice.

There was a muted thud of an explosion before a blinding white flash flooded his cockpit. Violent shudders whipped him forward, back, left, and right, then a hushed silence.

When the main display came back to life, he saw an enlarged view of the mountainside, slipping sideways as the craft decelerated.

"He's pulling the same trick I did!"

He realized his Gids Geese was scrubbing across a ridgeline, letting its belly scrape the rock before sliding smoothly over it.

An impact detonated against the ridge, the smoke bloom lighting Jiang's back as he escaped the battle zone. Naturally, he didn't forget to lob a cluster of barrel missiles behind him as he fled.

"Guh—!"

Jiang felt one of his wingmen's consciousnesses flicker and fade. Another ally had died.

"An enemy of that caliber exists!? Dargol is far too careless!"

He spat the words out between ragged breaths.

### 3

Affranchi realized that the very reason those enemies managed to withdraw was because they were dangerous. Missing the chance to finish them off made him shudder at what might come next.

"That was one terrifying retreat..."

All three survivors had scattered sand barrel explosives and used the drifting cloud cover to vanish. Affranchi's impressions, whether that pilot was male or female, were muddled by the rawness of the psyche he'd sensed through the Gaia Gear's systems. Delicate and ferocious all at once, leaving him uncertain who exactly he'd just faced. It was the first time he'd ever found himself wondering about an enemy's gender.

"Messer!"

Still in the transformation process from flight mode to standard man-machine, the Gaia Gear turned to greet the Zorin Soul as it approached, missing an arm. One of the Dochadi had also survived, at least.

"Emile Luther?"

"Yes, sir. Turns out we weren't worth targeting. Those new machines are absolutely monstrous!"

Emile's voice sounded horse and strained.

"We saw them too, but at least they fled..." Messer's machine took up position beside the Gaia Gear. "If that's MHA's reinforcements, we stand no chance. What do we do?"

"We'll do what we planned: sink the MHA Gayjisu. If we don't, we'll just be forced to watch them build their Earth Empire right here. The two of you, recover our comrades' remains if you can."

"That's impossible. They took a direct hit," Messer said, as though forgetting that without Affranchi's intervention, he too would likely have been shot down.

Ignoring that, Affranchi guided the Gaia Gear toward the wreckage of one of the enemy suits lying across the slope. They needed salvageable parts to get a read on its capabilities.

"That one?"

Spotting a crash site that was largely intact, Affranchi landed Gaia Gear and stepped out of the cockpit. Judging by the bulky torso, he saw it was roughly the same scale as the Gaia Gear.

"Gids Geese, is it?"

From a manufacturer's plate on the leg assembly, he deciphered what might be the machine's name. Funnels had gutted the cockpit, so it was hopeless to glean further data from inside.

The mountain debris shifted and crunched as the Zorin Soul's feet touched down, and Messer hopped out.

"No luck. None of the machines are intact enough to retrieve remains. Emile is still searching for one more."

"A tough break. Considering your craft's older design, it's a miracle you got away alive." Affranchi was frantically trying to pinpoint what was so special about the Gids Geese.

"It just suits me, that's all," Messer said with a hint of pride. He'd calmed down a bit.

Affranchi pried loose a block of the machine's point-computer near the waist, setting it on the Gaia Gear's outstretched hand.

"Here."

"Huh?" Messer tossed him a water canteen, and Affranchi took a swig.

"If Hong Kong MHA can build something of this caliber on Earth, it means the planet's manufacturing capacity is far beyond what people in the colonies believe."

"Places like Hong Kong and Europe can still churn out hardware. Probably why MHA returned to Europe," Messer noted.

Affranchi kept himself from saying more, suspecting he'd slip into a lecture. It was enough to see that Messer had reached his own understanding.

"That hit the spot," Affranchi said, returning the flask with a gentle toss.

"Right."



"Let's head back. Everyone's worried, and we ended up disappointing them."

"Yeah..." Messer took a drink from the same cap Affranchi had just used, then climbed the rope ladder leading up to Zorin Soul's cockpit.

"You can still fly that thing?" Affranchi asked.

"Flight isn't an issue, but it has no spare parts. If this keeps up, I'll lose my man-machine. When does Mother Metatron plan to drop more units?"

"Cessias said we'd be in touch by afternoon," Affranchi replied, deliberately naming the communications lead from Besançon instead of Miranda.

"Hope it works out... The Zorin Soul was born on Earth and hauled off from Hong Kong. Letting it spend its twilight here might be a fitting end," Messer said wryly.

"Shame, I was just getting used to it..." he muttered, hooking a foot onto the ladder. Glancing up, he spotted Emile's Gussa circling overhead having returned from an unsuccessful search.

"Maybe Messer finally gets me," Affranchi thought, though it was hardly enough to bring him peace of mind. He realized anew that if he wasn't in the Gaia Gear's cockpit, he oddly blind to others' mood or presence.

He watched the Zorin Soul, minus an arm, and Emile's craft align into a makeshift formation above, then glided the Gaia Gear into the air with a low thrumming of engines.

"Ah... maybe this surge of adrenaline will chase off my cold."

Affranchi exhaled, noticing that the chill he'd felt all morning had lifted. Without enough fighting spirit to beat a cold, how could he ever raise morale in those around him?

"If I can keep myself in check like this, maybe I could have been in a position to better lead..."

Yet even as the thought crossed his mind, he saw that Metatron's creed and objectives alone weren't enough to keep this operation going.

"We only rushed the bombing of Nouveau Paris out of the suffocating grip of organizational constraints. Wiping out MHA requires raw power, not pretty ideals. These old folks on Mother Metatron, who staked their lives on the idea of the Char Continuation Operations, a project built on borrowed convictions, will never open a path to the future."

Affranchi was certain. And if he didn't hold that firm resolution, an enemy like the one he'd just faced would inevitably overwhelm him.

"Losing would mean everything was for nothing."

At the same time, he felt keenly how violence ultimately left nothing behind.

## 4

The mock dogfight between MHA's Gussa and Hong Kong MHA's Gids Geese lasted barely three minutes. Time and again, the new Gids Geese took a superior position, proving to any observer that its performance was overwhelmingly high.

"Strictly between us, that pilot is the least experienced of our three survivors," Jiang shouted to Captain Bijan Dargol, who stood next to him.

"Understood. Still, we only traveled here because we can beef up our armaments and match the Gids Geese with similarly advanced man-machines. Don't assume your forces alone are our only ace," Captain Dargol replied. He didn't mind Jiang's bluntness, he knew that type made the best real fighters. Even so, the captain needed to remind him of their differing positions.

"Weren't you badly hurt by the bombing of Nouveau Paris?" Jiang asked.

"That just shows Metatron is desperate. Our presence in Bavaria is aimed at rounding up those living across Europe, so don't forget it," Dargol said plainly. There was a certain European pride in his words that an Easterner might not grasp.

"Sir! Then our rendezvous was pointless?" Jiang pressed, as tactless as ever.

"It's going according to schedule, or you wouldn't even be here. I'll grant that Gids Geese is better than the Gussa, but you still lost three units."

"We can't blame it on a first encounter, but that white transformable craft was anything but normal," Jiang said without reservation and no sign of intimidation.

With a deep resonant hum, the two man-machines that had performed the mock battle landed softly in a clearing overgrown with grass. Their movements showed just how much more agility the Gids Geese had, like a lithe giant compared to its companion.

"Li! Report!"

"Sir!"

Lihua Huang, who emerged from the cockpit of Gids Geese, bounded over lightly, addressing Dargol but really aiming her words at Jiang Wen.

"I was worried my skills or the machine's performance had deteriorated, but after that mock battle, I'm sure that's not the case. That enemy was just insane."

"Enough, Jiang Wen Fu," Captain Dargol barked. "As soon as maintenance is done, we may send you to annihilate the Gaia Gear. Study your tactics."

"Sir, yes sir. But the Gids Geese's issues are serious for us, which in turn becomes your concern, Captain. I'd like leniency regarding any perceived faults in my words or manner."

"Jiang Wen Fu!"

"Rest assured, Captain, I won't tarnish your name. If that white craft really is the Gaia Gear, then for the honor of my squad, I promise to shoot it down."

"Can you guarantee that?"

"If we fail, I'll slit my stomach," Jiang said.

"Easterners always say that," Dargol scoffed.

"Shall I cut off a finger instead? We're prepared to do that too," Liu Yan offered. Dargol frowned but said nothing, heading toward a gas-powered jeep, an archaic replica.

"These Orientals aren't like us whites," Dargol thought, sparing a brief glance for Jiang, Li, and their final surviving pilot, Liu Yan, before signaling the driver to set off.

A few hundred meters beyond the grassy landing field stood a large rubberized shelter styled to look like an old-fashioned building, an architectural illusion that might fool the casual onlooker into believing it had stood there for centuries.

"So, did you see it?"

Captain Dargol opened the door to find UI Urian's Bromb Texter undergoing maintenance inside.

"Quite the machine. I doubt even the Bromb Texter can match it," UI saluted from atop a maintenance crane.

"Once we install its new main engine, the barrier output improves, and we can increase payload too."

"Yes, then we'll stand a chance against Gaia Gear."

"Jiang seems eager to handle the Gaia Gear first, but if we let him do everything, it'll be problematic in the long run." Dargol gave UI a hard look.

"I'm not too keen on using Hong Kong MHA if it goes against your principles, Captain..." UI began.

"If that's how you feel, go show them up. Given their recent losses, I've revisited my judgment of your supposed failure," said Dargol.

"Yes, sir!" UI responded with a crisp salute.

"After the engine swap, get some rest. You arrived here ahead of the Bushing Nugg. You must be exhausted."

"Thank you, sir!"

Captain Dargol was pleased that UI had left the woman behind and hurried on to link up with him.

"Sure, there's a chance Gaia Gear and its pilot have both improved significantly, but with these new rivals, UI should be able to put up a solid fight," Dargol mused.

No matter how powerful Gaia Gear might be, it was still just one man-machine. In the worst case, focusing both UI's and Jiang's strengths could bring it down. The captain was more worried about a different threat: the Earth Federation government might soon balk at MHA's unilateral aggression, causing major political blowback.

"In that event, we'll need to take the families of certain Federation officials, those illegally settled on Earth, hostage and fortify our position," he muttered. Indeed, he wanted to expedite his plan for large-scale concerts and garden parties inviting all those well-connected residents, using his political pull. But for that, he needed to rebuild old facilities in the ancient cities. That was why Bavaria, with its heritage of industry and birthplace of modern culture, was so valuable.

"Call it common or elitist, Wagner's homeland is still essential. If we can make use of Neuschwanstein Castle, built by Bavaria's last king, Ludwig, our stage will be set perfectly."

So thought Captain Bijan Dargol. His dream to create an independent Earth nation centered on MHA would mesh beautifully with his personal tastes, once he brought this scheme to fruition.