

G-SAVIOUR

VOLUME ONE



YOSHIE KAWAHARA
Translated by ZeonicScanlations

G-SAVIOUR

イラスト/鈴木雅久



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Prologue

SAVIOUR.

If one were to define it, it might be interpreted as *holy* or *sacred*. And if the “G” in G-SAVIOUR were interpreted as *GOD*, then it might translate to *the Holy God*. In Buddhism, this could be likened to *Miroku Bosatsu* or the *Maitreya Bodhisattva*; in Shinto, it might be akin to *Amaterasu Omikami*.

Yet, let us not be mistaken, this “G” is not a direct reference to the Almighty.

Nonetheless, it is when we humans recognize our faults and follies that we can find solace in the “saviour” within ourselves, however small it may be.

For “saviour” represents the holy, sacred power that we, the foolish and flawed beings that we are, have created in order to save those we cherish from the consequences of our own errors.

Chapter.01

Intruder

By the year 0223 of the Universal Century, humanity had already marked two centuries since it ventured beyond Earth to claim the cosmos as a new frontier. This epoch might seem, at first blush, a bright testament to human achievement, heralding endless progress and discovery.

Yet the “space” that humans had so boldly claimed for themselves was far from the infinite, awe-inspiring expanse of the cosmos. The realm that humanity had managed to seize was nothing more than a minuscule speck between the Earth and the Moon, a space so inconceivably small that it could scarcely be seen amidst the vast tapestry of the universe. And yet, it was in this tiny sliver of the void that the sun’s life-giving energy could still be harnessed, and the shimmering blue planet of our birth could always be glimpsed, a constant reminder of our humble origins.

In this scant space, under the watchful gaze of our pale blue home, humans vied for supremacy. Within these two hundred fleeting years, a mere heartbeat in the cosmos’ vast rhythm, they waged incessant wars, spilling blood as numerous lives were extinguished in the strife.

The Earth Federation government, which once controlled the Earth Sphere, weakened under the weight of repeated battles until it finally collapsed five years ago. As a result, the Earth government incorporated Sides 2, 3, 5, and 7, which were pro-Earth among the “Sides,” and formed the Congress of Settlement Nations (CONSENT), which gave them powerful military and political power, consisting of multiple artificial space colonies now called “Settlements.”

This newfound power allowed them to exert immense pressure on Sides 1, 4, the Moon, and other smaller communities that failed to align with them. However, the Earth’s government had a pressing reason for their actions: a dire food crisis was imminent.

The cause of this crisis was all too clear, soil contamination from constant wars, environmental destruction, and unbridled population growth, the litany of humanity’s follies and hubris had brought Earth to its knees. The birthplace of humanity could no longer sustain its children.

And yet, foolish still, humanity sought to unleash new strife for the sake of petty interests and self-preservation, heedless of the suffering of their mother Earth.

Until a year ago, Mark Curran, born and raised on Earth, had been a lieutenant in the CONSENT Air Force. But in the rigid hierarchy of the military, where obedience to orders eclipsed all else, Mark refused those orders and voluntarily retired. As a mobile suit pilot who excelled far beyond other pilots, and given his young age of twenty-five at the time, his future gleamed with promise, a shining path stretching out before him. There were voices within the

military regretting his retirement, seeing in him the potential for greatness squandered. But Mark chose to forge his own future rather than being subjected to a court-martial.

His destiny lay beyond the confines of a cockpit, his heart called to a higher purpose, a quest to conquer the specter of famine that gripped humanity in an ever-tightening vise.

His battleground would be the Atlantic Deep Sea Farming Research Facility, a lone bastion against the unforgiving sea known simply as the Rig. Perched on the continental shelf off the Atlantic Philadelphia coast, the Rig stood sentinel over the mysterious Sohm Abyssal Plain. Here, researchers toiled to unlock the secrets of new marine plants, striving to harness the untapped potential of the deep seafloor to feed a starving world.

In the nearby Bermuda Triangle, lush forests of seaweed called kelp rise up, growing to towering heights of several tens of meters, thriving defiantly in this pocket of relative purity amid the increasingly polluted waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

If this daring venture into underwater farming succeeds, it promises to yield bountiful harvests, utilizing the vast and unexplored frontier of the seafloor remaining on Earth to produce quantities of food inconceivable through current land-based methods alone. Within the Rig, Mark's job is to operate the underwater MMS (Marine Mobile Suit), pouring his talent and experience as a mobile suit pilot from his military days into coaxing life from the deep.

Although mobile suits tend to be viewed through the lens of military might, their original purpose is far nobler, to serve as an extension of human capabilities, allowing them to persevere in environments where the limitations of flesh and bone would doom them to failure.

For Mark, who walked away from the rigid confines of military life, the chance to apply his skills towards a higher purpose filled him with a quiet but unshakable joy. Each day, he would descend into the depths within his beloved machine, an MMS that stood apart from its military brethren. Lacking the sleek lines and martial bearing of a weapon of war, it had an endearing ungainliness about it, yet the affection the Rig staff held for it was clear in the nickname they gave it: Guppy. The MMS was Mark's stalwart companion on his daily pilgrimages to the experimental farm far below the waves.

Picture a deep-sea exploration vehicle, but with the addition of thick, sturdy limbs, arms and legs almost comically short in proportion to its rotund body, giving it the appearance of a headless, portly human. Yet there was an undeniable sturdiness to its frame, all eighteen meters of it exuding reliability and strength. The front of this gentle giant, festooned with lights and sensors, called to mind the face of a well-loved teddy bear, an impression that was only reinforced by the powerful beams of its searchlights, illuminating the murky depths like warm and caring eyes.

On the pitch-black seafloor, where no natural light penetrates, the world of the farm is a strange and alien one, the powerful searchlights of the Guppy revealing sights unlike any found in the fields and orchards above. Geothermal heat from deep within the Earth causes warm seawater to well up, pulsing

gently through artificial cultivation rocks. Crowning the surfaces of these rocks are clumps of an unfamiliar organism sprouting in rounded heads, resembling some peculiar species of seafloor broccoli.

This new form of seaweed, a marvel of bio-engineering representing untold hours of painstaking research and experimentation, has been carefully crafted to thrive in the sunless world of the deep. Yet for all the ingenuity behind its creation, the plants struggle to produce nutrients in any meaningful quantity, starved of the life-giving touch of sunlight that their surface-dwelling kin take for granted.

However, by subjecting the seaweed to a process of fine grinding, it's possible to extract vital proteins, starches, and other nutrients that could mean the difference between life and death for the teeming masses crying out for sustenance. The key, it seems, is light, if only these undersea gardens could be illuminated, the broccoli of the deep could finally realize its potential, filling each head with nutritional treasures.

However, the shallow waters where such abundant light can be found are but a thin strip, a precious and rare resource. And even that has not escaped the creeping blight of pollution, a product of human short-sightedness and neglect. The road to recovery will be a long one, with the Earth's natural capacity for self-repair pushed to its limits even with the well-meaning but ultimately insufficient efforts of those striving to heal the damage.

The challenges before Mark and the Rig are daunting, each one a stern rebuke to those who would take the easy path. But weighed against those challenges is the knowledge that every day spent toiling beneath the waves brings the dream of a well-fed populace closer to reality. And so Mark prepares to take the next step, to harvest the first yield of this underwater broccoli.

As he shrugs on his specialized piloting life vest with a fluid familiarity, Mark's face is a study in planes and angles that would be equally at home etched in marble or cast in bronze. The ghost of a smile tugs at the corners of his mouth as he clears his mind of all distractions and focuses on the subtle control stick operation, following the images displayed on the monitor in front of him.

Mark deftly maneuvered the Guppy's two-fingered manipulators, skillfully adjusting the fasteners on the cage fixed to the harvesting rock.

"This is Mark, reporting a bountiful harvest. The basket is overflowing with broccoli," he announced, his voice tinged with satisfaction.

Back in the Rig's control room, Simmons sat hunched over the console, a newly developed snack bar clenched between his teeth.

"Roger that, you're always so quick with your work," he mumbled, forcefully biting off a piece of the unyielding bar. "Damn, this thing is hard as a rock. I'll have to give them an earful about it later."

Simmons, a man in his mid-thirties with a scruffy, unshaven face, grumbled to himself as he chewed on the tough snack. The sound of his struggle carried through the microphone, eliciting a chuckle from Mark.

"What, are you eating on the job *again*?"

"It's a taste test that Loewen asked me to do," Simmons explained, his words muffled by the dense bar. "Honestly, there's no way my old lady could eat this stuff."

"Keep volunteering for those taste tests, and you'll end up fatter than Loewen."

"That's the thing," Simmons lamented, "despite the times we're in, all he makes are these damn diet foods that don't do a thing to fill your stomach."

"Well, in that case, you've got nothing to worry about," Mark quipped, his laughter echoing through the comm link. "Alright, the cage is secure. I'm starting the retrieval process." His hands moved with practiced precision, carefully manipulating the control sticks as he focused on the hooks of the harvesting cage.

The Guppy, an aging machine by modern standards, responded to Mark's expert touch with smooth, almost human-like grace, belying its outdated appearance.

"She may be old, but she's still got a few good moves in her," Mark mused, a gentle smile playing on his lips as he addressed his faithful companion. The suit protected him from the crushingly terrifying water pressure.

In the Rig's control room, Dagget, the female control officer, furrowed her brow as she studied the numerous instrument panels before her. Unconsciously, she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose, her eyes narrowing in concentration.

"What's this?" she muttered, her voice tinged with concern.

On the radar screen, two blinking lights indicated a pair of objects hurtling towards the surface at an alarming speed.

"There shouldn't be any scheduled flights in this area today," she said, her tone sharp with suspicion.

Simmons, drawn by the urgency in her voice, approached the monitor, a wry grin on his face. "Maybe the system's on the fritz? Wouldn't be surprised if they skimped on the budget and saddled us with some cheap-ass equipment."

Dagget shot him a withering glare, her patience wearing thin. "This is no time for jokes. Mark, can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear," Mark replied cheerfully.

"Something just fell near your position," Dagget informed him, her words measured and precise. "Two objects, to be exact."

"Falling objects?" Mark's brow furrowed as he quickly pressed several buttons on his console. "That's strange... I'm not picking up anything on my end."

The instrument panel displayed no abnormalities, the readouts as tranquil as a southern island untouched by the passage of time. Yet Mark knew better than to doubt Dagget's assessment.

In her nearly five years as a control officer at the Rig, she had proven herself time and again to be an invaluable asset, intelligent, cool-headed, and possessed of an uncanny ability to make accurate judgments under pressure. Wittiness in her private life aside, Mark relied on her the most at the Rig.

"They might have broken apart upon impact with the water," Dagget theorized, her mind already racing to analyze the potential ramifications of the falling objects.

"We can't afford to have this area polluted by any strange substances--"

No sooner had the words left his lips than Mark felt a sudden, jarring vibration beneath his seat. In an instant, the world around him erupted into chaos as a tremendous shock wave slammed into the Guppy, throwing his body against the restraints.

"Whoa!"

Despite the violent tremors that threatened to tear the machine apart, Mark's instincts took over, his hands flying across the controls as he fought to stabilize the Guppy. For an agonizing twenty seconds, the cockpit shuddered and groaned, the swirling seawater and churning bubbles roaring in Mark's ears like a frenzied beast.

And then, as abruptly as it had begun, the maelstrom subsided, leaving an eerie calm in its wake. "No leaks detected," Mark reported, his voice steady even as his heart raced in his chest.

"Manipulators, normal. Monitors, no abnormalities."

Abnormalities in a mobile suit directly affected one's life. Mark knew this all too well.

"Mark, Mark! Are you okay?" Dagget's desperate voice crackled through the static-filled comm link, joined by Simmons' equally frantic cry, "Hey! Mark, are you alive?!"

"I'm fine, no problems here," Mark assured them, a wave of relief washing over him as he heard the concern in their voices.

"Oh, thank God!" Dagget breathed, her shoulders sagging as the tension drained from her body.

Simmons, too, let out a shaky laugh, his attempt at levity belying the genuine fear he had felt.

"Hey, I think I shaved a few years off my life there."

As Mark listened to their relieved exchanges, a warm smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. There was something to be said for having comrades who cared for one another, a sentiment that had only grown stronger in the face of the challenges they faced.

With a newfound sense of purpose, Mark turned his attention to the data the Guppy had automatically captured during the recent event. "What on earth was that?" he wondered aloud, his brow furrowed in concentration. "It felt like a massive amount of seawater suddenly shifted all at once."

"I don't know," Dagget admitted, her fingers flying across the keyboard as she pored over the incoming data. "But according to our analysis, both falling objects were quite large. And judging by their speed... They probably originated from above the stratosphere."

Simmons' eyes widened in disbelief, his voice rising an octave as he exclaimed, "You mean from space?!"

"It's the only logical conclusion," Dagget replied, her tone matter-of-fact as she continued to type furiously. "I'm calculating the angle of entry now."

"It couldn't be a regular shuttle to the Settlements, could it?" Simmons asked, leaning in to peer at the monitor over Dagget's shoulder.

"It doesn't seem to be," Dagget murmured, her lips pressed into a thin line. "But this is no laughing matter. Even without a war raging above, the last thing we need is for more strange objects to come crashing down to Earth..."

As she spoke, Dagget bit her lip, her expression grim.

Mark, listening intently from the Guppy's cockpit, couldn't help but agree with her sentiment.

Mark's mind wandered to the stories his parents had whispered to him as a child, stories of a war that had ravaged the Earth long ago. A space colony had plummeted from the sky, snuffing out millions of lives in an instant and transforming thriving cities into a vast, lifeless lake. In the years that followed, a suffocating darkness had descended upon the world, the sun's warmth forever dulled by a veil of noxious fumes.

Seasons of chaos reigned supreme, as abnormal weather patterns melted polar ice caps and swallowed once-bountiful islands whole. Torrential rains battered cities, stripping lush mountainsides bare. Grasslands withered into deserts, while rivers and oceans alike became tainted with poison. Countless species vanished, one by one, as if the Earth itself had grown weary of sustaining life.

And yet, through it all, the wars raged on, an endless cycle of destruction that saw weapons and debris rain down upon the scarred planet.

To the young Mark, these stories had seemed like little more than fanciful fairy tales. But as he grew older and ventured beyond the sheltered confines of his city, he discovered that the scars of those bygone conflicts still lingered. Across the barren wastelands, he stumbled upon the twisted remnants of innumerable mobile suits, their metal frames warped and melted beyond recognition. Shuttles and warplanes jutted from the earth like the tombstones of a forgotten age, grim reminders of the violence that had once raged unchecked.

Beyond these haunting ruins stretched vast plains, cracked and lifeless, where bountiful waters had once flowed. The land undulated like the surface of a turbulent sea, crusted with salt that had erupted from deep within the earth, shimmering white like snow beneath the merciless sun.

What had humanity wrought? The question haunted Mark, gnawing at his soul as he navigated the treacherous years of adolescence. He vowed that he would never allow such horrors to befall the Earth again, a simple, naive promise that had driven him to seek solace in the military.

But now...

Suddenly, the Guppy's seismometer jolted Mark from his reverie, alerting him to a faint tremor rippling through the depths.

"Hold on, I just picked up some minor vibrations... This doesn't feel like an earthquake."

Mark furrowed his brow as he studied the waveforms dancing across the screen.

"It could be debris from the objects that fell earlier," Dagget mused, her fingers flying across the keyboard with practiced precision. "But judging by the time it took to reach the seafloor in this area, it must be quite heavy and large."

"Mayday, mayday! Requesting emergency assistance!" A desperate voice, crackling with static, burst through Mark and Dagget's headsets.

"This is Lieutenant Tim Holloway of the Congressional Armed Forces! I require immediate rescue!"

"The CAF?" Mark leaned forward, his pulse quickening.

"This is the deep-sea farming research facility's work MMS. What's the situation?" he asked, his voice calm and measured.

"Oh, thank the heavens!" Holloway's voice was thick with relief, teetering on the edge of a sob.

"I'm sending my coordinates now."

Mark's reply was swift and apologetic. "Wait, I'm sorry, but we're not equipped for rescue operations here."

"What?!" Holloway's voice cracked with disbelief, a note of hysteria creeping into his tone.

"I apologize, but we'll have to relay your rescue request to the military--" Mark began, but Holloway cut him off, his words tumbling out in a frenzied rush.

"This is no joke! I'm going to die!"

Mark's mind raced as he tried to piece together the puzzle before him.

"What happened? Did the falling objects punch a hole in your ship or something?"

"It's not a ship!" Holloway's reply was shrill, bordering on the comical. "It's a Bugu!"

Mark's eyes widened in recognition. The Bugu was a versatile combat mobile suit deployed by the Congressional Forces two years prior.

As a hulking mass of metal, it was only natural that the MS would plummet through the water like a stone. Which meant that the earlier vibrations could only mean one thing: this Bugu had come to rest on the ocean floor.

"But why would it be in the sea..." Mark mused, before realization slammed into him like a rogue wave. The falling objects, they must have been this Bugu.

"Dagget?" he asked, seeking confirmation.

"We can't determine the shape or contents of the falling objects from here," Dagget replied, a wry smile coloring her words. "But given the speed and size of the impact, there's a good chance it could be a mobile suit."

"Thanks," Mark nodded, before turning his attention back to the stranded pilot. "Lieutenant, I don't know why you ended up in the ocean, but is your Bugu equipped for ground combat?"

"No, it's a space model," Holloway replied, his voice strained.

Mark clicked his tongue, careful not to let the sound carry over the microphone. Simmons, who had been listening to the exchange with growing unease, grimaced.

"Oh, that's not good," he muttered.

"In any case, I'll send a rescue request to the military from our end as well," Dagget said, her fingers already dancing across the keyboard.

As the massive humanoid weapon lay prone on the seafloor, small bubbles began to escape from various points on its frame. A sickening, creaking sound echoed through the depths, followed by a large bubble bursting from the Bugu's midsection.

"Please, hurry with the rescue!" Holloway's desperate plea crackled through the speakers. "My oxygen levels are dropping rapidly!"

Mark's face contorted at the sound of Holloway's anguished cries. "It won't hold out much longer... Dagget, any response from the military?"

"Nothing yet. What should we do? Should we deploy the rescue submersible we have here?" she asked, her words edged with urgency.

"No... It won't make it in time..." Mark's eyes narrowed, a fierce resolve hardening his features.

"He's determined, isn't he..." Simmons mumbled, his headphones pressed against his ears.

"Stop talking crazy. What are we supposed to do then?!" Dagget spun around to face Simmons, her frustration boiling over.

"No matter what, Mark's going to try. That's just the kind of guy he is," Simmons replied with a wry grin.

Another sickening creak of metal filled the air, accompanied by a steady stream of large bubbles rising from various points on the Bugu's frame.

"Please, do something! I'm going to be crushed!" Holloway's voice was a near-scream, edged with raw panic.

A memory flashed through Mark's mind, a phantom pain that still haunted his dreams. He couldn't bear to experience that kind of loss again. With a fierce determination burning in his heart, he gripped the control sticks and called out to the dying man in the darkness of the deep sea.

"I'm coming to help you now! Turn off your ventilation!"

"What?! If I lose any more air—" Holloway's words were a frantic jumble, his mind teetering on the brink of a full-blown panic attack.

"Your suit is designed for space, right? Use the emergency oxygen supply attached to it! If you leave the ventilation on, seawater will flood the cockpit from the breached areas in no time!" Mark barked, his voice cutting through Holloway's fear.

"Ah... Oh, right..." Holloway's head bobbed up and down, his trembling fingers following Mark's instructions.

As Mark guided the Guppy forward, he already had a lock on Holloway's position. The monitor before him displayed a detailed, three-dimensional map of the undulating seafloor, but in reality, only the small area illuminated by the Guppy's lights was visible.

Tiny deep-sea shrimp, jellyfish, and snowlike marine particles drifted past, reflecting the beam of light. The only sounds were the echoes of the sonar, Holloway's ragged breathing, and the quiet hum of the Guppy's engines.

It reminded Mark of the handful of times he had ventured into outer space during his training. Instead of marine snow, the view from the space shuttle's

cockpit window was filled with countless glittering stars, the occasional silhouette of a military craft or civilian shuttle reflecting the sun's rays, and the Earth below, casting a brilliant blue light...

It was a sight that never failed to take his breath away, and it struck Mark as strange to think that this pitch-black expanse, this watery void, was the interior of that same vibrant blue planet.

As the Guppy navigated the contours of the seafloor, an unusual shape emerged from the darkness, a jagged silhouette that sent a chill down Mark's spine. At the same time, the monitor switched to a real-time video feed, revealing the Congressional Forces manned mobile suit Bugu sprawled across the ocean floor like a fallen colossus, its seventeen-meter frame a twisted mockery of its former glory.

The Bugu's vaunted thick armor was still managing to protect its "partner" inside, but the thinner sections had already crumpled significantly, giving it a markedly different appearance from the Bugu that Mark was familiar with.

"Found it," Mark mumbled to himself, his voice barely above a whisper. Then, with a deep breath, he spoke into the microphone, his words a lifeline to the man trapped inside the metal tomb.

Mark's voice crackled, "I've got a visual on you. I'm coming to get you out of there. Just follow my lead, and we'll have you back safe in no time."

"O-okay... so... what do I need to do??" Holloway's voice was strained, a thin veneer of composure masking the raw terror that clawed at his heart. It was a natural reaction, Mark knew, for someone facing the icy hand of death.

"It's simple, really. Treat it like an emergency ejection. The only difference is the pressure adjustment. First, make sure your suit is airtight. Then, crank up the air pressure inside the cockpit as high as it will go."

"Got it." Despite the shaking in his hands, Holloway moved with purpose, following Mark's guidance to the letter. The cockpit of a space-use MS was built to withstand extreme conditions, but even it had its limits. It couldn't hope to match the crushing pressure of the deep sea. Still, Mark reasoned, any extra protection was better than none at all.

"Dagget, I need that decompression chamber prepped and ready to go, on the double!"

"Already on it, boss. But... are you sure this is going to work?"

Mark forced a note of levity into his voice, trying to keep the mood light despite the gravity of the situation.

"Guess we'll find out soon enough, won't we?"

"Lieutenant, what's the air pressure reading in there?"

"Hovering around five atmospheres. I don't think I can push it any higher."

Time was running out, and fast.

Mark muttered under his breath, the words meant for his ears alone. He steeled himself, knowing the next step would be the hardest sell of all. "Alright, Holloway, I need you to keep that pressure cranked as high as you can, and then... detach the backpack."

The response was immediate and explosive.

"Are you out of your mind?!" Holloway's voice was pure, undiluted panic. "If I do that, I'll be dead in the water!"

Mark's voice softened, his next words heavy with regret.

"I'm sorry, but... your partner's not going to be moving from that spot either way. Not anymore."

Silence hung heavy on the line, Holloway's shock palpable even through the crackling static.

Mark knew he had to act fast, had to shock the man out of his stupor. He let his voice rise to a commanding bellow.

"What are you waiting for, Lieutenant?! Detach, now! That's an order!"

Holloway snapped back to himself, Mark's tone jolting him into action. "Y-yes sir!"

On the Guppy's monitor, the backpack-like part attached to the Bugu's back, fitted with nozzles for propulsion, split apart with a flash of explosive force and tumbled away into the murky depths.

"Perfect. Now, when I give the word, you pull that emergency ejection lever like your life depends on it. Because it does. I'll be there to catch you."

Holloway's voice was strained to the breaking point. "This is insanity! We're in the middle of the goddamn ocean!"

"You want to get out of this ocean alive, don't you? Or would you rather take your chances with the deep?!"

"But... but I--"

"Now! Eject!"

On Mark's command, Holloway wrenched the lever with all his might. The Bugu's cockpit module blasted free in a hurricane of churning bubbles, rocketing towards the surface, and the waiting arms of Mark's Guppy unit.

Mark's reflexes took over, his hands moving on pure instinct. In a heartbeat, the Guppy's powerful manipulators had the cockpit block in an unbreakable grip.

"Gotcha!"

The rush of success brought a flush to Mark's face, a triumphant grin splitting his features.

Back on the rig, the control room erupted into raucous cheers. Dagget and Simmons traded relieved glances, the tension of the past few minutes bleeding out of them in an instant.

Mark was already in motion, the Guppy's arms locking the precious cargo in a protective embrace as he hit the throttle on his propulsion system. Jets of compressed air burst from the nozzles on the Guppy's back and legs, sending the bulky machine rocketing towards the surface.

"I'm making an emergency ascent before Holloway's cockpit gets crushed! Rig, tell me the hatch is open and waiting!"

Dagget's voice came back, bubbly with relief and excitement.

"Ready and waiting, Mark!"



Mark rocketed up from the depths at a breakneck pace that made him question whether the old Guppy was even capable of such an ascent. He made a beeline for the rig, handing Holloway over to the waiting medical team.

When pulled from the cockpit, the rescued pilot was in rough shape, his body pushed to the brink by the ordeal. Oxygen deprivation, decompression sickness, and the sheer mental strain had all taken their toll, leaving him teetering on the edge of consciousness.

But Holloway was a soldier through and through, his body conditioned to withstand the rigors of combat. With a steady flow of pure oxygen and a stint in the decompression chamber, he began to claw his way back to lucidity, the color slowly returning to his ashen features.

Mark, on the other hand, had depleted the Guppy's fuel for the emergency ascent, rendering the day's mission impossible. After a brief report, he headed towards the control room where his comrades awaited.

By chance, he encountered Holloway being taken to the infirmary. Prompted by a whisper from the attending medic, Holloway removed the oxygen mask from his face and addressed Mark in a low voice. "You're my savior, Mark Curran, right?"

Mark flashed a warm smile, waving off the praise with a modest shrug. "Guilty as charged."

"I don't even know how to begin to thank you," Holloway pressed on, his words punctuated by the labored rise and fall of his chest. "If you hadn't shown up when you did... I'd be fish food at the bottom of the damn ocean right now."

With a trembling hand, Holloway reached out, clasping Mark's arm in a gesture of heartfelt appreciation. Mark returned the gesture, his grip firm and reassuring.

"Don't mention it," he said, his voice low and earnest. "I'm just glad we got you out of there in one piece."

Holloway shook his head, a wry chuckle escaping his lips.

"I must have a guardian angel looking out for me, getting saved by the legendary Mark Curran himself. You're still spoken of like a damn folk hero back in the service, you know that?"

At the mention of his past, Mark's smile faltered, a flicker of old pain flashing across his features.

"Yeah, well... I guess I'm just the guy who couldn't cut it as a soldier."

Holloway opened his mouth to respond, but a sudden commotion in the corridor cut him off. Mark whirled around, his brow furrowing as he watched a group of rig staff sprinting past, their faces etched with panic.

"What the hell?" Mark muttered, already moving to follow.

"It's the Congressional Armed Forces!" Someone shouted.

Mark shot Holloway a quizzical look.

"You expecting company? Seems like an awful lot of firepower for a pickup."

He stepped out into the corridor, only to be greeted by a sight that set his teeth on edge. A phalanx of soldiers marched down the passageway, their combat gear jarringly out of place in the civilian facility. Mark's frown deepened as he watched them pass, a knot of unease tightening in his gut.

"Picking up a comrade in full battle rattle? What are they thinking?!" He double-timed it to the control room, his mind racing.

The scene that greeted him there did little to ease his concerns. The room was in a state of barely-controlled chaos, with soldiers manning every console and station. The regular staff had been unceremoniously booted from their posts, relegated to the sidelines as they watched the military men work.

Mark's comrades, Dagget and Simmons among them, stood to the side, their expressions ranging from confusion to outright fury. They turned to Mark as he entered, their eyes pleading for answers.

"What's going on?"

"Damned if I know!"

"Are they seriously trying to start some kind of military training exercise here of all places?"

"They just barged in here like they owned the place. Waved their guns around and told us to get out of the way," Simmons spat.

Dagget's plump lips twisted into a scowl as he spoke, mirroring the furrow that had appeared on Mark's brow.

The audacity of the military, pointing weapons at innocent civilians without any justification, was beyond the pale. A familiar sense of unease, one that had long lain dormant within Mark, began to stir, but he quickly tamped it down. Squaring his shoulders, he marched over to the soldiers monopolizing the consoles.

"Hey, fellas," he called out, his tone dripping with false cheer. "I know you military types are big on dramatic entrances, but don't you think this is a bit much? I mean, we're all friends here, right?"

The soldier barely spared him a glance, his attention focused on the console before him.

"Look, shift's almost over. Folks can't tidy up with you lot parked there."

He reached out to grab the soldier's shoulder, but a familiar voice froze him in his tracks.

"They're exemplary soldiers, unlike some people. They only take orders from their superiors."

Mark squeezed his eyes shut, a pained sigh escaping his lips. He knew that voice all too well, the clipped tones and icy arrogance seared into his memory. He turned slowly, already certain of what he'd find.

"Hey... Jack..."

Sure enough, there stood Jack Hale, every inch the perfect military specimen. His blond hair was immaculately coiffed, his bearing ramrod straight. He looked down his aquiline nose at Mark, eyes glittering with barely-concealed disdain.

Mark had always marveled at how someone so classically handsome could be so utterly unlikeable. If Jack would just crack a genuine smile once in a while, he'd have women falling at his feet. But no, that superior sneer seemed to be his default expression, a permanent fixture on that chiseled face.

"I wish I could say it's a pleasure." Mark's voice was flat, his gaze level. "You want to tell me what this is all about? Seems like an awful lot of trouble just to pick up one wounded pilot."

"Holloway? He made a mistake. When he returns to duty, appropriate disciplinary action will be waiting for him." Jack said, raising the corners of his thin lips slightly.

"That's beside the point! This is a *civilian* research facility. What reason do you have for suddenly pointing guns and terrorizing the hardworking staff who put food on *your* plate?!"

Mark couldn't help but raise his voice.

"I don't owe explanations to civilians like you," Jack said coldly, without moving an eyebrow.

"Why you—!"

Mark lurched forward, but a soldier's voice cut in.

"This the one, Colonel?"

He gestured at the screen.

On the screen was displayed the trajectory of the falling object Dagget had captured earlier.

"Let me see," Jack said, practically shoving Mark aside as he rushed to the monitor.

"This is definitely the splashdown point," the soldier said, pointing to the coordinates on the screen.

Mark called out from behind him, "If it's where the Bugu sank, I can take you there myself."

"Salvage operations aren't my concern," Jack replied dismissively, his eyes glued to the screen. He spared a glance back at Mark, a glint of suspicion in his eyes. "There's a high probability that rebels have infiltrated this facility."

"Rebels?" The word fell from Mark's lips in disbelief, his brow furrowing even deeper. Simmons and the others exchanged uneasy glances, the tension in the room ratcheting up a notch.

Realization dawned on Mark. The entire rig had been placed under surveillance on the mere suspicion that they were colluding with these alleged rebels.

Simmons, unable to contain himself, blurted out, "Rebels? What rebels? Are you talking about terrorists or something?"

Jack leveled his frigid gaze at Simmons. "I'll be the one asking the questions here."

"This is ridiculous..." Mark muttered to himself, pushing the soldier aside and running his fingers over the nearby keyboard.

The others must have immediately understood the meaning of Mark's actions. Dagget also rushed over.

"Where did they gain entry from?!"

"We need to check all the hatches."

"Yes. If we cross-reference with today's menu—"

As expected, Dagget's work was quick.

Even Jack couldn't help but lean in, peering at the monitor as understanding dawned on him. "Can you actually determine that?"

Mark allowed himself a small, grim smile.

"At least the hatch opening and closing records, yeah."

He spared a sidelong glance at the man standing next to him, the man he had once trained alongside, shared the camaraderie of summer camp and football with, but those days were long gone. From the moment Jack had graduated from the officer academy and been assigned his post as a commissioned officer, he had been Mark's superior, despite being a mere two years his senior.

It was no secret that Jack's father, a former military man himself, held considerable sway in the Congress of Settlement Nations.

Jack's father, a battle-hardened commander in the Federation Forces, had been a cunning survivor. As the Earth Federation crumbled, he turned the tables, exposing the corruption festering within the military. It was a calculated gamble, one that paid off handsomely, catapulting him into the halls of power as a national parliamentarian.

Perhaps it was witnessing this that forged Jack's ironclad loyalty to the military, a devotion that Mark, raised in the mundane world of civvies, could scarcely fathom.

Through the eyes of a man, not a mere subordinate, Jack's arrogance and unwavering allegiance took on a twisted logic. His very existence within the CAF depended on enshrining his father as a paragon of virtue, never mind that the elder Hale had betrayed his own to claw his way to the top.

In this light, Jack's actions held some measure of reason. But Mark could not accept the fatal consequences they wrought.

"The fourth, fifth, and ninth hatches don't match the menu," Dagget reported, her brow furrowed in concentration as she scanned the monitor. "And the eleventh... that was Holloway's entry point."

"What time?" Mark asked.

Jack's voice rose, cutting off Mark's question. "Forget the timing! Where are those hatches located?!"

Dagget shot him a withering look, but pointed to the rig's structural diagram displayed on the screen.

"It's right there, plain as day."

"The fourth and fifth on the south side... and the ninth..."

Suddenly, the lights flickered and died, plunging the room into darkness as the monitor went dark.

"What the hell?!" Jack exclaimed, his tall frame springing up as he surveyed the surroundings.

Dagget couldn't quite hide the smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. "Looks like the power's been cut."

"Don't worry. The backup power will kick in soon. The voltage is low, but the computers and important areas will still have light, so your boys won't be groping blind out there."

Jack rounded on her, his eyes flashing.

"Where's the source?"

"Beats me. With the right know-how, you could cut the power from any terminal on this rig."

Jack clicked his tongue in frustration.

Mark had to bite back a chuckle. If anyone could pinpoint the location, it was Dagget. Hell, even he could do it. This rig was their second home, after all.

The proof was right there on the monitor, the surveillance feed highlighting the likely spot where the power had been tampered with.

"Enough! Step aside!" Jack practically shoved Mark and Dagget away from the console, his face a mask of determination.

"I want every inch of this rig searched! Lock down the passageways and arrest anyone who so much as looks at you funny. I don't want a single ant scurrying out of here, you hear me?"

The soldiers, ever faithful to their superior's orders, dispersed.

"You know, considering we're underwater and all, he could've at least said 'plankton' instead of 'ant,'" Simmons muttered under his breath.

Stifling a laugh, Mark whispered to them, "Just lay low and don't piss them off for a while. There's something I need to take care of..."

With a quick wink at Dagget, he slipped away, melting into the shadows of the corridor.

"And where's he off to? The bathroom?" Simmons asked, his eyebrows raised.

Dagget just shook her head, a knowing smile playing on her lips. "He's got a hunch. It's not exactly subtle."

The location of the intruders was already known. It was one of the storage rooms where research samples from the undersea farm were kept. The power room was spitting distance. For someone who knew the rig inside and out, killing the juice would be child's play. He had to get his hands on these so-called rebels, and prove the rig's innocence before Jack connected the dots.

If he didn't, no amount of denial would save them. The military would twist the truth until it fit their version of events. Jack would make damn sure of that.

Mark made his way down the corridor, trying to avoid drawing attention. A pair of soldiers clocked him, but he flashed his ID with a wry grin, nodding toward the restroom. They lowered their weapons with a snort.

"Ocean living, am I right? Chilly as hell," Mark quipped, slipping into the sanctuary of the head.

Once the soldiers confirmed his actions, they turned their backs and quickly left the area.

"Faithful but not very competent, it seems. Jack's subordinates, that is," Mark grinned to himself as he quickly dashed out into the corridor and hurried to his destination.

He swiped his ID badge, which also served as a key, at the door of the target room, but there was no response.

"They tampered with the key program from the inside..."

Mark immediately took out tools from the toolbox at his waist and began removing the card key recognition board from the door.

These people were capable of even this. They might indeed be terrorists from somewhere. But what business could such people possibly have with this rig?

There were plenty of plant seeds and cell samples here, but there were no weapons or ammunition that terrorists would be interested in...

"If I can just bypass this--"

However, just as Mark was about to insert the tip of a thin knife into the chip on the board, he was suddenly pulled away from the door by soldiers.

"Why am I not surprised? You never could leave well enough alone, could you?" Jack's voice dripped with condescension, his thin lips curled in a sneer.

"No matter. Blow the door."

"This is a research facility! You can't just—" Mark's plea died as the soldiers' rifles barked, opening fire on the lock and prying the door open with brute force.

Figures darted inside the room, making a break for the metal staircase leading to the external hatch.

"Don't let them escape!" Jack snarled, his men's rifles echoing in the enclosed space.

One of the fleeing intruders jerked and spasmed as a hail of bullets found their mark, their body tumbling back down the stairs.

Mark watched in horror as another figure, a woman, leaped out from behind cover, her hands raised in surrender.

"Stop! Please!"

But the soldiers kept their weapons trained on her, fingers twitching on the triggers. Acting on instinct, Mark threw himself between her and the guns, his arms spread wide.

"Stand down! She's unarmed and surrendering, can't you see that?!"

For a heartbeat, no one moved.

Mark stood firmly, arms still spread wide, in front of the slender woman clad in a diving wetsuit.

"Lower your guns! Haven't you killed enough?!"

Jack clicked his tongue softly.

"Tch..."

The woman in the wetsuit crouched down and removed the diving mask from her fallen comrade, but he had already breathed his last.

She glared fiercely at Jack and the others, her anger and sorrow evident in her expression. Her large, dark eyes set against her sepia-toned skin made her emotions all the more striking.

For a moment, Mark was captivated by the strength in her gaze. He had never seen a woman with such serious and deep eyes before.

"Take her away!" Jack ordered, and two soldiers pushed Mark aside, each grabbing the woman by an arm and dragging her away. For a fleeting instant, her gaze met Mark's.

Her face seemed to want to say something, but before he could react, she was gone, leaving him helpless and haunted by the image of her eyes.

Mimi emerged from the bedroom, an exasperated sigh escaping her lips.

"Seriously, Mark? You're not even dressed yet?"

She clutched an elegant gown in one hand as she regarded her boyfriend sprawled lazily on the sofa, casually flipping through a magazine.

"The limo will be here any minute now."

But Mark merely glanced at her languidly. Her figure was alluringly curvaceous draped in the soft gown, her brunette hair swept up in a loose updo. Even at twenty-seven, with her full lips painted a brazen red, her delicate nose arched just so, and those deep green eyes that still held a glimmer of the dreamer within, she could have been a starlet straight off the silver screen.

Mark couldn't deny her beauty. They'd been together nearly three years now, and this past year he'd spent more nights under her roof than his own, a telling sign that he was starting to see her as a potential life partner.

Yet something held him back. Perhaps it was her continued ties to the intelligence arm of the Congressional Armed Forces, the very entity he'd left behind. Or maybe it was something else entirely. Even contemplating the reasons felt like a chore.

"I told you weeks ago, honey. I need you with me tonight," she murmured, before planting a light kiss on Mark's cheek.

"I had an awful dream. I'm really not in the mood for this." He grimaced, twisting away from her affectionate gesture.

"Oh please, it was just a silly dream! I promise, these military galas aren't as dull as you think. We might even have fun!"

"I can't even find my damn cufflinks..." Mark's tone grew more irate, and Mimi heaved another weighty sigh.

"Yet another reason we should just get married." A playful smile tugged at her lips.

"What is it, reason number sixteen?" Mark said with a wry smile.

"*Seventeen*," Mimi corrected, this time planting a kiss on his lips.

"I do love you, you know."

"And I love you," With a coy wink, Mimi vanished into the walk-in closet, calling over her shoulder, "I think there's an extra set of cufflinks in here somewhere!"

Mark flopped back against the cushions with a groan. His headstrong girlfriend was hellbent on dragging him to this wretched event hosted by the CAF, and only a day after that godawful incident. The very last thing he wanted was to be surrounded by his former military colleagues, especially that ass Jack.

But Mimi emerged triumphant, dropping a pair of gleaming antique cufflinks into his open palm.

"They were my grandmother's," she explained, a wistful note in her voice. "Special heirlooms made of bone china. I remember Mom showing them off when I was little."

"Mimi, I can't..." Mark sputtered, taken aback by the gesture. "They're too precious. I couldn't possibly—"

"Oh hush," she interrupted with an airy wave. "You're the only man I'd want to wear them now." Her eyes sparkled with mischief as Mark sank back, at a loss for words.

"Mimi..."

"Well, in exchange..." Mimi's grin turned positively wicked and Mark couldn't help but chuckle.

"Let me guess. I have to be your arm candy tonight?"

“Bingo.”

She sauntered over to the vanity to apply a coat of lipstick, ignoring Mark’s pained sigh as he turned to face the window.

“Image on,” he commanded, and the digital display embedded in the glass flickered to life. A newscaster droned on about the latest incidents plaguing the Settlements. A fire in one, a shuttle grounded by engine trouble along a regular route in another. Even a respected Earth-born politician caught smoking in a Settlement airport! But none of it held Mark’s interest for long.

Sinking back onto the sofa, a new headline caught his ear.

“...the following endangered species have been confirmed extinct this month: American Mississippi alligator, Masai giraffe, European beaver, African rhinoceros, leatherback sea turtle, kangaroo rat...”

“Damn, Harold’s going to be devastated,” Mark muttered, thinking of his conservationist childhood friend. The poor guy had dedicated his life to protecting vulnerable wildlife.

But when they met up six months ago after so long apart, he had lamented how powerless humans were in the current situation, saying that what they were doing amounted to simply picking up the colossal mess left behind by the people of the past.

Lost in thought, he barely noticed Mimi reappear, dangling a silk tie the same deep blue as the cufflinks.

“This will look dashing with your suit,” she declared, looping her arms around his neck to steal another kiss.

But Mark pulled away, his jaw tight. “Mimi, I really don’t think--”

“It’s only two hours,” she interrupted, settling herself on his lap with a coy bat of her lashes. “Please, baby. I need you to schmooze for me tonight, talk me up to the strategic planning committee. Tell them how brilliant and qualified I am.”

“I’d rather just tell them how brilliant and gorgeous my girlfriend is,” he countered with a rakish grin, but Mimi swatted his chest.

“Dummy. Listen to me. Chairman Hawke is giving a speech tonight. It’s a chance to get close to him. That could definitely benefit your work too, you know. Like budget and equipment upgrades...”

“Politicians are fickle.”

Mark scoffed, turning his attention back to the screen.

“Turning now to a growing crisis, the global food shortage is hitting a critical point. Authorities report that the yield from ocean floor farming projects is not meeting expectations, and innovative deep seabed production techniques are still in the developmental phase. Experts caution that even if these new methods prove successful, their practical application could be years away.”

The newscaster had unknowingly brought up a topic that hit close to home for Mark.

“In response, the CAF has suggested that the abundant food resources of the agricultural Settlement known as Side Gaea be placed under the control of CONSENT for staving off predicted food shortages for Earth and other Settlements.”

"See? Tonight's speech touches on this. You must be interested," Mimi said, eyeing Mark slyly.

"However, this proposal has met with fierce opposition from critics who argue that even in the face of widespread hunger, allowing the military to subjugate Side Gaea sets a dangerous precedent and amounts to nothing less than an act of invasion. They maintain that such a move cannot be permitted, regardless of the dire circumstances."

"Obviously..." Mark couldn't help but mutter in response to the reporter.

"The Congress is currently consulting with various experts to explore peaceful solutions to this food crisis. All eyes are on Chairman Hawke, who is expected to make an address tonight with a potentially pivotal statement on the issue."

"Well? Feeling like going now?" Mimi laughed, wrapping her arms around Mark's neck again.

He could feel the alluring swell of her shapely breasts through the gown pressing against his still-casually unbuttoned shirt. The familiar scent of her perfume wafted over him.

If only she wasn't so keen on advancing her military career, Mark thought, she would be impossibly cute and charming. But it was futile to wish for that when she clearly took pride in accumulating achievements and asserting her independence.

Mark finally said in a low voice, "I still really don't want to go..."

"Geez, what's with you, Mark? Come on, you're a hero!" Mimi turned to face the screen as she sat back down beside him.

"In other news, Lt. Tim Holloway of the Congressional Armed Forces narrowly escaped death yesterday when he fell to Earth during a high-stakes satellite removal operation. The accident, which sent shockwaves through the military community, could have ended in tragedy if not for the heroic intervention of Mark Curran, a former Congressional pilot now working at a deep-sea research facility near the crash site. Curran's quick thinking and decisive action saved Holloway's life."

An old photo of Mark in his military uniform filled a frame on the screen. Mimi giggled.

"Ooh, how dashing! You'll definitely be the belle of the ball!"

"Give me a break," Mark said with a wry grin.

"In a shocking development, according to a statement from the CAF, Mr. Curran also played a crucial role in thwarting a security threat. He aided in apprehending suspicious individuals who had infiltrated the agricultural facility. These individuals are believed to be armed terrorists from Gaea plotting a rebellion against CONSENT. In response to this breach, the rig's status was immediately upgraded to Alpha Two."

"What the hell?!" Mark furrowed his brow at the reporter's announcement.

"They're making this more than it was. Those people weren't even armed."

"Huh?" Mimi looked at Mark, puzzled.

"What are they playing at?!"

Mark clenched his fists, his chiseled brow knotted tightly.

As Mark and Mimi stepped out of the limousine they had kept waiting for a good ten minutes, they headed towards the party venue adjacent to the Congressional Armed Forces headquarters, where Chairman Hawke was scheduled to deliver his speech that evening.

The circular building that served as the venue was a chic structure, with almost its entire perimeter made of transparent glass. About a third of the wall was illuminated with the “C” mark, the symbol for CONSENT, contributing to the glamour of the party.

But beneath the glitz and glamour, the glass walls served a more practical purpose, reinforced to withstand the impact of a shoulder missile or two, a grim reminder of the times they lived in.

Guarding this fortress of festivity were armed soldiers, their numbers bolstered by two imposing Bugu units that stood sentinel, their silhouettes casting long shadows across the evening light, a stark reminder of the military’s ever-present watch.

As Mark followed Mimi towards the glittering entrance, he couldn’t shake off a surreal feeling. Glancing upwards at the looming shapes of military mobile suits, a sight he had thought he would no longer witness, there was an odd familiarity in the sight of these that piqued a subtle dissonance within him.

As they stepped through the doorway, the aroma of luxury assaulted their senses. Tables overflowed with fresh vegetables and fruits, now considered precious commodities. Steam rose from expertly prepared meat and fish dishes, while an array of butter-laden breads and caviar-topped canapés threatened to spill over the edges of their platters. The opulence was overwhelming, and for a moment, Mark forgot the harsh realities of the world beyond these walls.

As waiters deftly maneuvered through clusters of elegantly dressed guests, trays laden with shimmering glasses of multi-hued champagnes, fine wines, and frothy beers, one had to wonder: where, in this cornucopia, was there any hint of the world’s food scarcities?

A wave of disquiet washed over Mark as he recalled the stark contrast of their daily toils, submerged and silent in the dark ocean depths. Here, under the chandeliers, humanity’s supposed leaders, tasked with steering the course of civilization itself, mingled. The grandeur of the party seemed necessary, perhaps, but Mark found himself questioning the true necessity of such extravagance in their conversation-laden indulgences.

Naturally, among the well-dressed people, there were many military personnel in their formal Congressional Armed Forces uniforms. The rank insignia adorning their collars and chests represented the army, navy, air force, space force, colonels, lieutenant colonels, staff officers, and generals and marshals... It was an impressive lineup.

Every now and then, he caught glimpses of familiar faces, friendships formed in quieter, more personal moments during their service, connections that now, amidst the laughter and clinking glasses, felt worlds away.

As Mark stood amidst the glittering crowd, a sense of unease crept up his spine, mingling with the faint nostalgia that tugged at his heart.

Mimi, resplendent in a form-fitting, crimson dress, leaned in close and whispered, "You know plenty of people here, Mark. Let yourself enjoy the evening."

Mark, now clad in a crisp tuxedo and the tie Mimi had chosen for him, forced a smile to his lips.

"Yeah... I'll try," he assured her, accepting a flute of champagne from a passing waiter. As he took a sip, his gaze was drawn to a particularly large gathering across the room, with Chairman Hawke, the guest of honor, at its center.

Rumored to be in his early sixties, Hawke cut an impressive figure, his chiseled features and deep-set eyes lending him an air of distinction. His black hair, touched with silver at the temples, was impeccably styled, and his tuxedo fit him like a second skin. As he charmed the ladies surrounding him, Mark couldn't help but think that he resembled a Hollywood heartthrob more than a politician.

But Hawke's good looks were only part of the equation. In his position, political savvy was crucial, but even more important was his popularity among the wives of the high-ranking officials who governed each Settlement. To be disliked by these women was to risk the disapproval of their husbands, a fact that Hawke understood all too well. He was, without a doubt, a master of the game.

"The most pressing issue, of course, is this food crisis. We cannot afford to postpone addressing it if we want our children and grandchildren to live in peace and prosperity," Chairman Hawke spoke to the ladies with a smile.

A red-haired lady nodded in agreement, "You're absolutely right. It's heartbreaking to think of my son having to eat that dreadful seaweed at school every lunchtime."

Another lady's face clouded over, "But isn't it also frightening to think that we have to eat vegetables grown in the narrow farms within the Settlements, exposed to pollution and chemical fertilizers?"

Hawke seized the opportunity, his voice smooth as silk. "That is precisely why we must welcome Settlement Gaea into the fold of CONSENT. With their technology, we can produce safer, more abundant food for all."

One lady hesitated, "But... I've heard that Settlement Gaea is... somewhat unknown and suspicious."

She glanced at the lady beside her, who also nodded, "Yes. Isn't it the most remote Settlement that doesn't even have clear autonomy?"

"I heard the people there are comfortable touching disgusting creatures like insects and snakes," another lady added, her lip curling in revulsion.

Hawke, ever the diplomat, offered a wry smile. "While it's true that Gaea is far from the center, we mustn't let prejudice cloud our judgment."

A young officer who had been silent until then spoke up, "You need not worry. We merely aim to utilize Gaea's labor for food production. Nothing untoward that should concern you ladies. They are an ignorant people unaware of their station. To indulge their demands for autonomy after repeatedly rebuffing our government's overtures would only lead us down the path of the old regime's loss of authority."

Although Mark could only see his back, it was undoubtedly Jack.

"Same old Jack... running his mouth..." Mark muttered under his breath.

However, Hawke dismissed it with a light laugh.

"I appreciate your consideration, but our government is not to be underestimated. This policy has only just begun. If Gaea joins the Congressional government, there will be great benefits for them as well. If we sincerely explain this in an orderly manner, I believe we will definitely gain their cooperation."

"It's a waste of time. We should use military force to bring them to heel. Gaea is a backwater, with barely any defenses to speak of. No need for pointless courtesies," Jack insisted.

Hawke, sensing the tension in the air, turned to the ladies with a self-deprecating smile.

"Ah, to be young and so full of confidence in one's physical strength. I remember those days well, though I must admit, it becomes harder to maintain that stamina as the years pass."

"Oh, Chairman, you're too much. Hohohoho," one lady laughed in amusement.

"Oh my, hehehehe," the other ladies giggled, their faces flushed.

But Jack, oblivious to the shift in mood, merely grimaced, unsure if Hawke's joke had landed.

"The Chairman is still more skillful," Mark thought to himself. While he wouldn't want to work with Jack, he couldn't help but find his lack of wit somewhat endearing.

"Chairman Hawke," a gentle-looking, middle-aged military officer approached and called out.

"The stage for your speech seems to be ready. Would you like to take a look?"

"Oh, to be escorted by General Garneaux himself, I am honored," Hawke exclaimed with slight exaggeration as he looked at the officer.

Garneaux, the Congressional Armed Forces Governor General, was a dignified military man in his early sixties with neatly styled, almost entirely white hair and numerous medals weighing heavily on his chest. A self-made military man from the days of the Federation government, Garneaux had keenly discerned the situation during the establishment of the Congressional Armed Forces and had persuaded many military personnel to join early on, making him a key contributor to the establishment of the new government.

Unlike other military officers who directed battles from behind desks, Garneaux had risen through the ranks from a mobile suit pilot and had experienced the battlefield firsthand. As a result, he was known as a man who understood the younger soldiers and had a fair amount of popularity and many followers among them.

"If you'll excuse me, ladies," Hawke said with a smile, "I must take my leave. Do enjoy my speech."

As Hawke followed Garneaux, Jack was left standing awkwardly, the ladies quickly dispersing to other circles.

Mark, unable to contain his amusement, let out a chuckle. But before he could savor the moment, a voice called out from beside him.

"Mark? Lieutenant Mark Curran, is that you?" a man called out.

The booming voice belonged to Fred, a jovial administrative official who had been Mark's buddy back in his military days. Whenever Mark had stopped by the office, good ol' Fred would always welcome him with a piping hot cup of freshly brewed coffee and a warm smile.

Mark grinned, shaking his old friend's hand.

"Ah, I'm just a civilian now, Fred."

"That's right, that's right," Fred chuckled, his smile as bright as ever.

"Good evening, Fred," Mimi chimed in, leaning in with a dazzling smile of her own.

"Miss Mimi!" Fred exclaimed, planting a gentlemanly kiss on her cheek. "You look even more stunning than usual tonight."

He turned back to Mark, eyes twinkling. "You know, Mark here is still a living legend in the military. No one can pilot a mobile suit quite like Lieutenant Curran! And from what I saw on the news, he's done it again, eh?"

Mimi beamed at Mark, pride shining in her eyes.

"He sure has. I couldn't be more proud."

Mark shifted uncomfortably, a complex mix of emotions swirling within him at the mention of the news coverage.

"Well, I... that was..."

"A true hero, through and through," a new voice cut in. Jack had materialized behind Mark, his words dripping with sarcasm.

Mimi turned to him with an affectionate smile.

"Why Jack, don't you clean up nicely! Quite dashing in that formal wear."

Jack smirked, his eyes devoid of warmth.

"Your hero here doesn't look half bad in a tuxedo either, I must admit."

Mark met Jack's gaze, seeing right through the facade. He sighed inwardly, bracing himself for what was to come.

"A pity you missed meeting the Chairman, Mark. I'm sure he would have loved to hear your thoughts on the food crisis," Jack continued.

Mark squared his shoulders, facing Jack head-on.

"Yes, I imagine our opinions differ quite drastically on that front."

"The people of Gaea are making a sincere effort to acknowledge and atone for humanity's past mistakes. They're working tirelessly to create an ideal ecological environment with their own two hands. We could stand to learn a thing or two from their example."

"Soapbox, Mark?" Jack scoffed.

"But I suppose you have to spin it that way to justify all the time and research funding you've frittered away thus far."

Mark's voice rose, his frustration bubbling over.

"So, what, you think military force is the answer to everything? Can't you see that's precisely what led to the Earth ending up in this sorry state?!"

Mimi tugged at his sleeve, her eyes pleading.

"Mark, please! Not here, not now."

Mark deflated slightly, but he couldn't let it go. Not yet. He fixed Jack with a piercing stare.

"Sorry Mimi, but I need to get this off my chest. So, what the hell's with assigning my rig an Alpha Two, Jack? How could a handful of unarmed intruders possibly be considered armed terrorists plotting to overthrow the government?"

Jack's pale eyes narrowed to slits.

"Some hero you turned out to be. I hand you glory on a silver platter and this is the thanks I get?"

"I never asked for that! When did you become the kind of man who guns people down without a shred of justification?!"

"You have no right to question my duties!" Jack roared back, his composure slipping.

"ENOUGH!" Mimi wedged herself between them, her patience thoroughly exhausted. "Both of you, cut it out this instant! This is a party, for heaven's sake. Take your petty bickering elsewhere!"

She snatched two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter's tray and shoved them into the men's hands. "Now drink up and play nice! It's a lovely evening and I won't have you two ruining it with this nonsense."

As Jack took the glass, he leaned in close to Mimi and whispered, "I thought having you by his side would make him a bit more obedient to the military. Pity..."

With that parting jab, he melted back into the crowd.

Mimi whirled to face Mark, her eyes flashing with anger.

Mark held up his hands defensively.

"What? You saw how he was goading me!"

"Have you forgotten where we are? Your behavior reflects on me! Do you have any idea how much harder you're making things for my career?" Mimi hissed through clenched teeth.

Mark's shoulders slumped. She was right, of course. In a room full of high-ranking military personnel, the last thing he should be doing was causing a scene. If Mimi wanted to keep climbing the ranks, she needed her partner to make a good impression.

Mark's voice came, barely more than a whisper.

"I'm sorry, Mimi."

Mimi huffed out a sigh, the fight draining from her.

"Just... promise me you'll be more careful from now on? I need you to do this, for both our sakes."

"I will, I swear it." Mark's eyes shone with sincerity as he drew her close, breathing in the familiar scent of her hair. "Cross my heart."

The hint of a smile played at the corners of her lips. She leaned in, brushing a feather-light kiss against his cheek.

"See that you do, mister."

"Well, well! If it isn't the lovebirds themselves!" a jovial voice boomed out. Mark and Mimi sprang apart, whirling to find General Garneaux beaming at them, his grin threatening to split his face in two.

"Still going strong, I see! Ah, to be young and in love." He sighed wistfully, his eyes twinkling with mirth. "You two are the envy of us all, you know."

Mimi quickly composed herself, greeting him with a polite bow. "General, it's an honor to see you again."

Garneaux waved off her formalities with a chuckle. "The honor's all mine, my dear! And you!" He turned to Mark, clapping him heartily on the back. "The man of the hour himself! I hear congratulations are in order, eh? You've made quite the splash. You've done us all proud."

Mark rubbed the back of his neck, a sheepish grin tugging at his lips. "Just doing my duty, sir. Though I have to say, it's a privilege to be here at your personal invitation."

He reached out to shake Garneaux's proffered hand, marveling at the unexpected softness of his palm. For a military man, the General had surprisingly gentle hands.

Garneaux clapped Mark on the shoulder, his grip warm and familiar.

"It does my heart good to see you looking so well, Mark. Losing a pilot of your caliber was a real blow to the service. A damned shame, that's what it was. You sure this old soldier couldn't lure you into coming back?"

Mark laughed, shaking his head ruefully.

"I'm honored, truly. But I've found my calling elsewhere, I'm afraid. Besides, I left the military precisely because I wasn't cut out to be a soldier."

"Ah yes, your little seaweed-picking venture. Quite the noble pursuit, I'm sure."

He leaned in closer, his voice low and urgent. "But *entre nous*, Curran... surely you can't truly believe that's where you belong? A man of your talents, wasted on such... *frivolities*?"

Mark felt a flicker of irritation at the General's dismissive tone, but he tamped it down, keeping his expression carefully neutral.

"With respect, sir... my team's work is vital to the continued survival of the human race. Our oceans hold the key to--"

Garneaux raised a skeptical eyebrow, a wry smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"If you say so..." He shook his head, clearly unconvinced.

Mark hesitated for a moment before broaching the subject weighing on his mind. "General, about the security level at Rig--"

Garneaux's eyes widened, his interest instantly piqued. "Do you have information on those rebels?"

"No, nothing like that," Mark hastened to clarify. "It's just... I find it hard to believe they were truly rebels. They weren't even armed! Jack's response was a clear overreaction."

Garneaux's brow furrowed, his expression grave. "Is that so?"

Mark nodded emphatically. "He opened fire on one of them without even confirming if they were armed. If I hadn't intervened, he would've shot the other one too, even after they'd already surrendered. I don't mean to speak ill of Jack, but killing them outright would've made it impossible to learn their true motives."

Garneaux sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose. "That boy... always so reckless, no matter how many times I warn him to exercise caution."

He met Mark's gaze, his eyes sincere.

"Frankly, it's a relief you were there to keep the situation from escalating. But I can understand why the prisoner might be reluctant to talk, given the circumstances."

"She's not saying anything at all?" Mark asked, concern etched on his face.

Garneaux shook his head, his frustration evident.

"Not a word, and it's becoming quite the problem. From what you've told me, there seem to be discrepancies in Jack's report as well. I'm not even certain she's truly a rebel from Gaea as we were led to believe."

The image of those haunting eyes flashed through Mark's mind, boring into his soul as she was dragged away. Those were not the eyes of a terrorist or an insurgent. There was a purity there, a depth he couldn't quite fathom.

"Why won't she just explain herself?" Mark muttered, half to himself. "Surely she must realize how important it is to clear up this misunderstanding..."

Garneaux studied him intently, a glimmer of an idea sparking in his eyes.

"Mark, I have a favor to ask of you."

Mark blinked, caught off guard.

"Of course, anything."

"Would you be willing to meet with her? To talk to her?" Garneaux asked, his voice low and urgent.

Mark gaped at him, astonishment written all over his face.

"Me? But why?"

Garneaux leaned in closer, his words measured and persuasive.

"You may be able to get through to her in a way that we in the military cannot. You're a civilian, a neutral party. More than that, you're the one who shielded her, risking your own life to protect hers."

Mark shook his head, struggling to find the right words. "I don't know if I..."

Garneaux held up a hand, cutting off his uncertain protest.

"Mark, I implore you. Consider this a personal request, not an order from a General. If we can ascertain their true goals, it would go a long way in easing tensions with Gaea and preventing any further... misunderstandings."

Mark hesitated, torn between his reservations and the undeniable allure of Garneaux's words. If he could help prevent more needless bloodshed, more unwarranted suspicion...

"And of course, your cooperation would undoubtedly benefit Mimi's career prospects as well," Garneaux added with a conspiratorial wink.

The memory of his earlier confrontation with Jack flashed through Mark's mind, along with a twinge of guilt. He hated feeling like he was constantly undermining Mimi's ambitions, working at cross purposes to her goals.

Refusing Garneaux's request wouldn't be difficult. He could walk away right now, wash his hands of this whole mess. But the thought of once again derailing Mimi's dreams, of being the one to force her to take the long way around... it ate at him.

And if he was being honest with himself, the prospect of seeing those pure, haunting eyes again, of unraveling the mystery behind them... it called to him on a deep, visceral level.

He needed to know. Needed to understand what had brought her to the rig, what secrets she held so close to her heart.

Perhaps it was just a flimsy justification, a way to assuage his own selfish curiosity. But in that moment, Garneaux's request felt deeply important, imbued with a significance he couldn't quite put into words.

"Alright," Mark agreed at last, his voice soft but resolute. "I can't promise she'll talk to me, but... I'll try."

Garneaux beamed at him, clapping him on the shoulder once more. "Excellent, my boy! I have every confidence in you. If anyone can get through to her, it's you."

He glanced around furtively before leaning in close, his voice barely above a whisper. "I'd like you to go see her right away, if you don't mind. I'm afraid I have to go and gladhand at that damned speech now, but time is of the essence. You know where she's being held, yes?"

Mark nodded, his mind already racing ahead to the task before him.

"Good lad," Garneaux murmured, giving his shoulder a final squeeze before striding off towards the stage, his bearing as regal and self-assured as ever.

Mark watched him go, a maelstrom of emotions swirling in his chest. Pride at being singled out, trusted with such a delicate task. Gratitude for Garneaux's unwavering faith in him, even now, long after he'd traded in his uniform for civilian clothes.

But beneath it all, a stubborn kernel of unease, a vague sense of disquiet he couldn't quite shake. For all Garneaux's charisma and easy charm, for all the awe and respect Mark still held for the man... he couldn't help but wonder.

How much did the General truly know about the lives of the men and women under his command? The ones who spent their days drenched in oil and gunpowder, hurtling through the icy void of space at his behest? Did he ever pause to consider the weight of the words that flowed so easily from his lips, the orders that sent them marching off to their duties... and all too often, to their deaths?

Mark tried to shake off the treacherous thoughts, tried to focus on the task at hand. Garneaux was counting on him, trusting him to uncover the truth. He couldn't let himself get distracted by baseless doubts and idle speculation.

"Mark? Is everything alright?" Mimi's voice cut through his reverie, her brow creased with concern. "Where's the General? The speech is about to start."

Mark blinked, forcing a reassuring smile.

"Sorry, love. Something's come up. I'm afraid you'll have to go on without me."

Mimi's eyes widened, confusion and alarm warring in their emerald depths.

"What? What do you mean, something's come up?"

"I can't say just now," Mark replied, hating the evasiveness in his own voice. "But I promise, it'll all make sense soon enough."

He leaned in to brush a kiss against her cheek, already turning to leave. Mimi's voice rose to a near-shout behind him, sharp with anger and bewilderment.

"Mark! Explain yourself this instant!"

"Don't worry, it's nothing bad, I swear!"

And with that, he strode off towards the exit.

Chapter.02

False Accusation

Mark stepped through the automatic doors, his footsteps echoing in the cold, metallic corridors of the military headquarters' detention center. This was where they brought the unfortunate souls arrested by the army, a labyrinth of interrogation rooms, surveillance chambers, and holding cells. In the depths of the facility, research labs lay waiting for those moments when necessity called, while the basement housed the grim realities of the autopsy room and morgue. It was a place that repelled most people, a shadow they preferred not to acknowledge. But for Mark, crossing this threshold was familiar territory, though he had always been careful to stay on the right side of the bars.

Beyond the sterile walls and the passageways that were well-lit yet somehow devoid of warmth, guards were stationed to inspect those entering this specialized area and apprehend anyone attempting to escape. As he emerged from the automatic doors, a burly guard looked up, momentarily surprised, before standing at attention.

Mark approached the counter with a confident stride, unfazed by the guard's imposing stature.

"I'm here to see the woman from Gaea, the alleged rebel brought in yesterday," he said, his tone calm and assertive.

The guard, easily two sizes larger than Mark, stared down at him impassively.

"No visitors allowed without headquarters approval."

Mark met his gaze unflinchingly.

"I'm aware. This is a confidential request."

"That's irrelevant."

"Even if it's a direct request from General Garneaux?"

The guard remained unmoved.

"Proper procedures and a permit are required. No exceptions."

Mark tilted his head, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. "But you recognize me, don't you, soldier?"

Recognition flickered in the guard's eyes.

"Of course... Lieutenant Curran."

"That was a long time ago. I'm just a civilian now."

"Right, of course."

For a moment, the guard's stern expression softened.

"So I've heard she's not talking," Mark continued, pressing his advantage.

"That's the word," the guard confirmed hesitantly.

"General Garneaux personally asked me to interview her. Thought she might open up to a civilian."

"I see your point, but I'm sorry, sir. I have orders."

Mark chuckled wryly.

"You're absolutely right, of course. If I were in your shoes, I'd say the same thing." He turned as if to leave, then paused. "Funny thing about people, though... they tend to let their guard down at night. Especially after a full day with no one to talk to. Fatigue sets in, and even the strongest individuals have their moments of weakness."

The guard's grin widened.

"I see what you're getting at."

Mark shrugged apologetically.

"But," he continued, "if I were in your shoes, I'd probably say the same thing. Sorry for the trouble. I'll come back tomorrow with an official permit from the General."

He started to walk away, but the guard called out.

"Wait... Lieutenant Curran—I mean, Mr. Curran..."

"Just Mark is fine," he replied with a disarming grin.

The guard hesitated, then made a decision.

"Let's see what we can do about that access card of yours."

Surprise and gratitude lit up Mark's face as he handed over his card. The guard produced a device from under the counter and inserted it, tapping a sequence on the panel. There was a faint whir of machinery.

"Just a little trick," the guard explained with a conspiratorial smile. "One-time deal, no record."

"Color me impressed," Mark marveled as he shook his head in amazement. In a place renowned for its uncompromising security, this was no small feat. The guard's unexpected tech savvy belied his tough exterior.

"I was a bit of a computer prodigy back in the day," the guard said, flashing a boyish grin that belied his intimidating appearance. "Hacking was my specialty."

"HR sure missed the mark with you," Mark quipped.

The guard laughed.

"It's more of a hobby. Wouldn't be as fun if it was my actual job."

He handed back the access card.

"Sector B, second door."

"I owe you one," Mark said sincerely before heading off with a wave.

The soldier hadn't lied. There she sat, alone in a bleak cell deep within the bowels of Sector B. Mark slid his hacked keycard into the lock, and the heavy metal door swung open with surprising ease. The woman's eyes widened slightly, startled to see her visitor clad in a crisp tuxedo rather than military fatigues.

"Are you injured?" Mark inquired gently. She blinked, momentarily taken aback, before her face fell blank, and she glanced away. Still garbed in the damp wetsuit from her capture, both wrists remained firmly shackled.

"God, how awful..." The words slipped out before Mark could stop himself. At the soft sound of his voice, something flickered in her eyes.

"I'd like to talk with you. Let's move to the room across the hall for now, shall we?" Leaving the cell door ajar, Mark crossed the narrow corridor and swiped the keycard again. The door to the interrogation chamber clicked open.

Unease flitted across the woman's features as she watched him warily. Noticing her apprehension, Mark made a show of spreading his hands wide and gestured to the open doorway with a roguish grin. "No need to worry. Just a plain room with table, chairs, no thumbscrews or iron maidens. Cross my heart. Can you stand? Or has hunger sapped your strength?" Her tense expression softened just a fraction at Mark's weak attempt at humor, though her face remained largely impassive. Still, she rose obediently at his beckoning and took a seat in the interrogation room, movements precise despite her bound hands.

"My name is Mark Curran. And you are?"

She met his question with stony silence as he settled into the chair across from her.

Mark sighed. "Look, what I want to know is simple. Why infiltrate our rig?"

The woman turned away with a huff.

Exasperated, Mark raked a hand through his hair. "Some insist on painting you as terrorists because you weren't armed to the teeth. But I'm not buying it. I just want to understand your motives here. That's all."

He leaned across the table, trying to catch her eye, but she wouldn't meet his gaze.

"Not feeling chatty, huh? Well, that's just great..."

Heaving another sigh, Mark pushed back his chair and made for the exit. He paused in the open doorway and glanced back at her.

"But I want you to remember this. If I hadn't intervened on your behalf yesterday, you'd have met the same fate as your friend... I'm not asking for gratitude, but you need to realize your situation is pretty damn precarious."

Her eyes flew wide at that. Jerking her head up, she asked in a voice rusty from disuse, "You're not military?"

Mark quirked a brow, surprised by her question and the unexpected smoothness of her low, even tones. A far cry from Mimi's animated chirping.

Turning to face her fully, he replied, "I was, once upon a time. These days, I'm just a concerned citizen trying to lend a hand in research to boost food production. Mark Curran, at your service."

He took a step towards her, one arm outstretched for a handshake. After a moment's hesitation, she lifted her cuffed wrists and took his hand.

"Cynthia Graves. Chief Bioengineer for Gaea. I'm a scientist."

"A scientist?" Mark looked at her in surprise.

"That's right." Her dark eyes studied him intently, trying to gauge his reaction.

She was by no means a beauty. But the big eyes shining in the middle of her sepia-colored skin were like polished obsidian, and deep within them lurked a transparency like a profound lake.

It was a rather strange sensation. The image of something he had forgotten for a while vaguely surfaced in Mark's mind. It had not yet taken shape. But that image was surely accompanied by a wonderful memory for Mark. Perhaps aided by that image, he instinctively believed that she was definitely not the kind of person Jack and the others claimed her to be.

"Okay, I'll bite. What's a respectable scientist doing slinking around an offshore rig in a getup straight out of a spy flick?"

Mark peered into Cynthia's eyes, which contained something he still couldn't recall, with his hands propped on the table.

"Because Dr. Riva asked me to."

"Dr. Riva?" Mark involuntarily straightened up. "You mean the head researcher who quit last month? Just up and walked away, said his work was a dead end..."

Cynthia cut him off, eyes blazing. "Quit? Is that what they're saying? Dr. Riva didn't resign. He was silenced. Permanently."

Mark scoffed, shaking his head in disbelief.

"I'm open to giving you the benefit of the doubt, but you've got to give me something more believable to work with. Why would anyone want Dr. Riva dead?"

The metal chair screeched against the floor as he stood abruptly and turned his back on her, agitated.

"Think about it!" Cynthia urged. "Why would a man so driven, so dedicated to his research, throw in the towel after one setback? You were on the same rig so you must have seen how passionate he was, how tirelessly he worked."

Mark froze. The expression on Cynthia's face as he turned around was deadly serious. Mark inwardly reproached himself for his lack of insight.

Deflating, Mark held up his hands in supplication.

"You're right, I'm sorry. Please, go on," he said, sitting back down.

"When Congress ordered the ag settlements to step up production, Dr. Riva approached me about joining forces. He was developing some groundbreaking methods to boost yields, but he needed a partner. Someone with my expertise in bioengineering."

She fixed Mark with a penetrating stare. "Surely, you can see that their current practices are woefully inadequate to meet the skyrocketing quotas. I agreed to collaborate on the research, but we kept my involvement strictly confidential."

"But Dr. Riva's work was a wash. None of it worked," Mark said slowly, brow furrowed. "He resigned in disgrace..."

He had seen Dr. Riva countless times, holed up in the dim research lab of the rig, staring at test tubes and microscopes, not even sleeping at night.

"Did it really fail? After Dr. Riva left, did anyone bother to actually verify the results?"

Mark looked at Cynthia with a start. Mark remembered that when Dr. Riva resigned, some official from the CAF came and took the test tubes containing the samples Cynthia mentioned.

He clearly remembered Dr. Riva's assistant, who had stayed on the rig, saying something about not being able to dispose of the supposedly failed enzymes or whatever.

"The samples... the data... they're not on the rig anymore..."

At Mark's words, Cynthia let out a soft sigh.

"I see... In other words, by order from above, they were either confiscated or sealed away or something like that?"

Mark finally conceded, "Indeed..."

Seizing the moment, Cynthia pressed on, her voice filled with urgency, "That's precisely why I needed to examine those samples. To uncover the truth behind their disappearance."

Her eyes bore into Mark's, shimmering with an intensity that seemed to penetrate the depths of his memories.

"But why would the CAF label you as terrorists?"

"I can't say for certain," Cynthia admitted. "I can only guess that our presence threatens them. That they fear what we might discover if we were to examine those samples."

A heavy silence fell between them as Mark grappled with the implications of her words. If Cynthia was telling the truth, the ramifications were staggering. Yet, without further investigation, answers would remain elusive.

But one thing was certain: the answer could not be found as things stood now.

"I need access to those samples, Mark. You have to take me to them. Please."

Saying this, Cynthia placed her handcuffed hands on top of Mark's hand resting on the table. In the chilly room, the warmth of her palms made Mark's heart skip a beat.

"You can't be serious," he managed to say, his voice strained. "What you're asking is impossible."

"We have to! Surely you understand. Whether it's right or wrong to leave things as they are!"

Cynthia gazed up at him with her large eyes, still grasping Mark's hand. At that moment, Mark finally realized what he had sensed in Cynthia's eyes... It was the same sparkle that Harold, who had become a nature conservation officer, had shown him with gleaming eyes in a photo book during their boyhood, the eyes of the animals that had once lived in such abundance on this earth.

Eyes that looked straight at you, intently trying to sense something, eyes of curiosity seeking to discern the future. Cynthia's eyes radiated the same brilliance as those creatures. Mark stared at Cynthia's eyes for a while, as if entranced, but eventually lowered his gaze again and stood up.

It was precisely because he understood that Cynthia was not lying that Mark was conflicted. What she was trying to do, and what Mimi and Garneaux expected of him... they were all important, and he wanted to live up to all of them...

Eventually, Mark slowly opened his eyes, looked down at Cynthia as if shaking something off, and held out his hand.

"I must be out of my mind tonight."

Her face transformed, incandescent with hope and vindication. "I knew it! I knew you were someone I could trust!"

Mark laughed, rueful, reaching out to clasp her outstretched hands.

"I don't know about that, but I do know I'm a rotten liar. Especially to myself."

Jack had just finished listening to Chairman Hawke's speech and was straightening his formal attire in the restroom when General Garneaux appeared before him, washing his hands at the sink. Jack hurriedly nodded and stepped back, giving the General space.

"Quite a riveting speech, wouldn't you say, Jack?"

Garneaux raised an eyebrow, his reflection in the mirror meeting Jack's gaze with a pleasant expression.

"Yes, General," Jack replied, standing at attention.

A mocking smile played on Garneaux's lips.

"You don't actually believe I'm being sincere, do you? I was merely complimenting his oratory skills. Heh heh heh," he chuckled, his tone laced with jest.

"Yes, sir," Jack managed a strained smile.

"His technique is certainly impressive, but the content? Utterly unrealistic. As a commander, he's nothing more than a peace-addled optimist, though I suppose he is still the Chairman of the state."

"I couldn't agree more, General," Jack nodded in agreement.

"Now Jack, umm..." Garneaux's voice dropped to a low whisper as he adjusted his appearance in the mirror.

"This Gaeen rebel business, you do have that under control, yes?"

"Absolutely!" Jack asserted without hesitation.

"Are you sure?"

An odd inflection in Garneaux's tone caught Jack off guard, but he maintained his composure.

"Perfectly, sure, sir."

Garneaux's eyes flicked up to meet Jack's, a smile twisting his features.

"Very well, then. Enjoy your evening."

With that, he turned on his heel and strode out of the restroom, leaving Jack alone with his thoughts.

"You too, General."

As Jack watched him go, a sense of unease washed over him. Something about his parting words, the way he had looked at him... It didn't sit right. Jack replayed the conversation in his mind, fixating on one phrase in particular.

"Are you sure?"

The words echoed in Jack's mind, Garneaux's departing glance seared into his memory. In an instant, Jack burst from the restroom and exited the party venue, his voice ringing out to the soldiers securing the perimeter.

"Standby soldiers! I need three of you with me, now!"

Mark's memory served him well. The classified substance, confiscated from the civilians, stored away from prying eyes, though not dangerous, it was not something they wanted in public view. It had to be in the lab downstairs.

He took Cynthia's hand, heading straight for the lab with unwavering determination. The late hour worked in their favor; the staff had long since clocked out or escaped to the party, leaving the place deserted. Mark breathed

a sigh of relief as they entered the locker room-like storage area, the layout unchanged despite the two-year gap in his memory.

They made a beeline for the navigation computer, Cynthia's nervous energy palpable. "Any special codes?" she asked, her voice tight.

Mark shook his head, fingers flying over the keys.

"Not for this level. Let's see what we can find under... Dr. Riva."

A synthetic voice responded, "CONSENT Network: Accessing Library Samples."

"There!" Mark grinned triumphantly as a section of shelving slid open, revealing a tray loaded with precious vials.

The two hurried over.

Cynthia lifted the tray reverently, her eyes shining.

"It's all here," she breathed.

"Bingo!" Mark grinned.

"Where can we run the experiments?"

"The lab's right next door."

Mark punched in some numbers from his access card on the door panel. The glass door slid open, revealing a pristine laboratory with an array of test tubes, flasks, reagents, microscopes, and other typical lab equipment.

Cynthia immediately moved to the microscope, selecting a test tube from the tray.

"Bioluminescence," she said, her voice low and intense. "You're familiar with the concept?"

"Yeah, it's the light produced by living organisms through special enzymes without generating heat. Like fireflies, deep-sea fish, or jellyfish..."

"Correct. Now, what if it were possible to have bioluminescence with heat?"

As she spoke, Cynthia used a dropper to extract a solution from one of the test tubes, placed it on a slide, and set it under the microscope.

"Wait, what?" Mark was momentarily puzzled.

"Growing crops in the deep sea... It's only possible in limited areas right now, isn't it?"

"Oh, I see!" Mark nodded.

"Exactly. If we could provide the desired water temperature and light without having to search for hydrothermal vents in the deep sea, it would revolutionize agriculture and dramatically increase crop yields!"

Mark's eyes sparkled with excitement.

"No doubt about it... This is it..."

Cynthia peered into the microscope, nodded, and picked up two test tubes.

"He was able to isolate an enzyme which catalyzes a bioluminescent reaction. He just wasn't able to produce it in large enough quantities or stabilize it in water."

She held up the test tubes in front of Mark and handed one to him.

"But on Gaea, we developed a technology to provoke stable chain reactions in certain enzymes, causing them to clone themselves, if you will. It was successful, and with these enzymes, the technology would be complete."

Mark was simply astounded.

“Really?”

“The test tube that you hold is the product of my work, and this solution here is the product of Dr. Riva’s enzyme. If our theories so far are correct, we should be able to create a new form of bioluminescence right here.”

Cynthia looked at Mark.

“This is the first time trying to combine them in this form?” he asked.

“History in the making. That’s why you’re the witness. But... if it fails... I’ll just be a liar, won’t I?” she said with a wry smile.

Mark didn’t know how to respond to her demeanor.

He just gave a slightly strained smile and said, “Either way, you need a witness, right?”

Jack stormed into the prison, flanked by three menacing guards, their footsteps echoing ominously in the empty corridors. The guard at the counter leaped to his feet, snapping off a crisp salute, his eyes wide with surprise and a hint of fear.

“I’m here to see prisoner 33130,” Jack barked, his voice harsh and unyielding.

The guard swallowed nervously.

“Sir! Prisoner 33130 is currently no longer in the holding area, sir.”

Jack’s brow furrowed, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

“What do you mean?” His words were clipped, each syllable dripping with barely contained rage.

“Colonel, as you know, Mark Curran came to visit her earlier and took her to another location...” The guard’s face had gone pale, his voice trembling slightly under the weight of Jack’s intense gaze.

“Where did they go?!” Jack demanded, his voice rising as he strode forward, closing the distance between himself and the terrified guard.

Cynthia held out a test tube filled with the substance Dr. Riva had created. “Okay, ready? Pour it in here, please.”

Mark hesitated for the briefest of moments before nodding resolutely.

“Why not?”

He carefully tipped the liquid from his own test tube into the one Cynthia was holding.

The instant the liquids combined, a blinding light exploded forth as if the sun itself had materialized in the lab. Mark threw up a hand to shield his dazzled eyes, blinking away spots.

“Holy!”

The luminescence was unlike anything he’d ever seen, a scintillating, golden radiance tinged with fluorescent lemon hues.

Cynthia let out an exultant whoop, her eyes scrunched up against the glare, but her face beaming with unrestrained joy.

“We did it, Mark!”

Mark lowered his hand, astonished. “It actually worked?”

"Yes! The experiment was a total success!"

"Doesn't it feel hot?" he asked.

"Don't worry, I carefully measured the reagents. Besides, it will take a little while for the heat to build up," She turned to him, excited.

"Mark, do you realize what this means?"

He smiled. "Guess there really is a light at the end of the tunnel, huh?"

"Exactly..." Cynthia nodded, beaming. She picked up an insulated metal case from the test tube rack and carefully placed the still-glowing vial inside before snapping the lid shut.

"We need to report these results immediately and get out of here."

Mark balked. "Are you crazy? We can't just walk out with it!"

But Cynthia fixed him with a resolute stare.

"So what, you want to just put this back in that drawer? I'm not leaving it in the hands of people like that!"

"Okay, okay, I get it. I'll do it. I can smuggle it out." An idea struck him. "In fact... I have an idea."

"An idea?" Cynthia looked puzzled. "An idea? You don't trust me after I showed you this incredible breakthrough?"

Mark returned her penetrating stare.

After a moment, Cynthia relented.

"Alright then..."

She handed him the case. As she did, Cynthia pulled out the two remaining test tubes, still unmixed and sealed.

"But I'm going to take these last two samples out, alright?" she stated, looking up at him.

"Sure, they were yours to begin with," Mark agreed. He headed for the lab door.

"Wait! We'll stand out too much like this." As Cynthia held out the test tubes, Mark shrugged off his tuxedo jacket and gently draped it over her hands holding the tubes.

"Thank you," she said, smiling sweetly at him. It was a beautiful smile.

"Let's go," Mark urged, and they bolted into the hallway.

"We need to get to General Garneaux. It's our best shot!" Mark said, leading the way.

"The General? From the CAF?"

"He's a personal acquaintance of mine. Trust me, he won't turn his back on us," Mark assured her.

Just then, a familiar voice growled behind them.

"You're not going anywhere..."

Mark whipped around as if he'd been shot.

"Not you again... Please, just let us go."

"Which one of us is interfering..."

Flanked by armed subordinates, Jack glared at Mark, his eyes flashing with unmistakable hostility.

But Mark raised his hands slightly in a placating gesture and took a tentative step forward, desperate to reason with him.



“Not another step!” Jack barked.

“Don’t get the wrong idea! If you ask General Garneaux, he’ll vouch for me. He asked me to--”

Mark took another step.

“I don’t give a damn. Open fire!” Jack ordered. On his command, his men’s assault rifles erupted in gunfire.

“Look out!” Mark yelled, tackling Cynthia to the floor to shield her.

“What the hell was that, Jack?!” he shouted furiously.

Seizing the momentary distraction, Cynthia lobbed the test tubes she’d palmed at their attackers’ feet. The fragile glass shattered with a sharp, brittle crack, immediately filling the narrow passageway with a brilliant golden radiance, blinding in its intensity.

“Wh-what the hell?!”

“Aahhh!”

The guards reflexively squeezed their triggers, firing wildly into the light with eyes screwed shut against the painful glare. Bullets pinged like lethal hail as Mark and Cynthia sprinted down the hallway, chests heaving, hearts threatening to beat out of their chests.

Brighter than a dying star, the unnatural light filled the corridor, disorienting in its intensity. Thick smoke belched from gun muzzles, throat-searing and acrid, while the clamor of gunfire hammered at their ears, savage and unrelenting.

As they ran, Cynthia yelled angrily at Mark, “I thought you said the General was your friend! So why are his men shooting at us?!”

“I’d like to know too!” he shouted back. Swiping his access card, Mark pulled her through a door into a different corridor.

What in the world was going on? Even as he calmly handled their escape, Mark was thoroughly perplexed by the situation he found himself in.

He had only been following Garneaux’s orders. He’d had no intention of aiding in her jailbreak. So then why was Jack chasing him as if he were some kind of criminal too, shooting at him with rifles and hunting him down?!

“This way!” Mark swiped his key card again and yanked Cynthia into a room.

He knew this place... Though he wished he didn’t. Mark had been here a few times before. The air felt chillingly stagnant, devoid of any sign of life.

“What? It’s awfully cold in here...” Cynthia muttered, her eyes fixed on the black bags lying on the stretchers lined up before her.

She gasped.

Looking around, she saw the words “Autopsy Room” on the door at the back of the room.

As a scientist, Cynthia quickly guessed what this place was.

“No time.” In one swift motion, Mark scooped her into his arms and slammed his elbow into a recessed button. The wall yawned open, an eager, empty maw.

“Wait, what are you--”

Cynthia’s startled question morphed into a shriek as Mark unceremoniously flung her into the void, the blackness swallowing her scream with greedy haste.

Seconds later, the door exploded inward, disgorging a furious Jack and his murderous entourage.

"Where did they go?!" Jack scanned the room but saw no one. His gaze fell on the body bags. Without hesitation, he yanked the zipper down the front of the nearest one.

Inside lay a young man, dead for hours.

"Damn..." Jack clicked his tongue in irritation. He motioned for his men to unzip the other two bags. They complied, revealing two more unfamiliar middle-aged corpses, a man and a woman.

"Son of a bitch!" With an inarticulate howl, Jack upended a surgical tray, sending tools skittering and papers fluttering in a macabre blizzard. But no matter how hard he glared at the antiseptic space, no answers materialized.

Cynthia and Mark tumbled out into a large trash collection area behind the CAF HQ, pelted by icy rain. The back alley was a dark, cluttered mess, bearing no resemblance to the building's grand facade. It was nearly impossible to believe that this squalid space was connected to the same compound that controlled the Settlements with an iron grip.

"What the hell were you thinking?!" Cynthia's voice quivered with a mix of fear and disbelief as she desperately crawled through the mounds of refuse.

Mark, following close behind, glanced back at the refuse chute they had just escaped through. "But we're alive, aren't we? That's what counts." He had been to that sorrowful room before, having lost several comrades to training accidents and other tragic incidents.

Sometimes, he had been the shoulder to cry on for their grieving lovers. Other times, he had stood solemnly beside their stoic fathers. He would watch them leave the room, their expressions etched with pain, their silent loved ones by their side. And behind Mark, the coroner would methodically remove his rubber gloves and disposable surgical gown, stuffing them into a sterile pack and tossing it down that very same garbage chute. It had always seemed so callous to Mark.

But he could never forget the words the middle-aged coroner had whispered in passing after Mark had discreetly saluted yet another departing mourner: "It's a soul-crushing job, isn't it? For both of us."

Mark realized that they must shed their compassion and pity every time, discarding it with the refuse. How else could they bear the weight of their duties, day after day...

And today, those very people had saved his life. The irony was not lost on Mark. Somehow, it made that painful room of memories feel just a little less cold.

As Cynthia desperately clambered up the wall, she muttered, "We have to contact them... we have to get to New Manhattan..."

Mark pushed her butt from behind, helping to heave her over the top. Then, as he leaped to grab the ledge himself, he grumbled under his breath, "Geez... what's going to happen now... You know, an hour ago, I was quite content with the way my life was going."

Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined his old comrades pointing guns at him or being forced to crawl out of a dump, especially not just a short while ago.

The icy rain pierced his skin through his tuxedo shirt, his jacket lost in the chaos. As much as he wanted to criticize the CAF for not allowing Cynthia to change clothes, he had to admit, at that moment, he envied her wetsuit quite a bit.

Garneau's voice seethed with rage as he stormed into his private office.

"What the hell do you mean, they escaped? I thought security was airtight!" he barked.

Jack's voice crackled through the communicator, infuriatingly calm.

"Mark Curran's intimate knowledge of the building was the primary factor. And frankly, sir, I never anticipated he would stoop to aiding the escape of a Gaeen rebel."

"Unbelievable... and to think Mark is now a hero of our time..."

Garneau furrowed his brow.

"They fled with that sample... Probably thought they could use it as leverage, make a quick buck."

"In light of his recent heroism, do you really expect me to believe that Mark would throw away his entire career?" Garneau spat.

"Well, it appears in the course of their escape he murdered one of our men in cold blood."

"What?"

Garneau's eyes snapped to the earpiece pressed against his ear.

"The guard likely refused to open the cell door," Jack said and glanced down at the burly guard sprawled across the counter, a single bullet hole marring his temple.

"I want you to use whatever means necessary to capture them. Retrieve that sample!" Garneau ordered.

"Yes, sir, without fail!"

Jack's gloved hand tightened around the grip of his handgun. A bead of the soldier's blood dripped from the counter, staining his polished shoe. Jaw clenched, he terminated the call and wiped the blood on Mark's discarded tuxedo jacket, the one he'd draped over Cynthia's hands. He tossed it aside like garbage.

"Photograph the scene, then dispose of the body." The words were clipped, emotionless. Jack turned on his heel and vanished through the door without a backward glance.

Garneau sank heavily onto the plush sofa, yanking the earpiece out with a sigh. "Is this an opportunity?" he muttered to himself, "Or simply another headache?"

Beside him, a blonde woman in a military uniform, unbuttoned scandalously low, poured a generous helping of expensive cognac into his waiting glass.

"Is something troubling you, General?" she purred.

"No..."

Garneau accepted the drink with a grimace, his face twisted as if he'd bitten into something unpleasant.

"You look so tense, so scary..." the female officer gazed up at him with half-lidded, coquettish eyes, her thigh brushing against his as she crossed her legs.

Garneau's hand slid up the smooth, exposed skin of her thigh, his eyes flickering downwards for the briefest of moments.

"It's nothing you need to concern yourself with," he said.

The Sturgis Base, located just behind the CAF Headquarters, is a military-exclusive spaceport that monitors about half of the American East Coast. It launches mobile suits and military space shuttles into orbit. At first glance, its proximity to the headquarters might seem dangerous, but for Mark and Cynthia, who have no allies, this familiar base is the best hiding place.

Mark knew the facility's layout like the back of his hand. Even after two years, the hangars and runways remained largely unchanged. He guided Cynthia to a cluster of warehouses on the base's fringes, where abandoned containers towered in haphazard piles, weathered by the elements. They offered concealment, like a childhood game of hide-and-seek, shielding the fugitives from prying eyes and the frigid, stinging rain.

Midnight had long since passed, the darkness broken only by the occasional sweep of searchlights. But even those probing beams were swallowed by the looming shadows of the containers. Mark picked his way carefully through the maze, his destination a solitary phone booth at the edge of the warehouse district. The base personnel had a secret name for it: the Secret Lover.

It was an oddity, this phone in the middle of nowhere. But that very isolation made it perfect for clandestine calls, for reaching out to someone you couldn't risk being seen with. Personal phones were fine for private matters, but this? This was where you came to contact a lover or a colleague on duty, all under the guise of work.

Few officers knew of this place. Fewer still would think to look for them here. Certainly not that arrogant prick, Jack. Mark punched in the number, his fingers flying over the keypad.

"Come on, Mimi, be home," he muttered, his breath misting in the chill air as he rubbed his hands together.

The screen flickered to life, and Mimi's face filled the frame, so close she was almost pressing against the glass. "Oh, Mark, thank God?! What's going on? After the speech, I was waiting around for you, but they ordered me into confinement and sent me back to my room!"

Her words tumbled out in a rush, equal parts surprise and anger.

Mark's shoulders sagged. "I'm sorry, Mimi. I'll explain everything later, I promise."

"Wh-- Is it true? Did you..." Mimi swallowed hard, her eyes wide. "Did you kill a Congressional?"

The world tilted beneath Mark's feet. "What?! No! Mimi, you know me. I would never--"

But Mimi was already turning the monitor, angling it towards the television in her room.

"It's all over the news, Mark. They're saying you murdered a soldier and ran off with some Gaeon rebel!"

"What?"

Onscreen, a news anchor delivered the damning report.

"The motive remains unclear, but Congressional Forces sources reveal that former Lieutenant Curran had a history of insubordination during his service, repeatedly disobeying orders from superiors. This led to his discharge two years ago. Some speculate that this incident may be an act of revenge stemming from that issue."

"That's ridiculous!" Mark shouted though the anchor couldn't hear him.

"He may be armed and dangerous, as he is accompanied by a rebel. Anyone with information regarding his whereabouts, contact your local CONSENT security station immediately."

"I can't believe this. This is unbelievable," Cynthia breathed, appearing at Mark's side.

Mimi's face filled the screen once more, her expression thunderous.

"What's going on? Explain it to me!"

"I'm the one who needs an explanation!" Mark shot back. Mimi's gaze flicked to Cynthia, her eyes narrowing.

"Who's that with you? Is she the rebel?"

Cynthia bristled. "Excuse me? I'm not a rebel!"

Mimi's voice rose to a shrill crescendo.

"Then who is she, Mark?"

Head spinning, Mark held up a hand. "Mimi, please. I promise I'll tell you everything later. But right now, I need your help. I need your security pass."

For a long moment, Mimi just stared at him, her brows furrowed. Then, with a sigh that spoke of reluctant surrender, she nodded.

"Fine. I'm coming to you. Where are you?"

Chapter.03

Escape

Garneau reclined in his plush executive chair, his piercing gaze fixed upon Jack, who maintained his impeccable posture. The cold, calculating look in Garneau's eyes bore little resemblance to the affable gentleman from the party. The spacious office, despite its grandeur, felt more like a condensed military museum than the sanctum of a governor.

Atop Garneau's imposing mahogany desk, miniature replicas of medieval European armor and swords gleamed under the ambient light. The room's perimeter was adorned with an impressive array of historical uniforms, armor, firearms, and bladed weapons, all meticulously polished and ensconced within reinforced glass cases. These artifacts, undoubtedly Garneau's prized collection, transformed the gubernatorial office into a shrine to warfare's evolution.

With the expansive window behind him, now an obsidian canvas against the night sky, Garneau's voice rumbled low and ominous.

"Given the circumstances, I want every file from the deep-sea agriculture research facility recovered. Interrogate every staff member and investigate their activities for the past month. Leave no stone unturned."

"Being done as we speak, sir," Jack responded with crisp efficiency.

Garneau acknowledged the reply with a curt nod before continuing, his tone laced with urgency. "Under no circumstances can we allow that sample to see the light of day. Apprehend anyone who might know of its existence. The reason is irrelevant, everyone has skeletons in their closet. Exploit them."

"Understood, sir. However, I don't think our fugitives could have gotten too far. We've established checkpoints on all major roads and alerted long-distance transit stations."

"Well, obviously they got far enough!" Garneau's eyes flashed dangerously as he glowered at Jack, who instinctively lowered his chin in deference.

"Y-yes, sir..."

"Surely tracking his ID would reveal his movements! Have you overlooked anything? Identify every possible sanctuary and deploy our forces accordingly."

"Of course, we're already pursuing that avenue. However... the only person in a position to harbor them would be Mimi Devere."

"Then why are you still here?" Garneau's patience was clearly wearing thin, his frustration palpable in the air.

"We've already searched Mimi's apartment, sir. She wasn't there, but we found evidence that she received a call."

"In the dead of night? Her destination should be obvious! And don't try to pass it off as a shopping trip!"

With a resounding clang, Garneaux slammed his Viking sword letter opener onto the desk. Jack's eye twitched almost imperceptibly as he stared at the makeshift weapon.

"Mimi... isn't foolish enough to jeopardize her career prospects," Jack said, choosing his words carefully. "Even if we can't pinpoint her location, she must understand how to navigate this situation..."

"Oh?" Garneaux's eyebrow arched as he glanced up at Jack.

"However, we require one thing to proceed... your signature, General."

"My signature?" Garneaux's interest was piqued.

"Yes, sir. With that, we can secure not only the sample but Gaea as well."

Though Jack maintained his rigid posture, his eyes gleamed with unwavering confidence as he met Garneaux's gaze.

As the eastern sky began to hint at the coming dawn, a faint blue tinge crept across the horizon. Time was running out; they needed to make their escape soon. Even on the outskirts of this sparsely populated base, the start of the regular workday would bring more frequent security patrols. Worse still, Jack and his men would undoubtedly intensify their search efforts.

Mark, restless and on edge, alternated between standing and sitting in the shadow of a shipping container. His constant movement might have been an unconscious attempt to ward off the bone-deep chill that had set in after hours exposed to the freezing drizzle.

The distant rumble of an engine caught his attention. A quick glance at his watch confirmed it had been exactly an hour since the last patrol. "We need to hide," he whispered to Cynthia, who had been watching him intently.

"Alright," she replied, rising without hesitation.

Cynthia was acutely aware of how cold Mark must be. After all, he had sacrificed his jacket for her sake. While a tuxedo jacket offered little protection against this biting cold, its absence was keenly felt. She felt a pang of guilt every time she saw him rubbing his shoulders for warmth, and had been on the verge of saying something several times.

But Mark hadn't uttered a single complaint about the cold. Instead, he remained vigilant, constantly scanning their surroundings. Cynthia found his quiet determination both reassuring and oddly endearing. Despite their precarious situation, his presence had a calming effect on her.

"This way," Mark said, extending his hand. Cynthia took it without hesitation, allowing him to guide her into a narrow gap between containers. Moments later, the patrol vehicle rumbled past, its headlights cutting through the gloom.

Suddenly, a shadowy figure darted into their hiding spot. Mark inhaled sharply, instinctively shielding Cynthia with his body. The newcomer, equally startled, stared at them with wide eyes.

From behind Mark, Cynthia's voice broke the tense silence. "You two..."

"Dr. Cynthia?" A young man with short hair and features hinting at a tropical heritage breathed, his eyes brimming with emotion.

Hot on his heels, an Asian woman with straight black hair cut at shoulder length and glasses pushed past him. "Is it really you, Dr. Cynthia?!"

"And Kobi's with you too!" Cynthia exclaimed, her eyes widening in recognition.

"Thank goodness!" The dark-haired woman threw her arms around Cynthia.

"You're safe!" The young man, his sun-kissed face creased with relief, gripped Cynthia's shoulders, nodding repeatedly.

"We were so worried. What happened to you after...?" he began.

Cynthia's lips curved into a smile. "It's quite a story. I'll explain everything later." She held up her bound hands, eliciting a mischievous grin from the woman called Kobi.

"Oh, these? I can take care of those in no time," Kobi said, her slightly upturned eyes twinkling behind her glasses. She shrugged off an oversized backpack and produced a device roughly the size of a notebook.

Mark stood by, utterly bewildered by this turn of events. Cynthia turned to him with perhaps the most genuinely relaxed smile he had seen from her yet.

"Allow me to introduce you," she said. "This is Franz Dieter, a trainee, and Kobi, my assistant. They're both my interns from Gaea University." She then gestured to Mark. "This is Mark Curran. He helped me get out."

Mark snapped out of his daze, offering a friendly smile and extending his hand to Dieter.

"Just got caught up in all this, really."

Dieter, however, completely ignored Mark's outstretched hand.

"I thought we weren't supposed to involve anyone else, Dr. Cynthia?" he asked, his tone borderline confrontational.

Mark awkwardly lowered his hand and took a few steps back, turning away from the group to hide his discomfort.

"If it weren't for him, I'd be dead," Cynthia said firmly. "He saved my life." She turned back to Mark. "Mark, these two were part of the team that infiltrated the rig with me."

"What?" Mark spun around, incredulous. "Hold on a second. Aren't they just students? And you involved them in something so dangerous?!"

Cynthia nodded, a hint of pride in her slight smile. "They handled themselves remarkably well, don't you think?"

Kobi, having finished removing Cynthia's handcuffs, playfully pushed them towards Dieter with a grin.

"I... well..."

Mark was at a loss for words.

"But... how did you even get onto the rig? Where did you learn about the facility's layout?"

"We bought the blueprints," Kobi replied nonchalantly.

"*Bought* them?" Mark's eyes widened in disbelief.

"On the black market," Dieter added with a roguish grin, his demeanor suggesting a history of youthful mischief.

"I see..." Mark nodded, processing this information. "Then... how did you even get to Earth?"

"We hid behind decommissioned satellites to get through orbit," Kobi explained.

"Fixed 'em up ourselves," Dieter boasted, puffing out his chest.

"I... wow..." Mark couldn't help but chuckle, both exasperated and impressed by their audacity. "Like teacher, like students, I suppose. When recklessness reaches this level, it becomes almost admirable."

"We're honored by your praise," Cynthia said with a laugh.

As he watched the three of them share a carefree moment of laughter, Mark felt a twinge of envy. These people had the courage, no, the sheer passion, to risk everything for what they believed in. Fear and danger seemed inconsequential in the face of their conviction.

Mark realized that he was witnessing a fervor he had long since lost. Confronted with such unbridled enthusiasm, he found himself both overwhelmed and drawn to it. Deep down, a part of him longed to be swept up in that same intensity once more.

Suddenly, Mark lifted his head, as if hearing a distant call. The icy rain continued to fall, its sound a constant backdrop, a sandy patter against the containers and scrap metal, punctuated by the quiet splashing of droplets in the puddles forming at their feet.

A faint whisper cut through the tense silence, barely audible yet unmistakable to Mark's keen ears.

"Mark..."

His heart leapt.

"Mimi?!"

Mark whipped his head toward the sound, cautiously peering out from between the towering stacks of containers. His eyes met those of Cynthia, Dieter, and Kobi, their faces etched with a mixture of surprise and relief.

A flicker of movement caught his eye in the murky shadows.

"Mark, where are you?" Mimi's voice was hushed, urgent.

The situation demanded discretion; shouting was out of the question. The labyrinth of containers and piles of discarded machinery that provided them cover also obscured Mimi's view.

"I'm near Secret Lover," Mark replied cryptically, his mind racing. If Jack had somehow tapped their communication, this vague reference might buy them precious time. While Jack's inner circle might know the codename, Mark wagered that the type of elite soldiers Jack kept close wouldn't concern themselves with such trivial matters.

It was a gamble, but one worth taking. And it seemed to have paid off, Mimi had reached them before Jack.

A flash of long hair, partially concealed by a coat, darted between the containers.

"There," Mark breathed, scanning the area with laser focus. The possibility of Mimi being followed hung heavily in his mind.

"She came?" Cynthia's voice was tinged with hope.

Mark nodded, a smile breaking across his face. "Yeah, and it looks like she wasn't followed. Wait here."

He sprinted towards the mountain of containers where he'd glimpsed Mimi, his heart pounding.

"Mimi! Over here!" he called out in a fierce whisper.

Mimi's face lit up as she spotted him. She flung herself into his arms, clutching at his collar. "Mark! I was so worried! God, you're freezing..."

Her brow furrowed as she felt the chill of his skin even through her leather gloves.

"I'm fine," Mark assured her, pulling her close. "I'm sorry for putting you in danger like this."

Kobi, observing the reunion, couldn't suppress a mischievous grin. "Ah, so that's how it is," she teased, sticking out her tongue playfully.

"That's none of your business, young lady," Cynthia chuckled, though she averted her gaze from the embracing couple.

Suddenly, Kobi's expression changed.

"Huh?" She stared intently at the small device in her hand.

"What's wrong?" Dieter asked, concern etching his features.

Kobi tilted her head, perplexed. "Haro's picking up some weird signals... I'd better move to get a clearer reading. It can't be from New Manhattan, that'd be bad news."

As she stepped away, Cynthia called out, "Be careful!"

Mark returned with Mimi in tow, making quick introductions. "This is Mimi. Mimi, meet Cynthia and Dieter. Wait, where's Kobi?"

Dieter began to explain, but Mimi cut in abruptly.

"I guess this means there was something to Dr. Riva's research after all."

Cynthia's eyes widened in shock.

"How do you—"

With a triumphant smile, Mimi reached into her shoulder bag and produced a metallic pouch. She unzipped it, revealing its contents.

"While I was waiting for Mark's call at the apartment, I decided to do some digging. I managed to extract some interesting data from the military database."

Inside the pouch, nestled securely in protective cases, were several data memory chips.

"The CAF knows. They've always known. This chip contains reports on Dr. Riva's research, and this one's about Gaea. Up until a couple days ago they just pretended not to. How they know is beyond me."

She looked pointedly at Mark and Cynthia.

"Whatever you're planning, it's futile. I don't know the details, but you're fighting a losing battle against the military."

Cynthia shook her head vehemently.

"This isn't about winning or losing. The future of humanity is at stake!"

For a moment, Mimi faltered under the intensity of Cynthia's gaze, but she quickly steeled herself.

"The future of humanity? How can such a small group, hiding in a place like this, possibly save humanity's future?"

Cynthia's resolve wavered momentarily.

"You... you don't understand!"

As Cynthia leaned forward, her passion palpable, Mark hastily intervened.

“Whoa, let’s calm down. We’ve only just met; there’s no need to—”

Meanwhile, on the other side of the container, Kobi was engrossed in her device, moving slowly left and right.

“What could this be? It doesn’t seem to be coming from New Manhattan... Did I increase the sensitivity too much? Huh?”

The jumbled characters on her small monitor suddenly dissolved into chaotic static.

Her words were cut short by a bone-rattling sound that shook the air around them.

Mark’s head snapped up, his body tensing.

“What was that?”

Cynthia and Mimi looked skyward in unison.

Two pinpoint of light pierced the deepening purple of the evening sky, growing rapidly larger.

Mark cursed under his breath.

“Patrol! Where’s Kobi?!”

He took off running as the others watched in stunned silence.

Kobi stood frozen, her eyes locked on the massive shadow suddenly looming above her. Blinding light erupted from the craft’s thrusters as it descended.

“Eeeeeek!” she shrieked, instinctively covering her head as the wind whipped her black hair into a frenzy.

“Watch out!” Mark shouted, tackling Kobi and rolling them both behind a container just as the ground shook violently.

The deafening roar of engines mixed with the rattling of debris as two enormous Bugu touched down mere meters away. Though protocol dictated foot patrols, it seemed these pilots had decided to indulge in a bit of mischief during the quiet pre-dawn hours.

Oblivious to the humans cowering nearby, the mechanical giants strode away, each step spanning five meters and sending tremors through the earth.

Kobi peeked out from behind their shelter, pushing her askew glasses back into place. Her voice still quavered slightly as she muttered, “Jeez... they’re not supposed to be fooling around like that...”

The five found themselves in an underground passage within the base’s airport, guided by Kobi’s compact computer named Haro. They approached a metal door nestled among the warehouses, not far from the infamous “Secret Lover.”

Kobi connected Haro to the door’s panel, her fingers dancing across the keys. The device emitted a soft buzz as it searched for long-abandoned access codes.

“Haro!” The device chirped triumphantly.

“You’re a clever one, aren’t you?” Kobi grinned, turning to the others. “We’re good to go. I’m opening it now.”



As they descended the iron staircase beyond the door, Mark's eyes darted around, his voice tinged with awe. "I'm impressed... I had no idea HARO could do something like this."

Kobi's response was nonchalant, a hint of pride in her voice.

"This one's special. It's customized way beyond what other students have. After all, where's the fun in being just like everyone else?"

The narrow passage, dimly lit by auto-sensors, felt stuffy and damp compared to the outside air.

Mimi clung tightly to Mark's arm, her eyes wide as she surveyed their surroundings.

"I've never heard of passages like this, even in Intelligence..."

"You seem to know a lot about this place," Mark said, turning to Cynthia.

Kobi interjected with a mischievous smile. "We're not just reckless, you know? Right, Dr. Cynthia?"

She continued, her tone matter-of-fact. "This airport was a base even during the Federation era. They used these passages for cables and such. When the Congressional Forces took over, renovations made them obsolete. Now they're all but forgotten."

Mark's brow furrowed as he tried to mentally map their route, his eyes catching glimpses of faded Federation-era signs.

"But how did you get this information?"

Dieter, leading the way, smirked.

"That's our little secret."

They came to a stop, and Kobi once again connected Haro to a panel. The device buzzed and beeped.

"How's it looking? Think you can crack it?" Kobi addressed the machine, either out of habit or genuine affection.

"Haro!" The device chirped once more.

"Fantastic! This one's clear too!" Kobi beamed, opening another door to a new passage.

Mark muttered to himself, piecing together their location. "So, this must be... near the mobile suit hangars..."

"Spot on, Mark!" Kobi's smile was infectious. "We're right under the fifth mobile suit hangar."

"Glad I'm not losing my touch," Mark replied with a wry smile.

Kobi continued, "After the next door, we'll be in Area 3. From there, we can access the shuttle fuel depot, putting us right by the launch pad."

Mimi's eyes widened, her hand flying to her forehead.

"Oh, Jesus! This is insane! What about security?"

"Base security is top-notch," Kobi replied confidently. "But finding ways around it? That's what we do."

Mark turned to Cynthia, impressed.

"You've got quite the student here."

Cynthia shrugged, a small smile playing on her lips.

"Most students these days are like this."

They climbed an iron ladder in another room, squeezing through a narrow metal door into a cramped space. The area was cluttered, barely accommodating the five of them, but light filtered down from above.

Looking up, they spotted a slatted ceiling panel.

"Dieter, if you would," Cynthia nodded.

"Right!" Dieter hoisted Kobi onto his shoulders with practiced ease.

Kobi examined the ceiling closely.

"Ah, just as I thought. It's here too."

"Hurry up, will you? You're not exactly light," Dieter grumbled.

Kobi's heel found Dieter's chest in retaliation.

"Keep that up, and I'll make sure the scoreboard shows 'ERROR' during your next game!"

"Ow! Watch it! What if you injure the team's star first baseman?"

Ignoring Dieter's protests, Kobi connected Haro to the panel.

"This might be tricky... but..."

After a series of beeps, Haro chirped, "Haro!"

"Did it work?" Mark asked, his voice tinged with anticipation.

Kobi flashed a thumbs-up but cautioned, "Wait a sec."

She extended Haro's antenna through the slats, tapping the screen rapidly.

"Thermal detection?"

"Haro!"

"Air vibration?"

"Haro!"

"Infrared sensors?"

"Haro!"

"Let's check for CO2 detection, just to be sure."

"Haro!"

"Perfect!" Kobi grinned down at the anxious faces below. "We're clear. No one's up there now."

They ascended one by one, with Mark, the tallest, helping Mimi and Cynthia up last. As they stood, the sight before them left them speechless.

Towering structures they'd mistaken for pillars were actually maintenance scaffolds for mobile suits. And beyond them stood a colossal foot, unlike anything they'd seen before.

Orderly rows of scaffolds and cranes framed gigantic humanoid forms. From their vantage point, they could make out massive protrusions at the ankles, four vernier-like slits split front and back on the lower body, and broad shoulders. These were clearly different from the Bugu they'd encountered earlier or the widely-known Freedom units.

Mark's breath caught in his throat.

"Is that... the MW-Rai?"

Dieter turned to Kobi, his voice a mix of awe and disbelief.

"How the hell did we end up here?"

Even Kobi looked pale. "This was supposed to be the fuel depot..."

Mimi's eyes were wide as she gazed upward. "The Rai is the latest MW model. It's the CAF's top secret. I had no idea they were this far along..."

Dieter swallowed hard, his voice filled with longing. "It's so cool... You know, I'd love to take one of those puppies for a test drive."

Mark's expression darkened slightly. "This is a machine built for war, you know."

"I know that!" Dieter retorted. "But who wouldn't dream of piloting something so incredible?"

Mark understood the young man's fascination, but he also recognized the naivety behind those words. A sharp pain lanced through his chest as he considered the harsh realities Dieter had likely never contemplated.

It's better not to know war, Mark thought. Even if it's not about killing each other as enemies, it's better not to entrust human lives to such machines.

These somber reflections kept Mark silent for a moment.

Suddenly, Mimi turned to Dieter with a mischievous smile. "Sorry to disappoint you, but you won't be piloting this Rai. It's unmanned, after all."

"What? Unmanned?" Dieter's eyes widened in surprise.

"That's right. That's why it's called an MW, a Mobile Weapon. I might as well tell you since it'll be officially announced soon. This is truly just a machine, autonomous, following its programming. With these in action, there'll be no need for people to risk their lives on the battlefield anymore. That's the direction we're heading."

Mimi's gaze softened as she looked up at the colossal machine once more, then turned to Mark. "Don't you think that's far better, Mark?"

There was an odd glint in Mimi's eyes. Cynthia, sensing something amiss, glanced at Mark. After a moment's hesitation, Mark nodded slightly, his expression tinged with a hint of pain.

Dieter pouted, clearly disappointed.

"So, I can't pilot it..."

"If you're that eager to pilot, you'd need to become at least a major in the Congressional Forces," Mimi teased. "Then you could command this MW-Rai from a manned unit."

"A manned unit?" Dieter's eyes lit up again.

"Yes, the MS-Rai. It's the pinnacle of mobile suits, reserved for the chosen elite."

"There's something like that too?" Dieter was awestruck once more.

Mimi's gaze returned to Mark, her voice softening. "Mark... if only you hadn't quit back then..."

"Enough," Mark's brow furrowed deeply. "To me, these things are nothing but useless relics now," he said curtly.

Cynthia sensed a strange dissonance in Mark and Mimi's conversation. On the surface, they appeared to be a perfect, enviable couple. Yet, something wasn't quite right between them. Cynthia perceived a gap, likely larger than even they realized.

This realization stirred something within Cynthia, a feeling she couldn't quite name. But she knew they couldn't afford to dwell on such matters now.

"Let's go," Cynthia said decisively. "Our goal is the shuttle. Kobi, what's our next move?"

Cynthia strode forward purposefully, with Kobi hurrying after her. “There are two checkpoints after we leave here. We’ll need actual ID cards for those.”

“Understood. Let’s head there,” Cynthia replied, her tone leaving no room for argument.

In the dim pre-dawn light, the shuttle stood silently on its launch rail. Unlike civilian crafts, it was kept ready for emergency launches, with steam rising from its main nozzles as the engines stayed warm in the cool morning air.

At the base of the boarding elevator, Kobi checked the security level with Haro. “As expected, we absolutely need genuine cards here.”

Cynthia turned to Mimi. “May I borrow your card?”

“Isn’t this why you called me?” Mimi smirked, producing a high-level CAF staff ID from her bag.

“We’re in your debt,” Cynthia said, taking the card and inserting it into the door lock panel without hesitation.

“ID confirmed. Intelligence Department, Mimi Devere. Please enter your PIN and submit to eye scan,” the door lock announced in a polished, receptionist-like voice.

Mimi swiftly entered her PIN and positioned herself for the eye scan.

“Mimi Devere, identity confirmed. Unlocking,” the system announced. The elevator door slid open silently.

Cynthia turned slowly. “Thank you, Mimi, for your cooperation. And Mark, I’m truly grateful for your help. Now, for the sample—”

“Sample? You’re *taking* it?” Mark interrupted, his voice sharp.

Cynthia’s eyes widened.

“Of course. That’s why we took this risk.”

“But that makes it even more dangerous. The military is after that sample, not you.”

“I can’t involve you any further,” Cynthia insisted.

“Which is why I’m coming too,” Mark declared.

Both Cynthia and Mimi were stunned.

“What are you saying? Haven’t you done enough?!” Mimi exclaimed.

“I’m serious,” Mark said, meeting Mimi’s gaze.

“Why do you need to go?” Mimi demanded.

“So, you’d rather I stay here, get arrested by Jack, and rot in jail for a murder I didn’t commit? No, thank you!”

“They’ll find out you’re innocent soon enough!”

“How? Do you think they’ll admit their televised announcement was a mistake that easily?”

Mimi clutched Mark’s arm desperately.

“I’ll be your witness!”

“You can’t! Everyone knows you weren’t with me then!” Mark’s voice rose. “Don’t you see? Whether I’m the real culprit or not doesn’t matter to them, especially Jack. His aim is to get rid of me and this sample!”

“Mark...” Mimi was at a loss for words.

“Look, you have to understand this. I refuse to be branded a murderer for something I didn’t do. I won’t accept that!”

Mark shook off Mimi's hand. She bit her lip, then made her decision.

"Well, fine. Then I'm coming too."

Now it was Mark's turn to be shocked.

"What?!"

Dieter protested, "Hold on! We don't need dead weight!"

Mimi glared at him.

"Who do you think got you access to space? This is between Mark and me. Besides, this shuttle can hold thirty people. One more won't be a burden."

Dieter stammered, intimidated by her intensity.

Mark sighed, knowing all too well that once Mimi made up her mind, there was no changing it.

"Hurry! Security will catch us if we dawdle!" Mimi strode into the elevator.

The group exchanged bewildered glances before following her, an awkward tension hanging in the air as they ascended to the shuttle's hatch.

As the doors opened, Mark felt a twinge of nostalgia. He'd been on shuttles like this before, for training and missions to the Settlements. The interior was as spartanly military as he remembered, a far cry from civilian comfort.

Mark felt a pang of concern watching the others look around wide-eyed. Did they really understand what they were getting into?

He instinctively moved towards the captain's seat, but Dieter pushed past him.

"You wanna come along, you're welcome to take a seat in the back."

Dieter plopped into the captain's chair, calling over his shoulder, "Don't forget boots and caps. I'm not responsible if your shoes float away or you get a shock-head."

Kobi hurriedly retrieved the gear from a nearby compartment.

Meanwhile, Dieter's eyes darted nervously across the console before him.

Dieter's hesitation was palpable as he stared at the console, clearly unsure where to begin. Mark reached over, flipping a switch above Dieter's head. The instruments before them flickered to life.

"Look, Dieter," Mark said gently, "If you wanna pilot this bird, that's fine. I just figured that since I have four years experience on a shuttle just like this, maybe it, uh, might help our chances at a smooth getaway."

Dieter turned to Mark, his eyes wide. "Thanks for the offer, but for me, this shuttle's easier to fly than riding a bicycle," he boasted, flashing a grin.

"Dieter," Cynthia's voice cut in from the co-pilot's seat. "You don't break through the atmosphere on a bicycle. Let Mark take over."

"But why?" Dieter protested, looking dejected.

"Do I really need to explain? Now, hurry up!"

Under Cynthia's stern gaze, Dieter reluctantly stood.

"I'll let you take the helm in three years," Mark reassured the sulking young man as he slid into the captain's seat.

"You know, I've always hated the back seat since I was a kid. Makes me queasy," Mark quipped, his hands dancing across the switches with practiced ease. He flashed a smile at Cynthia.

"Me too," she returned the smile, a moment of levity in their tense situation.

The radio crackled to life.

“Sturgis Base Control to *Spindrift*. Please input launch authorization code.”

Mark’s smile faded.

“Authorization code, right... Well...”

The computer panel, unsurprisingly, displayed no code.

“Think we need Haro’s help for this one?” Mark mused aloud.

Before anyone could respond, the radio blared again.

“Sturgis Base Control to *Spindrift*. We have not received your flight plan.

Current flight cannot be authorized. Disengage launch sequencer immediately.”

“Damn,” Mark muttered. “No time for Haro’s tricks.”

He glanced at Cynthia, noting the tension etched on her face. It was understandable; they were about to steal a military shuttle, after all. The gravity of their situation was undeniable.

“What a shame,” Mark said loudly, catching Cynthia off guard.

“Hm?”

Mark’s face was a mask of mock seriousness. “Looks like we’re finally getting that traffic ticket.”

Cynthia stared at him, wide-eyed for a moment before her expression softened. “One ticket won’t get your license suspended,” she played along, a hint of a smile tugging at her lips.

“*Spindrift*, abort launch immediately!” The controller’s angry voice filled the cabin.

“I don’t think so,” Mark muttered, cutting off the speaker. His eyes darted across the console.

“Energy gauge full, launch rail clear, departure course all green, atmospheric exit angle... perfect. Engine warm-up at critical point. All systems... nominal. Alright, we’re going! Everyone strapped in?”

With that brief warning, Mark engaged the engine starter. A deep rumble resonated through the shuttle as it began to glide along the rail, slowly at first, then with increasing speed.

The shuttle raced along the arcing rail, building the initial velocity needed for atmospheric escape. The engine’s roar intensified, accompanied by an increasing vibration that rattled through their bodies. The world outside the window blurred into an indistinguishable rush of color.

The g-forces mounted, pressing them deeper into their uncomfortable seats.

“Ugh...” Dieter groaned involuntarily.

“We’re just getting started!” Mark called out, still managing to keep his body upright as he gripped the controls.

The landscape outside became an indecipherable smear. Mark’s body finally succumbed to the pressure, pinned to his seat.

“Ahhh!” Kobi cried out, eyes clenched shut against the discomfort.

Mark glanced at Cynthia. Her jaw was set, eyes wide open, hands gripping the edges of her seat.

The shuttle reached critical speed on the curved rail.

“We’re taking off! Brace yourselves!” Mark shouted.

With a deafening roar, the shuttle left the rail, its nose pointing skyward.



“Full throttle!” Mark engaged the switch beside the control stick.

A thunderous explosion of sound erupted as the auxiliary thrusters ignited. The shuttle surged upward, breaking the sound barrier in an instant.

Screams erupted from the rear seats. Even Cynthia let out an involuntary gasp at the impact.

What felt like an eternity to the passengers was, in reality, only a few minutes. The window glowed a soft red from atmospheric friction, wisps of cloud streaking past at impossible speeds.

The sky ahead burned a brilliant crimson, whether from dawn or friction heat, it was hard to tell. Beyond that fiery veil, the deep blue of space beckoned.

In the midst of the violent shaking and crushing pressure, Mark’s thoughts drifted to the beautiful expanse waiting just beyond this brief ordeal. It made him acutely aware of the planet he was leaving behind, filling him with a bittersweet longing.

Some viewed gravity as a constraint, but Mark saw it differently. It was Earth’s way of embracing its children, a mother’s loving arms trying to keep them safe. As humanity broke free of that embrace, lured by the glittering expanse of space, they often forgot the gentle beauty of their home world.

Mark had been awestruck countless times by Earth’s breathtaking beauty when looking back from space. Each time, he felt the same pull: a desire to return to that shimmering blue sphere, his true home.

Gradually, the shuttle’s vibrations subsided. The oppressive weight lifted from their bodies. Through the window, the stars began to twinkle.

With a gentle float, they became weightless, lifting slightly from their seats.

Once again, Mark had broken free from Earth’s maternal embrace to venture into the cosmic unknown. Yet this time, the void of space felt somehow warmer, more welcoming than ever before.

Chapter.04

Activation

Side 4, suspended between Earth and the Moon, is composed of forty space settlements, mirroring the structure of other Sides. In Earth's vicinity, there exist five stable points where the gravitational forces of Earth and Moon balance perfectly. Objects placed at these "Lagrange points" maintain their position, free from the pull of either celestial body. The Sides, including Side 4, orbit the sun in stable trajectories at these Lagrange points, in sync with Earth.

Among these, Side 4 was one of the earlier constructions.

The space settlements that make up the Sides share a common structure: imagine immense, sealed cylinders floating in space. Each measures forty kilometers in length and six kilometers in diameter. These colossal tubes rotate once every two minutes, generating Earth-like gravity for their inhabitants.

While this rotational speed might seem dizzying from a terrestrial perspective, it's not so remarkable when you consider that Earth itself, many thousands of times larger, completes one rotation every twenty-four hours.

This rotation creates a one-G artificial gravity, allowing humanity to maintain a "normal" lifestyle in the depths of space.

Along the cylinder's length, three-kilometer-wide glass panels are spaced at regular intervals. At one end, three massive mirrors fan out like corn husks, reflecting sunlight through these panels and into the settlement's interior. By adjusting the angle of these mirrors, the settlement can recreate Earth-like day and night cycles, and even simulate seasons.

Inside, these glass panels give the impression of vast "rivers." Bridges span these expanses, connecting the "land" areas where people reside and work.

The settlement generates its own breathable atmosphere and rainfall. White clouds perpetually drift in the central area of the cylinder. These clouds serve a dual purpose: not only do they simulate weather, but they also help alleviate the psychological discomfort residents might feel from seeing "land" overhead, a decidedly unnatural sight for Earth-born humans.

Through this ingenious design, humanity, originally ill-equipped for space habitation, can lead lives nearly indistinguishable from those on Earth within these settlements.

At the heart of Side 4 lies "New Manhattan Island," commonly referred to simply as New Manhattan. True to its name, this settlement is a meticulous recreation of New York City, once the economic epicenter of the United States. Skyscrapers line the inner walls, while iconic landmarks like Central Park and the Statue of Liberty have been faithfully reproduced.

The populace of New Manhattan immerses itself in an atmosphere strikingly similar to its terrestrial predecessor: a whirlwind of information, business opportunities, wealth, danger, freedom, and ceaseless activity. This unique ambiance, with its enticing blend of opportunity and risk, continues to captivate residents and visitors alike, sometimes drawing them into the darker aspects inherent to any great metropolis.

The group arrived at New Manhattan's port with surprisingly little scrutiny, quickly hailing an electric cab to navigate the crowded downtown streets. Throughout the journey, Mark couldn't shake a sense of unease. Even if Side 4 wasn't under the direct control of CONSENT, surely a shuttle from Earth, the government's home, should have warranted more thorough checks? This lax security made Mark suspect that there were greater forces at play behind Cynthia's actions.

Their cab halted before an aging theater, its weathered sign proclaiming it as the "San Simon Theater."

"What's this place?" Mark inquired.

"Just follow me," Cynthia replied cryptically, pushing open the theater's heavy, history-laden doors.

They were immediately enveloped by an intoxicating blend of exotic scents, the press of bodies, and languid, otherworldly music. The interior was a bar, or rather, a theater lobby functioning as one. The decor was a striking fusion of medieval European castle opulence and psychedelic exuberance, populated by patrons whose avant-garde fashion somehow fit perfectly within this anachronistic setting.

"What's that smell?" Mimi wrinkled her nose.

"...Cigars?" Mark said, dumbfounded.

In the closed environment of a space settlement, air pollution was typically the gravest concern. Fossil fuels were banned, all transportation was electric, and smoking was absolutely forbidden. Even on Earth, smoking had long since fallen out of favor, relegated to a handful of government-sanctioned establishments.

"You can't be serious," Mimi gasped.

Cynthia turned, smiling. "Don't worry. It's just artificial scent, not actual smoke. It's a kind of nostalgic ambiance they're creating."

"It's in terrible taste!" Mimi protested, fanning the air in front of her face.

"Now, now, don't make such a face. It's ruining your beauty," came a voice, as a bartender appeared before them, pushing a drink cart.

The bartender was clearly male, yet his appearance defied easy categorization. Taller than Mark, his face was adorned with feminine makeup, and he wore an elaborate dress of black tulle and lace. His half-lidded gaze as he regarded the group suggested that "she" might be the more appropriate pronoun.

"Welcome to Philippe's Castle. What can I get you to drink? I can make anything you desire," the bartender purred in a low, sweet voice.

Mimi, composing herself, replied, "Well, I'm not sure if it's day or night here, but I'll have a martini. Make it good."

"Of course, darling. My martinis will transport you to cloud nine," the bartender said, reaching for a glass.

Suddenly, Cynthia interjected, "Wait. Cancel the martini. We'll all have Philippe Margaritas."

The bartender's hand froze mid-reach.

"Are you sure... Philippe Margaritas?"

"Hey, I wanted a martini," Mimi protested, glaring at Cynthia.

The bartender winked, saying, "You got it," but Cynthia shot Mimi a stern look.

"Just trust me! Everyone's having Philippe Margaritas, *period!*"

Mark, who had been watching this exchange in bewilderment, suddenly realized something.

"Mimi!" He pulled her closer, "Please, just go along with Cynthia on this."

"What? You too? What's going on?" Mimi looked between Mark and Cynthia, confused.

As Cynthia repeated the order for five Philippe Margaritas, a voice called out from behind them.

"Mark!"

Mark spun around, his face lighting up with recognition.

"Philippe... San Simon Theater... Of course! Now I get it!"

Mark extended his hands towards the approaching man, clearly an old friend about ten years his senior. Despite his unassuming appearance, the man's sharp eyes and slightly pointed nose gave him a raptor-like quality.

"I'm shocked! I heard you were dead!" Mark exclaimed, grasping his old friend's hand.

Philippe smiled. "Sometimes it's better that way. You should try it sometime. You quickly learn who your real friends are."

He placed a hand on Mark's shoulder, his piercing gaze softening. "The old me did die. The man before you is living a completely new life. Everyone, please order whatever you like."

Philippe glanced at Mimi, then gave a subtle nod to the bartender. Understanding, the bartender reached not for the gun hidden among the dark bottles, but for the vermouth beside it.

As they followed Philippe to a more private area, Mimi whispered to Mark, "You know him?"

"He was a superior officer. More like a comrade in arms, really," Mark replied with a smile.

Settling next to Philippe, Mark said, "I finally get it. You were the one who fed them the information."

Philippe smirked. "I'll leave that to your imagination."

Suddenly, Dieter interjected angrily, "That info was way off. Security was much tighter than you said!"

Philippe fixed Dieter with a stern look. "I warned you. Security measures change daily, often becoming stricter."

"I know that. But because of it, we lost one of our own. We barely escaped with our lives!"

Dieter looked down, clearly frustrated.

Philippe placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry to hear that. But look, you've made it back here. Well done."

Mark nodded silently, thinking, "He hasn't changed at all..."

He remembered Philippe as a unique superior officer, a major, one who didn't care about family background or political clout. Instead, he valued talent, skill, personality, and luck.

"Technology and individual capabilities evolve daily," Philippe once said. "But innate talent is different. So is one's character. No matter how advanced the technology, people won't follow someone with poor skills. And regardless of status or wealth, it's personality that truly attracts people. Someone for whom others would willingly risk their lives... that's real strength. Lastly, there's luck. Even the strongest warrior needs to recognize fortune to survive the battlefield."

This philosophy had shocked Mark, who had been solely focused on improving his technical skills. He learned the hard way that even the most advanced machine could become either a marvel or a wreck depending on its pilot.

Every time he reflected on that pain, he was reminded of the truth in Philippe's words.

When Mark heard of Philippe's supposed accidental death, he couldn't believe it. How could a man so adept at recognizing fortune fail to avoid an accident? Now, that mystery was solved, and Mark was overjoyed to see his mentor alive, having forged his own path.

As they settled in, Philippe asked quietly, "So... how did it go?"

Cynthia smiled. "Thanks to you." She signaled to Mark, who produced a case containing a test tube from his shirt pocket.

As Mark opened the case, a golden radiance spilled out, eliciting gasps of awe from everyone present.

"Wow..." Philippe exclaimed.

"Amazing!" Dieter and Kobi, seeing it for the first time, held their breath.

"Is this... the sample?" Mimi asked, wide-eyed.

Mark nodded, handing the tube to Philippe.

"Incredible," Philippe marveled. "Congratulations! This might be the most significant invention for humanity in centuries."

Philippe said, his eyes narrowed as he gazed at the glow, clearly moved.

"I promised we'd succeed," Cynthia said softly. "It's just a shame Dr. Riva isn't here to see it..."

Mark turned to Philippe, alarmed.

"Philippe, is it true? About Dr. Riva being killed?"

Philippe studied Mark's face for a moment before answering in a low voice. "Have you ever heard of... the Illuminati?"

"Illuminati? The rumored dissident group opposing the Congressional Forces?" Mark's eyes widened with sudden realization.

"You've always had good instincts," Philippe smirked. "It started as a small private club. But five years ago, when the balance of power in the Congress shifted dramatically, we decided to act."

"You mean... you invested in anti-government movements to become a space security force and maintain the balance of power according to your own values?"

Mimi leaned forward, her eyes gleaming with a mix of curiosity and caution.

"My, my. You seem to be quite well-informed," she said, her voice a blend of amusement and respect.

Philippe's eyebrows arched momentarily in surprise, then settled into a knowing smile. "She's an intelligence operative for the CAF," Cynthia interjected with a wry grin, her tone tinged with a hint of resignation.

A hearty laugh erupted from Philippe, echoing through the room.

"Well, well! It seems I've inadvertently welcomed quite the formidable guest into our midst. How delightfully unexpected!"

Mimi lifted her chin, a defiant glint in her eye.

"Rest assured," she purred, her lips curving into a daring smirk, "this excursion is strictly off the books."

"Fair enough," Philippe nodded, his gaze shifting deliberately to Mark. The air in the room seemed to thicken as he spoke, his words carrying the weight of conviction. "Our ultimate goal is the peace and prosperity of all humanity. We stand against anyone who casts a shadow over Earth's future, be it myopic armed factions unable to see the bigger picture, ruthless entrepreneurs and their political puppets who'd sacrifice everything for profit, or..."

His voice dropped an octave, "...dictators enslaved by their own delusions of grandeur."

"Hold on a second," Mark interjected, a nervous chuckle escaping his lips.

"Dictators? That's the stuff of fairy tales in this day and age, surely—"

"Is it *really*?" Philippe's piercing gaze locked onto Mark, his eyes glinting like polished steel. The words Mark had been about to utter died in his throat.

"Forgive me for speaking so boldly in front of Ms. Mimi," Philippe continued, his tone unapologetic, "but consider the current CAF. Don't you think they embody every aspect I just described?"

Mark found himself rendered speechless, the weight of Philippe's words settling heavily in the air between them.

"No matter," Philippe said softly, rising from his seat with a fluid grace that belied his imposing stature. "There's something I'd like you to see. Would you care to accompany me?"

"Me?" Mark's eyes widened in surprise as he looked up at Philippe's towering form.

"Yes, you," Philippe emphasized, an enigmatic smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Garneau's eyes were transfixed on the diminutive video monitor before him, absorbing every detail of the unfolding scene. The footage captured Mark and

his cohort, engaged in a tense exchange with Jack's team over the coveted sample.

Suddenly, the screen erupted in a blinding flash as Cynthia's test tube shattered, exploding into a dazzling supernova of light, bleaching the screen in an otherworldly luminescence. The monitor convulsed, caught in a fitful dance between blinding radiance and inky darkness.

In that moment of revelation, the silver spoon Garneaux had been absently stirring his coffee with slipped from his grasp. It clattered against the pristine floor, the metallic ring echoing ominously in the hushed room.

His voice, when it came, was a guttural growl, laden with determination and barely contained fury.

"Recover that sample. At. Any. Cost."

His steely gaze snapped up to Jack, who stood at rigid attention beside him, a dark sentinel awaiting command.

"Do you understand? *Whatever* it takes!"

Jack's response was measured, his tone clinically detached.

"They've already departed Earth, sir. New Manhattan is likely just a waypoint. Gaea is their probable destination. Once there, they'll be beyond our jurisdiction."

"You think I don't know that?" Garneaux snarled, his patience wearing thin.

"Then we must resort to... more *aggressive* measures."

A predatory gleam flickered in Garneaux's eyes.

"Perfect. It's about time we put those eggheads in their place. Gaea, for all its scientific prowess, would crumble before a single platoon of our forces."

"You're authorizing military intervention, then?"

Garneaux's response was a derisive snort.

"Let them make the first move. We are, after all, the righteous defenders of order."

A wolfish grin spread across Jack's face as he snapped a crisp salute.

"Understood, sir. We'll be ready."

The cavernous theater stretched before them, an anachronistic marvel of a bygone era. Rows of seats curved in a grand semicircle, facing an imposing stage draped with sumptuous burgundy velvet curtains. Behind them, a massive screen loomed, promising spectacles yet unseen.

The air was thick with nostalgia, carrying the authentic scents of wood, fabric, and materials long since replaced by synthetic imitations. For Mark, it was a realm of wonder, utterly alien yet strangely inviting.

He'd heard tales of how people once flocked to such places for entertainment, but the sterile, modern theaters he knew paled in comparison. Those venues, while physically comfortable, had always left him feeling oddly detached, as if observing life from behind a pane of glass. But here... here was different. An inexplicable sense of immediacy permeated the atmosphere, drawing him in.

Philippe guided Mark down the gently sloping central aisle, their footsteps muffled by plush carpeting as they approached the stage. The older man's voice echoed softly in the hushed space.

"Thanks to the brilliant minds who've joined our cause, Illuminati's technological prowess has grown exponentially. We've decided to channel that power into supporting Gaea's efforts to combat this food crisis."

Mark nodded, absorbing the information.

"I see."

Philippe's tone darkened, "But as you've come to understand, Dr. Riva was murdered. We know it's a conspiracy orchestrated by the CAF. Their motives remain unclear, but they're clearly attempting to sabotage this groundbreaking collaboration between Dr. Riva and Gaea from the shadows."

"Ah..." Mark's mind reeled, recent events flashing before his eyes in a dizzying whirl. Mere days ago, he'd been contentedly observing that curious broccoli alongside his Guppy in the ocean depths. The idea that he'd soon be standing in New Manhattan would have seemed preposterous.

Philippe pressed on, his voice gaining intensity. "We must stand against the CAF. To do so, we need power, overwhelming power."

With a click of the remote in Philippe's hand, the screen before them blazed to life. Mark's breath caught in his throat, his eyes widening in awe at the sight of a mobile suit unlike any he'd ever encountered.

"Behold the G-Saviour," Philippe announced with pride, "our latest combat mobile suit."

The machine was a vision in white, utterly distinct from both the CAF's Bugu and the MW-Rai. Its helm, crowned with sharp, wing-like antennae, bore a face sculpted to mirror human features, piercing eyes, a defined nose ridge, and a protective mask where a mouth would be. Broad shoulders framed a robust torso housing the cockpit, transitioning to a flexible midsection. Armored hip plates gave way to powerful legs, the entire form exuding both strength and agility.

While reminiscent of the widely-used Freedom model, this suit before them was something else entirely. Its lines were crisper, more mechanically precise, yet it retained an inexplicable air of human grace and fluidity.

"I'm... stunned," Mark finally managed, releasing a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"It's beautiful."

Philippe's eyes narrowed, a hint of pride in his voice.

"Beauty is just the beginning. Compared to the mobile suits we piloted for the CAF, those machines might as well be children's toys."

"I can tell. This... this is something truly extraordinary."

Mark's eyes sparkled with excitement, drinking in every detail of the magnificent machine.

"What's the thrust-to-weight ratio in space? It looks sleek, but how's the response time planetside? The elbow joint system seems drastically different from the Freedom's. What about the flexion and rotation angles?"

"Why don't you find out for yourself?" Philippe's reply was as unexpected as a thunderclap on a clear day.

"What?" Mark whirled to face him, confusion etched across his features.

"You'll be piloting it. The best way to understand is through experience."

Mark's jaw dropped, his mind reeling.

"What... what are you talking about?"

As if materializing from the shadows, Cynthia's voice joined the conversation.

"We need your strength, Mark. Please, lend us your power."

"Hey... cut it out! This isn't funny..." Mark's voice wavered between disbelief and growing unease.

Philippe's tone remained unwavering.

"This is no joke. We prepared this machine *specifically* for you."

A strained, nervous chuckle escaped Mark's lips.

"You've got to be kidding! When did I ever say I'd join the Illuminati? I'm going back to the Rig to continue my work on food development!"

"The situation has changed drastically. Do you even know what's happening on Earth right now?"

With another click of Philippe's remote, a new image appeared on a portion of the screen, eclipsing part of the G-Saviour. Mark's blood ran cold as he recognized the face filling the frame.

"The terrorists breached the facility from this point," Jack's voice rang out, crisp and authoritative.

"Jack... that's... that's the Rig!" Mark exclaimed, his world tilting on its axis.

"They appeared to be on a top-secret mission."

The clamor of reporters swelled in the background.

"What was this secret mission? Destruction of the facility?"

Jack's response was measured, each word carefully chosen.

"Unlikely. This facility has produced no results for two years, despite being funded entirely by your tax dollars."

"Then what was their objective?"

"That's currently under investigation. However, we have testimony suggesting Mark Curran was exchanging information with Gaea from this location."

A chorus of excited murmurs rippled through the unseen crowd of journalists.

Mark's fists clenched involuntarily, rage building within him.

"Nothing but lies!"

Philippe observed Mark's reaction silently, his expression unreadable.

A female reporter's voice cut through the din as she thrust her microphone toward Jack.

"But the autopsy reveals that the Congressional soldier was killed by bullets from weapons currently used by the military. How do you explain this?"

Jack's smile was a study in calculated charm. "He still has contacts within the CAF. Obtaining a weapon would be possible for him."

"What about the materials allegedly taken from here?"

"No such materials have been confirmed."

Mark stared in horror as Jack effortlessly wove a tapestry of deception, not a shred of truth escaping his lips.

The female reporter's frustration was palpable.

"That's absurd! Multiple Rig staff members have given testimony!"

Jack's composure never wavered.

"They could be Mark Curran's accomplices. In fact, given the evidence we've uncovered, it's possible that the Rig itself was involved in some form of conspiracy with Gaea."

As Jack spoke, two familiar figures were led past in the background, their hands bound. Mark's heart leapt into his throat as he recognized Dagget and Simmons.

"They have nothing to do with this!" Mark shouted uselessly at the screen. "Stop it!"

His words echoed hollowly in the distant theater, powerless to change the unfolding tragedy.

Jack's final statement dripped with false sincerity.

"In any case, all will become clear once Mark Curran is apprehended. This concludes our public statement."

The image of Jack's smug smile seared itself into Mark's retinas, igniting a fury that blazed through every fiber of his being.

Philippe, sensing the storm of emotions within the young man, spoke softly.

"Now do you understand? They've already branded you and Gaea as enemies. Their next move involves using that sample as justification and it will likely be military intervention against Gaea."

Mark turned to Philippe, his face a mask of shock and dawning horror.

"You mean... war?!"

"Probably," Philippe nodded gravely. "You must see it now. This isn't just about you or Gaea anymore. The future of all humanity hangs in the balance."

"That's why—" Cynthia began, but Mark's anguished shout cut her off.

"I don't want to hear it!" His voice echoed through the cavernous theater. "I won't be part of a war! I'm done with killing, absolutely done! Why... why does everyone immediately think of fighting? There must be other ways!"

"Mark..." Cynthia stared at him, stunned. She'd never seen this side of him before, a potent mixture of anger and sorrow etched across his features. Something deep within was tormenting him.

"I'll take you to Gaea as promised. But that's it! I won't do anything more than that! Remember that, Philippe!"

With those words, Mark spun on his heel and stormed out of the theater.

Cynthia watched his retreating form helplessly, whispering, "Why...?"

Philippe's sharp eyes narrowed slightly as he let out a deep sigh.

"Not ready yet... A man like him, still unable to shake it off..."

Cynthia furrowed her brow, not comprehending his cryptic words. Philippe's expression quickly returned to normal as he continued, "In any case, I'll have the G-Saviour loaded onto the Nimbus, ready for deployment at any time. The mayor understands the situation. There won't be any problems with your departure."

"Right..." Cynthia replied, her gaze drawn once more to the theater doors through which Mark had disappeared. The pain in his face lingered in her mind.

That Mark, who had never shown a hint of weakness before, to see him like that...

Cynthia realized, for the first time, how little she truly knew about him. Their meeting had been pure chance, yet in that instant, he had saved her. And since then...

The more she reflected, the more she recognized the magnitude of what Mark had done for her. She understood it stemmed from his innate kindness and sense of justice. But what had she given him in return?

"If only..." Cynthia thought. If only she could shoulder even a fraction of the pain he'd shown. If her presence could somehow ease his burden...

It might be all she could do for him right now, but...

Cynthia's heart spoke to Mark's vanished form. You shouldn't have to wear such an expression. If there's anything I can do, anything at all, I want to be of use to you...

Her large eyes remained fixed on the doorway, unaware of Philippe's knowing nod beside her.

Two hours later, the Nimbus, prepared by Philippe, departed from New Manhattan with its passengers aboard. At first glance, the vessel resembled an outdated cargo or work ship. Its most distinctive features were the large propulsion engine nozzles at the stern and six cylindrical containers. Otherwise unremarkable, it measured roughly 120 meters in length.

Even so, it was considered small for a spacecraft. Compared to the massive civilian container ships constantly traversing between Settlements, the Nimbus was practically minuscule.

The voice of a female air traffic controller from the New Manhattan control tower crackled over the comm.

"Flight number 6344, vessel number 2217, registered name Nimbus, bound for Gaea, you have cleared New Manhattan airspace. Please maintain course 0244 and keep your beacon active."

"Nimbus acknowledges," Kobi, seated in the co-pilot's chair, responded crisply.

The control officer's voice carried a hint of amusement as it crackled through the comm system.

"Also... there's a message for Dr. Cynthia from the mayor. He says, 'Give my regards to the Councilor.'"

Kobi chuckled softly as she responded, "I'll be sure to pass that along."

She glanced at Dieter beside her, who occupied the main pilot's seat. Their eyes met, both faces etched with matching grins of barely contained mirth.

While the ship's navigation was entirely automated, leaving them with little more to do than monitor the radar and perform occasional visual checks, Dieter's face radiated an almost childlike joy. The thrill of their daring escape still coursed through his veins.

Seven hours had passed since their hasty departure from Earth. The events of the previous night felt like a whirlwind, leaving them all breathless. As the initial surge of adrenaline began to ebb, Mark and Cynthia became acutely aware of the bone-deep fatigue that had settled into their bodies. They entrusted Dieter

and Kobi with the ship's surveillance, retreating with Mimi to the rear cabin where they sank gratefully into the plush chairs.

Yet, despite their exhaustion, sleep eluded them. Their minds buzzed with the weight of recent events, leaving them to gaze absently into the void beyond the windows. The vastness of space stretched before them, a tapestry of billions of stars shimmering with an intensity unimaginable from Earth's surface. Occasionally, a fleeting streak of light, space debris, would arc across their field of vision.

Once, such sights might have been romantically dubbed "stardust," but they knew the bitter truth. Most of these glimmers were nothing more than mankind's refuse, carelessly scattered into the cosmic expanse.

As Mark's thoughts drifted, he found himself pondering the curious nature of light. How strange, he mused, that light could imbue even the most mundane objects with an aura of beauty. Whether garbage or gold, precious gems or the eerie bioluminescence of deep-sea creatures, or the very stars twinkling before them, all were transformed by their radiance.

Perhaps, he thought, this instinctive attraction to light was deeply encoded in human DNA, a remnant of our shared evolutionary history with all Earth's creatures. The drive towards illumination, towards that promise of a brighter future... And yet, what price had humanity paid in its relentless pursuit of that brilliance?

"Mark..."

Cynthia's soft voice pulled him from his reverie. He turned to face her, separated only by the narrow aisle between their seats.

"Can we talk?" she asked, her tone gentle but tinged with hesitation.

Mark nodded, offering a small smile.

"Of course."

Cynthia's eyes seemed to shine with an unusual intensity, reflecting the starlight from beyond.

"If you don't mind... I'd like to know. What really happened? Why did you have to leave the CAF?"

It was a topic Mark had hoped to leave buried in the past, but somehow, under Cynthia's earnest gaze, the prospect of sharing his burden felt less daunting. He took a deep breath, steeling himself.

"If I hadn't resigned... I would have faced a court-martial. I did something unforgivable in the eyes of the military," he began, his voice low and measured.

Cynthia's brow furrowed slightly.

"What do you mean?"

"I disobeyed a direct order from a superior officer. I ignored the chain of command and acted on my own. In the military, an officer's word is absolute, even if... even if it's wrong."

Mark's gaze drifted back to the star-studded void outside.

"It happened during a combat exercise. A pilot named Sawyer, his engine suddenly cut out. The entire electrical system went dark, making emergency ejection impossible. We still don't know what caused it. A crash was inevitable."

He paused, the memory vivid in his mind.

"I wanted to save him. But Jack, who was in command at the time, gave the order: 'Maintain current course. No rescue attempt.'"

"But... why?" Cynthia's voice was barely above a whisper, her expression a mix of confusion and growing horror.

"Ten billion dollars," Mark said flatly. "That was the cost of the craft I was piloting. Sawyer's, in comparison, was worth two billion. The chances of a successful rescue were slim to begin with, and the attempt itself was risky. Jack's reasoning was that we couldn't risk turning ten billion dollars into scrap metal for such a low probability of success."

Cynthia was speechless, her eyes wide with disbelief.

"Logically, it was the correct call. An efficient command decision," Mark continued, his voice tight. "But, over the radio, we could hear Sawyer screaming for help..."

Mark closed his eyes, Sawyer's desperate cries echoing in his memory. The raw anguish of a man calling out to those he trusted most, knowing his fate was sealed.

"I hesitated," Mark admitted, his voice barely audible. "Torn between my duty as a soldier and the weight of my comrade's life. It was only thirty seconds, but those seconds sealed Sawyer's fate. I finally broke ranks and went for the rescue, ignoring Jack's orders."

He opened his eyes, meeting Cynthia's gaze.

"I was too late."

Cynthia's breath caught in her throat, her heart aching at the pain etched across Mark's features.

"Thirty seconds," Mark repeated, his voice hollow. "Just thirty seconds that cost Sawyer his life."

"I—I don't know what to say..." Cynthia whispered, her voice barely audible over the gentle hum of the ship's systems. It was all she could manage, the weight of Mark's story leaving her at a loss for words.

Mark nodded slightly, a sad smile ghosting across his lips.

"Yeah... I guess there's not much to say."

"No one has the answer," Cynthia continued, her eyes glistening. "Maybe... maybe there never will be one."

She felt a lump forming in her throat, her heart aching for the burden Mark had carried all this time.

"It wasn't your fault, Mark," she said softly, her voice filled with a conviction she didn't know she possessed.

Mark's gaze met hers, and the raw vulnerability in his expression nearly broke her. He looked like a lost child seeking comfort, his eyes brimming with unshed tears. In that moment, Cynthia wished they weren't bound by the constraints of space travel and safety harnesses. She longed to wrap her arms around him, to offer whatever solace she could.

For the first time in her life, Cynthia felt an overwhelming surge of protectiveness, of... *something* deeper. She blinked rapidly, feeling moisture gathering at the corners of her eyes.

Suddenly, a violent tremor rocked the ship, accompanied by the shrill wail of alarms. The peaceful moment shattered instantly, jolting even the dozing Mimi awake.

"Emergency! Get up here, now!" Kobi's voice echoed through the cabin, urgency clear in every syllable.

The team scrambled to release their harnesses, fighting against the disorienting effects of zero gravity as they made their way to the cockpit.

"What's happening?!" Cynthia called out as they entered.

Dieter, frantically adjusting radar and sensor settings, looked up just as the ship's computer announced in its eerily calm voice.

"Emergency situation detected. Massive obstacle identified on current trajectory. Distance: 20,000 meters. At current velocity, impact in 320 seconds."

"Why the hell did you choose this course?!" Mark demanded, staring at Dieter in disbelief.

Dieter's face contorted with frustration.

"It was the only route outside CAF surveillance!"

"There's always a reason some areas aren't monitored!" Mark shot back, his fingers flying over various controls. The data readouts painted a grim picture, their path was littered with debris of all sizes.

Another violent impact shook the ship, eliciting a frightened yelp from Kobi.

Mark's continued attempts at the controls proved fruitless.

"It's no use... we can't alter course in time."

"What are we going to do?" Mimi's voice quavered as she clung to Mark's shoulder, fear evident in her eyes.

"I'll blast through with the G-Saviour!" Dieter suddenly exclaimed.

Mark gaped at him.

"The G-Saviour? Are you insane?"

"You can't possibly pilot that!" Cynthia interjected, her gaze darting between Dieter and Mark. The intensity in her eyes made Mark take a step back.

"It's on auto-control, right? I'll figure it out!" Dieter insisted, his voice rising with desperation.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Kobi snapped. "It's not that simple!"

"So what, we just resign ourselves to becoming space junk?!" Dieter shouted, his face flushed with anger and fear.

"I'll do it," Mark's steady voice cut through the chaos. "You guide me from here."

Cynthia whirled to face him, her eyes wide with a mix of shock and something deeper, a fear she couldn't quite name.

"You? Can you really do this?!" Dieter exclaimed, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"Probably better than you can. It's our only option now! I'm going!" Mark's words hung in the air as he bolted from the cockpit.

It was as if the past two years had never happened. Mark's body moved with the practiced precision of countless drills, muscle memory taking over. In mere seconds, he had donned the specialized spacesuit and was propelling himself towards the G-Saviour's hangar.

The access door's green light blinked invitingly, sensors detecting his approach. As it slid open, the hangar illuminated, revealing the majestic form of the G-Saviour, its chest hatch already open in anticipation.

Almost on autopilot, Mark snagged a helmet from a nearby hook. He paused briefly before the cockpit, gazing up at the mobile suit's head, so familiar from that fateful day at the theater. Philippe's words echoed in his mind, his own vehement refusal to pilot again...

Yet here he stood, heart racing at the sight of this silver guardian. The contradiction wasn't lost on Mark, a flicker of confusion and surprise passing through him.

"I'm not fighting..." he murmured, as if trying to convince himself, before leaping into the cockpit.

The moment he settled into the seat and secured his harness, the hatch sealed shut. Displays flickered to life, offering a view of the exterior alongside a dizzying array of gauges and readouts. The control yoke rose smoothly into position as Mark donned his helmet, his eyes widening at each new detail.

"It's really..." Mark whispered, recognizing the fundamental controls but marveling at the staggering performance metrics displayed before him.

A screen below eye level proclaimed "G-SAVIOUR SPACE MODE," while an adjacent monitor showed a tuning log, dated to the very day of his arrival in New Manhattan. Mark's breath caught as he noticed another display: "PILOT: Mark Curran"

Philippe's words resurfaced: "We prepared it for you..." Only now did Mark fully grasp their meaning, they had been fine-tuning this machine until the last possible moment, on the chance he might come.

"What fools..." Mark muttered, even as a lump formed in his throat.

As the all-green launch signal illuminated, the G-Saviour's imposing 18-meter frame began to rise, rotating slowly towards the ceiling hatch. Mark steeled himself, pushing aside his conflicted emotions.

"Generator output increasing. Looking good," a voice crackled through his helmet.

"Hatch opening. You're clear for launch," another added.

"Here goes nothing!" Mark gripped the controls.

With a burst of pressure, the G-Saviour erupted from Nimbus' specialized hangar. Instruments came alive, stars streaking across the main viewscreen as status indicators flashed urgently. Mark's hands flew across the controls, stabilizing the mobile suit and igniting its main thrusters.

The distinctive six fins of Space Mode deployed, blue-white jets of propulsion erupting from the nozzles between them. In an instant, the G-Saviour rocketed past the Nimbus, surging forward to meet the oncoming threat.

"Incredible thrust..." Mark breathed, but there was no time for awe.

Before him, a maelstrom of space debris loomed, fragments of derelict ships, discarded Settlement construction materials, the accumulated refuse of humanity's push into the cosmos. Mark's fingers continued dancing across the controls, the G-Saviour's rifle blasting larger obstacles to dust while its beam shield deflected the smaller fragments.

Yet the onslaught seemed endless, each destroyed piece of debris revealing more behind it.

"Watch out! A big one's coming!" Dieter's warning crackled through Mark's earpiece.

"I see it," Mark replied, his right hand danced across the control monitor while his left gripped the manual control stick. The G-Saviour moved like a dancer through space, its rifle precisely shattering obstacles while thrusters flared in short, controlled bursts.

From the control room, Kobi whispered in awe, "Mark... he's incredible..."

Cynthia could only nod, her eyes wide with amazement.

"There it is..." Mark spotted a glinting object in the depths of the monitor. Of course, the G-Saviour had already detected its presence, displaying its shape and composition on the screen.

"Three thousand meters left!" Dieter's voice rang out, driving the point home.

As the looming shape of their primary obstacle came into view, Mark's face tightened.

"This one's massive..."

"No way to avoid it," Dieter confirmed grimly. "Nimbus is locked on this course."

"Understood!"

Mark pushed the G-Saviour forward, closing in on the colossal debris, likely a discarded Settlement's outer wall. Twisted steel beams, torn pipes, peeling exterior panels, and shredded iron plates were tangled with fine synthetic fibers in a chaotic mess that seemed to reach out hungrily towards them.

"Can't destroy it with the rifle... and no explosives... We'd need missiles to destroy it..." Mark muttered, studying the approaching monstrosity.

"Mark!" Mimi's cry echoed through the comm as the debris threatened to engulf them.

Mark's initial volley of rifle fire proved futile, barely scratching the surface. A piece of debris the size of the G-Saviour itself glanced off the beam shield.

"Whoa!" Mark almost lost his balance, but the auto-controlled mobile suit instantly fired auxiliary propulsion units on its back and waist to regain stability.

"No choice left!" Mark's hand flew to a switch, and the G-Saviour's back flared with blue-white light. In one fluid motion, he drew the beam saber, its azure radiance momentarily outshining the stars.

"That's..." Kobi gasped.

"He's using the beam saber!" Dieter leaned forward, gripping the console.

The G-Saviour rocketed upward, positioning itself above the approaching wall of debris. With a war cry that seemed to resonate through space itself, Mark brought the saber down in a massive overhead strike.

For a heartbeat, there was resistance, then the blade sank into the debris.

"More power!" Mark growled, his teeth clenched. "Show me what you can do!"



As if responding to his challenge, the beam saber's glow intensified. With a smooth motion, the giant mass was sliced open, the beam's edge progressing downward. Steel beams and pipes, melted by the beam's intense heat, spread to either side, glowing like metal in a foundry's furnace.

Supporting the blue saber in front of its torso, the G-Saviour cleaved the enormous mass in a single breath.

If this had been in the atmosphere, surely a great creaking sound would have been heard.

In the silent vacuum of space, the G-Saviour and Nimbus threaded the gap between the severed halves of debris like passing through a colossal set of gates.

"We did it!" Dieter and Kobi's triumphant shouts filled the control room. Mimi and Cynthia stood transfixed, their eyes wide with disbelief at the incredible feat they'd just witnessed. The G-Saviour's beam saber had instantaneously sliced through a mass hundreds of times its own size.

Even Mark found himself breathless, staring out at the sea of stars now spread before them. His face, still etched with surprise at his own miraculous feat, slowly spread into a smile of indescribable joy.

In that moment, something fundamental shifted within Mark. Though he might not have recognized it himself, he had undeniably grasped hold of something greater, the true potential of the G-Saviour, and perhaps, his own destiny.

To be continued

REPORT OF G-SAVIOUR
Report on Side 8's Independence

Text by
Casper D McGregor
(Inoe International Institute)

Dawn of a New Universal Century Order

This report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the circumstances surrounding the momentous "Light of Gaea" incident. It is my sincere hope that this document will serve as a valuable resource in unraveling the complexities of this pivotal event in our shared history.

COLLAPSE OF THE EARTH FEDERATION

Nearly three centuries ago, humanity embarked on an ambitious journey to expand its living space into the cosmos. Historical records paint a picture of the Earth Federation's birth as an organization designed to oversee the burgeoning human society and orchestrate the smooth execution of space migration.

The Federation, with its political nucleus firmly rooted on Earth, wielded control over the space colonists like a puppeteer manipulating strings. However, as the colonists' economic might grew, so did their hunger for political autonomy. This desire for independence collided head-on with the harsh reality that many nations comprising the Federation relied heavily on their dominion over these cosmic outposts to sustain their economies.

Unsurprisingly, the colonists' impassioned pleas for sovereignty fell on deaf ears, echoing uselessly in the vacuum of space. Frustration festered, and a faction of migrants took up arms, declaring their independence in a blaze of defiance. What began as a struggle for national recognition soon ignited into a cataclysmic war.

Earth, once a vibrant blue jewel, was reduced to a scarred, ashen sphere. The grim ledger of history recorded the loss of billions of lives, a testament to the conflict's brutality. Yet, the embers of war refused to be extinguished, and the bloody dance between Earth and its wayward children continued in an endless waltz of destruction.

These relentless cycles of conflict gnawed at the Federation's foundations, accelerating the push for autonomy among the space colonies, known colloquially as "Sides." However, this shift inadvertently cultivated a toxic strain of Earth-supremacist ideology within the Federation, a virulent anti-Side sentiment that spread like a cancer.

In the year U.C. 0217, the Federation government, driven by a primal instinct for self-preservation, made a fateful decision. Military forces were unleashed upon the Sides, their mission: total subjugation. The autonomous governments of the Sides, buoyed by citizen support, met this aggression with fierce resistance. Clashes between the invading troops and the Side-stationed forces erupted across the cosmos, each skirmish fanning the flames of a high-intensity conflict.

In the end, it was the Earth-leaning Sides that stepped into the fray as mediators, brokering a fragile peace. But this intervention, intended to quell the chaos, instead dealt the final, decisive blow to the already crumbling Earth

Federation. The once-mighty union of humanity's interstellar endeavors lay in ruins, its collapse now an immutable fact of history.

A NEW ERA

In the wake of the conflict's resolution, the Earth Federation, compelled to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Sides, underwent a seismic fracture. Earth and the Sides emerged as entities endowed with parity in rights under the aegis of international law, at last realizing the long-harbored aspiration of space colonists. The pejorative nomenclature space colony for Side constituents was, in this watershed moment, refined to the more dignified "Settlement." Terrestrial nations, hitherto holding assembly seats and forming the federation's backbone, coalesced into a singular political entity, forging a novel federal state alongside pro-Earth Sides. This crystallized into the Congress of Settlement Nations (CONSENT). Sides 1 and 4, in a strategic maneuver, aligned with the Moon to birth the Settlement Freedom Alliance. Thus, human civilization embarked upon an unprecedented epoch.

Yet, the contemporary political landscape remains precariously fragile and volatile, demanding unwavering vigilance in the preservation of order. Indeed, the recent declaration of independence by Side 8 portends a significant recalibration of the delicate political equilibrium. While we narrowly averted the relegation of Dr. Riva's groundbreaking bioluminescence discovery to obscurity, its potential as an immediate panacea for the looming food crisis remains uncertain. For in every age and every realm, there persist those misguided souls who elevate personal aggrandizement and the satiation of their desires above all else...

CONGRESS OF SETTLEMENT NATIONS FORCES

Just as individuals are endowed with inalienable human rights, nations bear both rights and sacred duties. Chief among these is the solemn obligation to "safeguard the lives and property of the state and its citizenry." The military, in its essence, stands as the bulwark against the specters of invasion and catastrophe that threaten the state and its people. Thus, even in the wake of the harrowing conflict five years past, a conflagration that exacted a grievous toll in civilian lives, the military apparatus was not consigned to oblivion. Instead, a metamorphosis occurred, with considerable Federation soldiers transitioning to being CONSENT soldiers (naturally, the upper echelons of command faced rigorous prosecution for their roles...). The military, while indisputably an instrument of awesome power, can, when wielded with judicious restraint, prove an invaluable bastion of security.

The Congressional Armed Forces boasts a diverse array of branches, each tailored to the unique demands of terrestrial, maritime, aerial, and cosmic theaters of operation. In our present epoch, it is the Space Force that indubitably wields the greatest influence and commands the most substantial

personnel. Notably, they are reputed to embody a dual nature, serving concurrently as a rapid response unit for emergent crises.

At the vanguard of their martial might stands the iconic humanoid war machine: the mobile suit. This marvel of military engineering, having undergone over a century and a half of refinement since its inception, now harnesses formidable high-output engines to assert dominance across all conceivable environments, a far cry from its rudimentary forebears. On terra firma, these behemoths forge tactical synergies with conventional tanks, while in the void of space, they orchestrate deadly ballets alongside agile space fighters. This seamless integration of diverse military branches forms the cornerstone of their strategy to vanquish adversaries and accomplish critical objectives. The current flagship unit, the redoubtable Bugu, has carved out a legacy of triumphs that unequivocally cements its status as the true “queen of the battlefield.” A chorus of military analysts posit that the CAF reigns supreme in martial prowess, a testament perhaps to the wealth of tactical acumen inherited from the Federation’s time period.

THE PEOPLE’S ARMY

The CAF’s reputation has been undeniably sullied by the heavy-handed investigation at the North Atlantic Deep Sea Farming Research Facility and the covert machinations surrounding Side 8 Gaea’s bid for independence. However, it would be a grave error to let these isolated incidents, perpetrated by a handful of misguided officers, overshadow the fact that the vast majority of the CAF’s ranks are composed of individuals of sound judgment and moral fiber.

In a continuation of time-honored tradition, the CAF, much like its Federation Forces predecessor, employs a dual system of conscription and voluntary enlistment. This approach is rooted in the enduring belief, carried forward from the previous century, that military service is a fundamental civic duty. National defense, in this light, is not merely an obligation but a sacred trust. The army’s personnel undergo rigorous training, molding them into combatants capable of unflinching action in the face of crisis, prepared to engage in the grim necessities of warfare. Yet, precisely because they are held to a moral standard that diverges from civilian norms, these soldiers bear the weighty responsibility of exercising judicious restraint in the application of force and conducting themselves as exemplars of reason and decorum.

It is a testament to their character that the CAF’s personnel are widely regarded as meeting these exacting standards. For when these warriors return to their hearths and homes, they seamlessly transition into the roles of devoted spouses and nurturing parents. History bears no witness to instances where soldiers, sharing the fundamental values of the citizenry they protect, have collectively strayed from their path, bringing catastrophic harm to the very society they are sworn to defend.

THE HUMAN CONDITION

Having dissected the intricacies of CONSENT and its military apparatus, let us now pivot to the origins of the revolutionary bioluminescence that ignited our current predicament, and the machinations of those who seek to harness the food crisis as a ladder to power.

The Earth's biosphere lies in tatters, a casualty of relentless space wars and conflicts. Agricultural lands, once the lifeblood of our planet, now present a tableau of desolation with no glimmer of restoration on the horizon. This agricultural apocalypse has sent Earth's food self-sufficiency into a death spiral, necessitating ever-increasing imports from the Settlements. Yet, these orbital bastions are far from cornucopias themselves, their surplus a mere trickle in the face of terrestrial demand. The specter of societal collapse loomed large, hunger threatening to unravel the very fabric of civilization. In this race against annihilation, marine botany emerged as a beacon of hope.

The Atlantic Deep-Sea Agricultural Research Facility, thrust into the limelight by Mark Curran's involvement and inextricably linked to our present crisis, stands at the vanguard of this desperate quest for sustenance. It was here that Dr. Riva, in collaboration with Gaea's Dr. Graves, birthed the miraculous bioluminescent substance. Their breakthrough promised to fling wide the gates to humanity's future, yet it also aroused the ire of certain factions.

For these shadowy elements, the food crisis is not a calamity but a golden opportunity. The fledgling CONSENT, still finding its feet, presents a tempting target for usurpation. Their stratagem hinges on swaying public opinion towards centralization. They bank on the desperation of Earth's populace, believing that the masses, gripped by hunger's cold hand, will sanction even military subjugation of the food-rich Sides. Hunger, they posit, is the ultimate anesthetic, capable of obliterating lofty ideals and moral compunctions.

At the core of their ideology lies a stark dogma: Earth as the supreme entity, with Settlements relegated to mere vassals. The current parity between Earth and the Sides is an abomination in the eyes of these Earth supremacists, a heresy they are determined to rectify by any means necessary.

BALANCER

The preceding discourse has, I trust, illuminated the precarious nature of our current global predicament. The Congress of Settlement Nations and the Settlement Freedom Alliance stand as twin colossi, with a constellation of smaller, unaligned nation-states orbiting in their gravitational pull. This nascent world order, still in its infancy, requires the nurturing balm of time to achieve true stability. Yet, the path to equilibrium is strewn with formidable obstacles: the resurgence of Earth-centric ideologies, the specter of food scarcity, and a Gordian knot of diplomatic entanglements, including the thorny issue of trade relations between CONSENT and the Alliance. Each of these challenges

represents a Rubik's Cube of complexity, defying resolution without the intercession of an impartial arbiter, unfettered by the chains of vested interests.

Enter the Illuminati, an enigmatic force emerging from the shadows of obscurity. While their name may resonate in the corridors of power, their true essence remains enshrouded in a veil of mystery. Allow me to speculate from the threads of intelligence I've gathered. Popular lore traces their founding to the twilight years of the old Federation, sprouting from the fertile soil of an exclusive private club. Conversely, whispers persist of a more ancient lineage, dating back over seven decades to the tumultuous era of inter-Side conflicts. Regardless of their precise origins, their deep-rooted influence in the fabric of society is incontrovertible.

The inner workings of the Illuminati, far from the Byzantine complexity one might expect, appear to be founded on pragmatic, common-sense human relationships, unburdened by the arcane rituals often associated with clandestine societies. Their *raison d'être*, it is said, is twofold: to safeguard the delicate balance of order and to stand as a bulwark against the tide of unjust violence. The Illuminati's ranks are a veritable mosaic of humanity, encompassing luminaries from academia, engineering marvels, battle-hardened soldiers, intrepid journalists, and seasoned politicians. On paper, such a concentration of influence could easily metastasize into an authoritarian juggernaut. Yet, paradoxically, they eschew hegemonic aspirations. The Illuminati's foundation rests upon the bedrock of mutual aid, a principle without which they would be bereft of their members' crucial support.

Their recent intervention in Side 8, deploying their formidable mobile suit contingent, was not a display of military might but a measured response to the CAF's egregious use of force. It serves as a testament to their commitment to justice and order. However, let it be known that should Side 8 ever stray from the path of righteousness and threaten the delicate balance, the Illuminati would undoubtedly rise to the occasion.

POSTSCRIPT

Humanity, in its turbulent journey, has repeatedly baptized the world in the inferno of conflict. A century and a half ago, during the inaugural cosmic conflagration, even the Settlements, our species' celestial sanctuaries, were perverted into projectiles, raining destruction upon our ancestral cradle, Earth. Subsequent eras bore witness to even more grotesque atrocities, with chemical warfare desecrating the very habitats meant to shelter us among the stars. It was through this crucible of strife and immeasurable sacrifice that the progeny of Spacenoids wrested their independence and dignity. This somber truth must be etched indelibly into our collective consciousness. Our solemn duty to those who perished is to internalize these harsh lessons, using them as the foundation upon which we construct a world of harmony and order.

In the twilight of the Federation, a certain social philosopher boldly proclaimed, "History has at last reached its denouement." Yet, the harsh light of reality has starkly refuted this premature epitaph. The specter of famine still

looms large, while the machinations of Earth supremacists and the ever-present dread of renewed hostilities keep our world teetering on the precipice of perpetual crisis. Far from having breathed its last, history surges onward with renewed vigor, its pulse more frenetic than ever.

As we stand at this crossroads, a question looms large: Can we, the inheritors of this tumultuous legacy, outmaneuver the inexorable force of history and carve out our destiny in this dawning epoch?

Afterword

Five years ago, in a cutting-edge CGI studio nestled in Santa Monica, Los Angeles, a short trailer, known in Japan as a “pilot film,” came to life. As luck would have it, I found myself on set during the production of this trailer, which seamlessly blended American actors with state-of-the-art CG. What struck me most was the sheer prowess of American CG technology.

Coming from the world of anime production, witnessing a real Hollywood live-action shoot was nothing short of mesmerizing. But it was the computer-generated imagery, integrated flawlessly with the filmed footage, that truly opened my eyes. Even to my untrained gaze, the gulf between this and what we were producing back in Japan was glaringly apparent.

Picture this: an 18-meter colossus, striding through the heart of Manhattan. Panic-stricken crowds scattering at its feet. The scene bristled with an almost tangible immediacy, a testament to the wonders modern CG can achieve. I couldn't help but think, “My God, we've finally reached this level with mobile suit visuals. This is what I've been waiting to see.”

This was the honest reaction of someone who'd been in the trenches with Sunrise for years. But I suspect that, at the time, this level of sophistication seemed like a distant dream, both for Japan and Sunrise itself.

“Impressive,” was all that was said. And just like that, the trailer for “G-Saviour” faded into obscurity.

It's been... well, let's just say more than two decades since I first got involved with Sunrise. I've worn many hats, production, planning, and now as a writer. I've had my fingers in countless pies, but oddly enough, anything with Gundam in the title has remained stubbornly out of reach.

Sure, I've done some minor work, helping with script layouts for some Gundam something-or-other, or lending a hand with proposal documents for another Gundam what's-its-name. But for a franchise that's been churning out content for 20 years, it's strange how I've managed to stay on the periphery.

I'll admit, there were times I felt a bit left out. “Maybe the Gundam gods just don't like me,” I'd think to myself, only half-joking.

Then, about three years ago, Producer Inoue approached me with an intriguing proposition: “How about writing up a proposal for G-Saviour? We're looking for something that skews older than the trailer, with a sample story to boot.”

With Gundam's 20th anniversary on the horizon, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to capitalize on what we'd learned from that initial trailer. The wheels in my head started turning.

What came to mind was this: “Let's pay homage to the fans who've supported Gundam for two decades. Show them a mature Gundam, one that's grown up and is ready to shoulder its responsibilities in society.”

(Even if Gundam had given up on me, I certainly hadn't given up on it.)

With that driving force, I penned a proposal and sample story. It wasn't about war machines fighting for the sake of conflict. Instead, it was the tale of mobile suits battling to protect the irreplaceable lives born on Earth.

That was my vision for G-Saviour.

And while the story may have evolved, that core theme lives on in the final product of G-SAVIOUR. When I read the script, polished by a writer I'd never met from across the ocean, I was overjoyed to see that they'd truly grasped the essence of what I was trying to convey.

I told Producers Ueda and Inoue, "If there's anything I can do to help, just say the word."

Little did I know how prophetic those words would prove to be. Of course, as merely the person who'd written the initial proposal, I had no real authority or say in matters. But I couldn't stay away. I wanted to see this through to the end. So, as nothing more than an interested party, I found myself spending months in Los Angeles where the office was based, and braving the winter chill of Vancouver, Canada, where filming took place.

The larger the media market, the more constraints you inevitably face. This was, in many ways, a first for the industry, a production taking place entirely on American soil, far from Japan. Budget, time, language, culture, systems... there were countless reasons why certain things couldn't be portrayed, shouldn't be shown, or had to be altered.

And then there was the challenge of communication. With 5,000 kilometers between us and Japan, keeping everyone on the same page was no small feat. It was tough to watch the stationed staff struggle with these realities, even though I understood why it had to be this way.

But then came the American test screening. Seeing the excitement on everyone's faces, from complete Gundam novices to die-hard fans, was incredible. And when their kids shouted "Very cool!!!" with eyes sparkling, I thought to myself, "We really did it... we made G-Saviour a reality!"

Now, I even have the honor of novelizing the story. I doubt there are many writers out there who've been as fortunate as I am. That's why I see it as my duty to convey the authentic experiences I witnessed to the readers through this novel.

In that sense, this G-Saviour novel is also a gift to Gundam lovers, a glimpse into the mature Gundam world in all its glory. If readers come away thinking, "Wow, I didn't know the Gundam universe could tell stories like this," I couldn't ask for anything more. It would be the ultimate satisfaction as a writer.

And if some think, "This isn't the Gundam world I know!" Well, that's okay too. After all, no child ever grows up exactly as their parents envision. It's almost a given that they'll defy expectations. We've all been there, right? With that slightly mischievous mindset, I'm about to dive into the second half, the real meat of the story.

G-Saviour, while part of the Gundam universe, isn't officially a Gundam series. It's an independent mobile suit work in its own right. In other words, it seems I'm still not quite in the Gundam inner circle.

Before I wrap up, I'd like to express my heartfelt gratitude to a few people: Editor Marutomi, who's been incredibly patient with my slow writing pace; Daitoku from Jushosha, who's been a constant support; and George Izumi, who's been invaluable in helping me navigate life in America. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

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Yoshie Kawahara