

G-SAVIOUR

VOLUME TWO

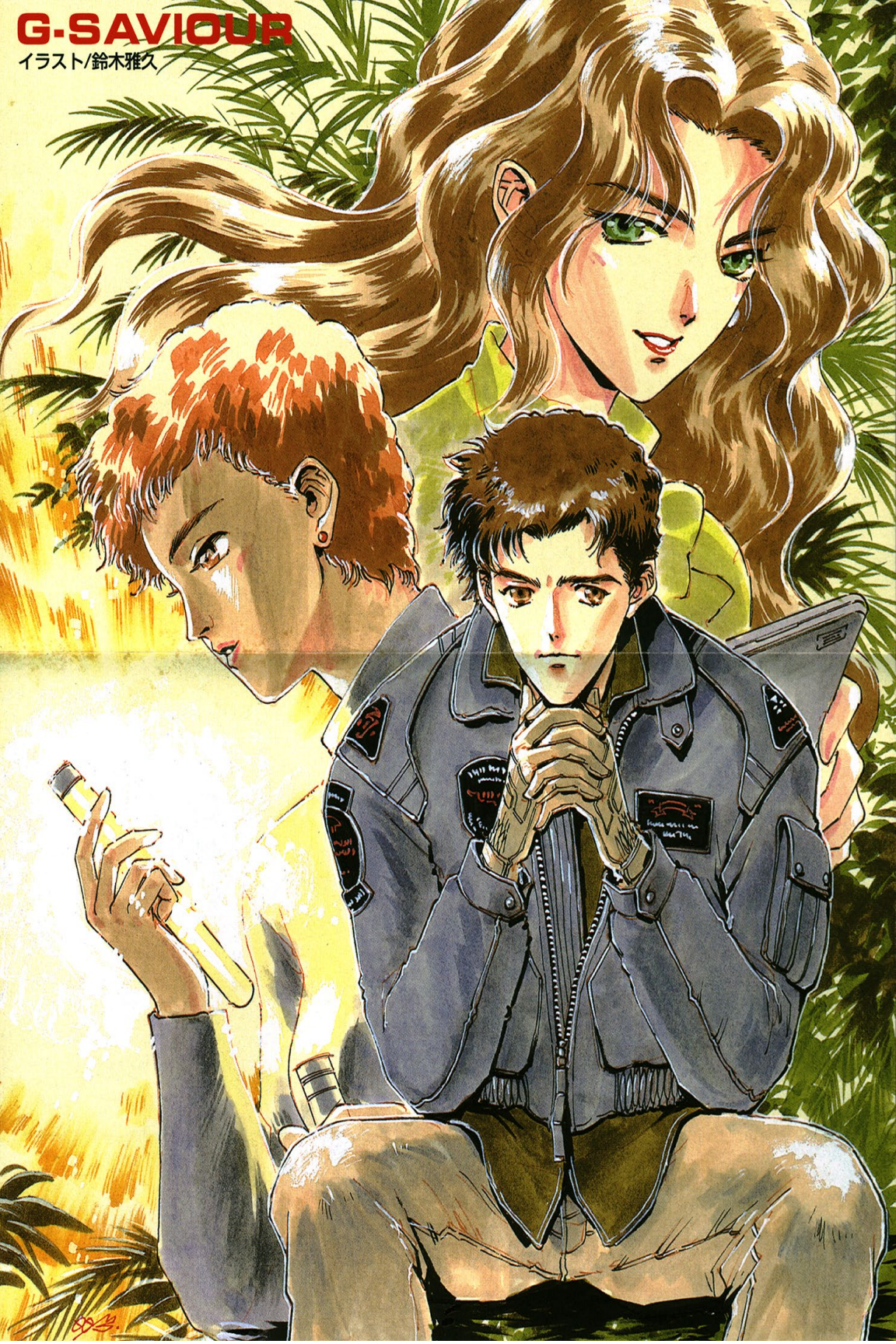


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Translated by Zeonic|Scanlations

G-SAVIOUR

イラスト/鈴木雅久



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Chapter.01

Flower Garden

The Saviour Team.

That was the moniker given to the group of mobile suit development engineers assembled under the brilliant mind of John Saviour, a genius in the field of mobile suit design. Whenever people talked about those celebrated, near-legendary mobile suits (humanoid robots designed for piloting), the work of this team was nearly always present in the shadows, as though etched into the very bones of their creation. Yet for all their achievements, the team remains shrouded in mystery. No one knew for sure which organization they answered to, what kind of people made up their ranks, or where their base of operations could be found. In fact, even the question of who John Saviour himself might be, a man who had attained semi-legendary status within the ranks of the Congressional Forces, remained an enigma.

The prevailing theory was that he was a scholar whose remarkable talents had once seen him working in the military's own mobile suit development division. Strangely, however, no one in the military ever seemed to have laid eyes on a man by that name. And this wasn't the distant past of fifty or a hundred years ago. Right now, the official records of the Congressional Forces clearly state that John Saviour was deeply involved in the development of the Bugu, currently the military's mainstay mobile suit, and the widely adopted Freedom model for the public sector. Even so, search as one might through every relevant registry, his name is nowhere to be found. Yet there is indisputable evidence in the form of the G-Saviour, almost certainly christened in honor of that very man.

By existing, the G-Saviour openly declares that John Saviour and his Saviour Team are real. It showed its astonishing capabilities to the four people who boarded the Nimbus, and even to Mark himself, the one who piloted it firsthand. If, for some reason, John Saviour's existence were classified at the highest level of secrecy within the military, then it would stand to reason that details about him wouldn't simply leak out. However, the fact that not even the intelligence division's data held any mention of him was almost impossible to believe.

Sitting in the cabin of the Nimbus on its covert journey toward Gaea, Mimi quietly shut the lid of her compact computer and gazed out at the myriad stars speckling the void.

"The G-Saviour... I really did see it with my own eyes."

It homed in on flying debris one after the next, destroying each one with pinpoint accuracy. It cut clean through an enormous obstacle, easily two kilometers across, in the blink of an eye. Its agility, power, and fighting capabilities were nothing short of unbelievable, unlike anything I'd ever witnessed, overturning every conventional idea I had about mobile suits. On top

of that, it introduced a whole new system that allowed you to swap out its equipment depending on the environment of use, a mobile suit that could change and evolve. Right now, that very machine is resting silently in a dedicated hangar aboard the Nimbus, and yet there's no denying it's alive in there, waiting.

Mimi still felt a tinge of disbelief that this mobile suit, which might very well be called miraculous, truly existed, despite having witnessed it herself. And she couldn't shake the memory of the expression on Mark's face when he returned from piloting it. His breath had been ragged, his eyes lit up like a starstruck boy, brimming with excitement in a way she'd never seen before.

She had been with Mark for three years now, yet she had never seen him so alive. Plenty of men had tried their luck with her, she was beautiful and possessed a bright future, after all. She'd even dated a few who called themselves elite officers. Yet something always felt missing. No matter how kindly they treated her, no matter how many times they whispered sweet words of love into her ear or showered her with bouquets, she was never fully satisfied.

Mark, on the other hand, lacked that so-called elite status and wasn't particularly savvy about matters of romance, yet he alone possessed something the others never did. When she first met him, sure, he was recognized in the military as an ace pilot. Mobile suit pilots occupied a kind of elite position in the forces, of course, but in reality, they weren't all refined thoroughbreds. Most of them had clawed their way up on pure skill and raw nerve, which often made them wild, rough around the edges, or strangely self-obsessed, if not downright neurotic.

In contrast, Mark was always calm, free of any arrogant posturing or gaudy mannerisms. In that sense, he was an oddly sincere young man. And yet he harbored a quiet fire deep inside, she could sense it. That was what drew her to Mark Curran, a man she admired for who he was, not for his rank or résumé.

What exactly was that elusive something the others were missing? Even now, Mimi wasn't entirely sure. But because Mark had it, because he had given up his position and fame as an ace pilot, trading the prestige of the military for the life of a mere civilian mobile suit pilot, she felt able to accept him. She herself clung fiercely to her military career and future prospects; Mark's choices were the exact opposite of her own ambitions. Yet, inexplicably, she could allow it.

For now, that was enough. She would let Mark do as he pleased. Whatever dream he failed to realize, she would accomplish in his stead. And one day, by her own hand, so that no one could possibly object, she would make Mark a celebrated ace pilot again... make him a hero.

Seeing his radiant face as he emerged from the G-Saviour had rekindled that determination in her.

Yes. Mark needs a mobile suit. He needs the best machine possible, one that can truly unleash his potential, and the stage on which to shine. Only in the cockpit of the finest mobile suit can Mark's talent bloom. That's what he himself desires; that gleaming smile of his said it all.

"Mark. You will pilot the greatest mobile suit in the world, and seize the greatest glory with your own hands. Because you're the man I chose to stand above them all. And for that, I'd do anything. I want to see you disembark from that cockpit, the cockpit of the most powerful mobile suit ever built. And as you step into the cheering throng, hailed as a hero, I'll run toward you and fling my arms around you with all my might, while you look at me with that same brilliant smile as before..."

Mimi closed her eyes and conjured this vision in her mind's eye. Even that alone made her chest tighten with an almost girlish heat, her heart drumming in excitement. It reminded her of the rush from the early days of a first love, something sweet and rapturous coursing through her veins.

"I won't let this joy stay a mere dream!"

Renewing her resolve, Mimi opened her eyes and peered beyond the partition as if her gaze might pierce through it. On the other side of that divide, in the cockpit, sat Cynthia, Dieter, and Mark.

Mimi sensed it, something was happening inside Mark... something had changed since that woman, Cynthia, the Gaea scientist, appeared. It was still just a faint apprehension for the moment. Yet in those fleeting seconds when Mark and Cynthia's gazes overlapped, she could sense some intangible energy sparking between them. The way his eyes followed her, and the slight shift in his tone, both were subtly different from how he interacted with anyone else. Mimi had caught on; she was sensitive enough to see it.

She had no concrete proof. Perhaps she was imagining it, a pointless woman's fancy, a foolish misunderstanding. And it had better be just that. But uncertainty flickered in the depths of her heart, unsettling her. After all, this was a kind of fear she could not afford to entertain.

She recalled a certain message she had received back in New Manhattan. Maybe this is my chance...

If, by any chance, her fears were well-founded, she would do whatever it took to ensure her dream didn't remain a dream. She murmured in a voice so soft that no one else could hear.

"Dreams are meant to come true..."

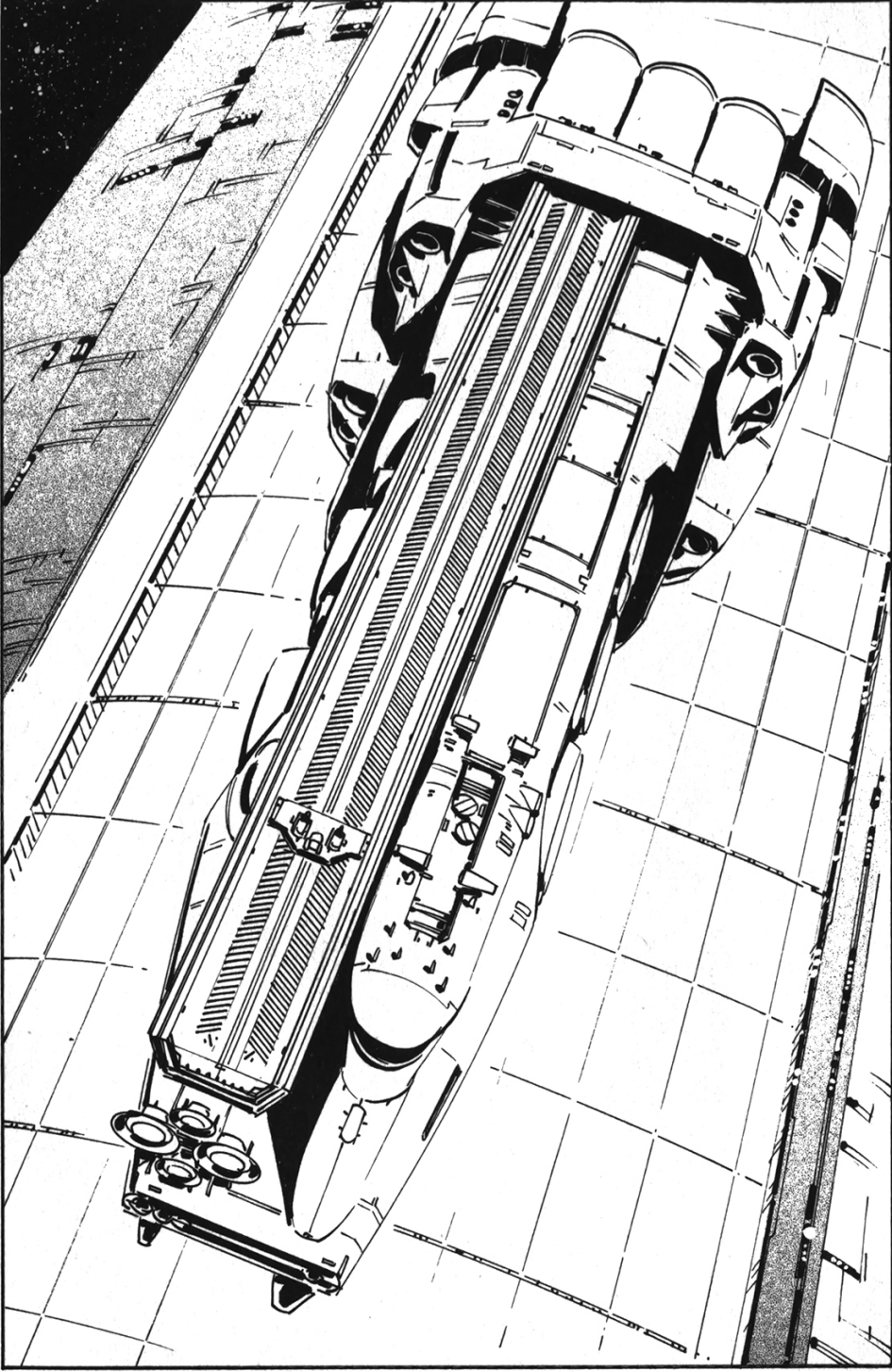
"Gaea Tower, Gaea Tower, this is Flight Number 6344 requesting permission to dock."

Leaning toward the mic, Dieter repeated the call, his voice edged with irritation. He'd already hailed them four times, and despite the open line, the speakers remained stubbornly silent.

"What the hell is going on?!"

He pursed his lower lip in a scowl.

"There doesn't seem to be a problem with our comm link. There's no interference that would disrupt the signal," Mark said, his fingers flashing across the console keys as he cast a glance at the steadily enlarging form of the Settlement outside the window.



"Agreed. They should be hearing us just fine," Cynthia added, pressing a fingertip to her headset mic. "This is 6344. I'm Cynthia Graves. New Manhattan should have sent word ahead."

Still, the speaker offered only silence.

"If they won't answer, I'll force our way in," she said plainly.

"C-Cynthia... wait, you can't just—" Mark was taken aback by her unexpected boldness.

"It'll be fine."

She cast him a small, confident smile.

At that moment, a voice finally echoed through the speaker.

"Gaea Tower here. We read you, Ms. Cynthia Graves. Permission granted. Follow the guidance beacon and proceed through Gate 5."

"See?" Cynthia beamed without the slightest hesitation, leaving Dieter momentarily speechless.

"Is that how people on Gaea usually handle arrivals?" Mark wondered. It clearly defied the normal protocols he knew, and he could only blink in surprise at the easy back-and-forth.

Before their eyes, Gaea, the centerpiece of Side 8, began to reveal its true form. Structurally, it was the same shape as other colonies. But the "ground" that stretched out beneath them was lavishly cloaked in green, so much so that it was breathtaking. Unlike the gray jungle of high-rise buildings in New Manhattan, this place offered a radiant swath of color that gleamed in the mirrored sunlight, washing the Nimbus's hull in vivid emerald hues.

"How beautiful..." Mark murmured under his breath, unable to contain his awe.

Cynthia gave a little laugh.

"It's lovely, yes, but it still can't hold a candle to the real Earth."

Her dark eyes glimmered with reflections of that lush greenery, making them sparkle all the more.

Side 8 was the last colony ever constructed, a cluster of settlements perched at the far end of the Lagrange point whose stable orbit was governed by the gravitational interplay between the Earth and the Moon. Almost all of its residents were scientists or people in primary industries dedicated to achieving full human self-sufficiency in outer space. Their goal was to find new ways of life that prioritized environmental balance above all else, an endeavor deemed impossible in the other colonies for a variety of reasons. They sought out cutting-edge technology, blending it together in pursuit of a completely different style of Settlement.

Yet because Side 8 had been established under a non-governmental entity back in the era of the Earth Federation, and consequently never had a solid national backbone, it never developed the political leverage enjoyed by other Sides. Nor did it have a leader with the kind of skill and forceful temperament required for state governance, so it had yet to earn its independence as a fully sovereign Side.

The Nimbus's port of entry looked much like any other settlement's. But Mark noticed right away that something was missing, the typical smell of artificially scented cleaning agents that usually hit you the moment you set foot in a docking area. Instead, there was a pleasant humidity and the crisp, chlorophyll-laced fragrance of plants... in other words, calm, refreshing air.

That was Mark's first impression of Gaea as he stepped out through the Nimbus's hatch. He realized why almost immediately: once he followed Cynthia and the others outside, an overwhelming surge of greenery sprawled before his eyes. The entrance plaza was a riot of blossoming flowers, the likes of which he'd rarely seen even on Earth. Butterflies and bees darted about, and small birds chirped in the rows of trees lining the roads. In the gentle breeze, the branches swayed, and the golden sunlight, filtering down from the "river" high above, visible faintly through distant clouds, poured across the brick-laid streets like dancing beams.

Something shimmering a deep cerulean whirred across their field of vision. Mark thought it might be a larger-than-average insect, but Kobi calmly identified it as a hummingbird, an almost legendary species found only in old encyclopedias. The revelation made Mark blink in astonishment.

Around the port, personal electric cars and cabs were almost nowhere to be seen. Instead, slightly bigger electric buses ran routes in every direction. The explanation was simple: they wanted to minimize unnecessary energy consumption. Cynthia and her companions flashed their passes and boarded one such bus, urging along the still-gawking Mark and Mimi.

Outside its open windows stretched orderly roads flanked by greenbelts and farmlands showing off dark, fertile soil. Cows and sheep grazed lazily; carts piled with hay were slowly pulled by real horses. Homes dotted the landscape, and every so often a cluster of buildings, likely a shopping center or some facility, rose up. Even those stood among gardens lush with foliage, blending seamlessly into the scenery. Beyond them spread dense forests and groves, shades of rich green layered upon green, like a page torn from an old picture book, the kind of landscape Earth once had in abundance, long ago.

The first thing Mark did in Gaea was take a deep breath. He couldn't recall the last time he'd done that so freely, maybe back on that orientation camp in high school, in what was once called Greenland, surrounded by precious forests.

"Incredible..." he managed to say at last, gazing over at Cynthia.

"Too rustic?" Cynthia teased, flashing him a mischievous grin. Mark could only give a sheepish chuckle in response.

"Well... it's certainly rural, I guess, but...I never would've imagined a place like this could exist inside a colony."

"Yes, it's all still very much in outer space," she said, nodding. "A mere step beyond this road where the bus is driving lies the freezing void. If you think about it that way, maybe this is all terribly artificial."

"No, that's not what I meant," Mark said hastily, shaking his head. "You rarely see a place like this anymore, even on Earth. I'm just amazed you were able to create all this."

Cynthia's eyes softened.

"I guess I never really thought of it that way. I was born and raised here in Gaea. For us, this is normal. Soil underfoot, greenery bursting with life, animals everywhere... We just accept it as the way things ought to be."

Mark wasn't sure how to respond. He knew, intellectually, that what Cynthia said was correct. But as for himself, this was his very first time truly experiencing such a landscape in all its glory. Sadly, he had no frame of reference for taking Gaea's way of life as a given. At the same time, the deep sense of ease welling up in him proved just how much he craved an environment like this.

"I think this is a wonderful way to live," Mark said finally, smiling back at the gentle smile Cynthia wore.

"Thank you. That means a lot to me," she replied.

Looking at her, Mark felt a surprising warmth blossom inside him. Was it simply the magnificence of Gaea, or the presence of the woman smiling at him right now?

Suddenly, the thought occurred to Mark. Cynthia is so much like this place... like Gaea itself.

For the short ride to their destination, he let himself melt into the soothing sensations of Gaea, and perhaps into Cynthia, as well.

Meanwhile, Mimi had felt ill at ease ever since arriving. Part of it was the unfamiliar scent wafting in through the window: fresh earth, livestock, organic fertilizer. But more than that, she couldn't stop noticing the subtle glances people sent her way. Sure, Mimi's Earth-urban outfit, currently the height of fashion back home, did stand out here. Still, even though this was the farthest-flung colony, it wasn't some time-warped land cut off from the rest of civilization. Her clothes weren't that alien, and certainly no one cared about differences in skin tone or hair color anymore. More to the point, Mark was from Earth as well, yet no one seemed to cast him so much as a second glance.

Yet when she boarded the bus, everyone seemed to turn around as though they had eyes in the backs of their heads. More than once, Mimi found herself furrowing her brows at it.

"What makes me so different?" she wondered, both confused and irritated.

The true reason turned out to be trivial: her perfume. Right before entering the port, Mimi had reapplied her usual fragrance. To her, it was simple courtesy when going somewhere new, especially since she hadn't changed clothes or showered since the night before. She'd been soaked in that freezing rain, then traipsed through musty tunnels filled with mold and dust, explored seedy corridors reeking of cigar smoke... horrors that would be unthinkable in her usual day-to-day life. She was convinced she smelled awful, so dabbing on a little perfume seemed appropriate.

But to the people of Gaea, who lived amid the natural scents of flowers, greenery, and fresh air, her one-hundred-percent synthetic perfume was overpowering and jarringly out of place. They'd turn to see what was causing such a stench, and upon noticing her appearance, realize she must be a visitor from outside. Then, they'd politely look away again. Far from reassuring her, though, their behavior only fueled her suspicions.

"I hate this place..."

That dark thought flickered through her mind. And Mark, without noticing her discomfort in the slightest, was glued to the scenery outside, eyes shining like a boy's. Every so often, he'd glance back, only for his gaze to land on Cynthia. His face softened just a bit each time, and the gentle curl of his lips was not directed at Mimi. That made her bristle with resentment. If there weren't people around, she felt she might've grabbed him by the collar and forced him to look at her.

Fuming quietly, she stayed fixed on his profile for the rest of the bus ride.

Eventually, the group arrived at Gaea's Central Administration Center, the facility that handled every aspect of life within the colony, overseeing daily operations and maintenance for the Settlement as a whole. The colony's day-night cycle and climate, set by massive mirrors; scheduling artificial rainfall; running the port; communicating with outside vessels and shuttles; conducting inspections and repairs on the settlement itself. It was all administered through this complex.

They made their way to the so-called "Gaea Tower," which rose from the heart of the management center. The tower was essentially Gaea's nerve center, housing its most critical departments. Yet despite that somewhat imposing title, the interior of Gaea Tower was designed as a tranquil, spacious environment. The wide corridors, doorways to various rooms, and scattered lounges all used natural materials like wood and stone. Real plants entwined everywhere, rich green foliage sprouting and flourishing along the walls. Every so often there was a hall featuring real flowers in bloom, small waterfalls, and streams that filled the air with the gentle sound of trickling water. It almost felt as though they were strolling through a lush park or a woodland grove.

People walking to and fro wore outfits of striking individuality, beautiful, yet never gaudy or outlandish. Their clothes hinted at the vast tapestry of cultures humanity had produced (and lost) across its long history. There was a faintly exotic feel in the air, as if one had stepped into an ancient global bazaar on Earth. Mark and Mimi, new to Gaea, were wide-eyed, craning their necks to take it all in. They felt a hint of the "foreigner" experience for perhaps the first time.

And yet, strangely enough, it wasn't uncomfortable, because everyone in Gaea wore a gentle expression. Even passersby who'd never met Mark or Mimi greeted them with casual smiles, as if they'd known one another for years. There was not a trace of the wary suspicion that usually marks a "stranger in town."

What surprised the two more than anything was how leisurely these people moved. By the standards of New Manhattan, where they'd just been, or even Earth's administrative cities, Gaea's population moved at what seemed an almost aggravatingly slow pace.

"Time must flow differently here," Mark thought with a wry smile. A life free from rushing around, racing the clock, the endless grind of deadlines. In its own way, that was an enviable existence. But watching these people's unhurried steps, Mark couldn't help but reflect on the day-to-day norms in busier places,

where you hurried from point A to B in an endless scramble, and wonder how happy any of it really made people.

He didn't, even for a moment, think his entire life up to now had been some colossal mistake. But to learn that other people, descended from the same Earth he knew, living in the same artificial tubes in space, had found this path was undeniably a revelation.

Mimi felt something similar, in her own way. Dressed in sharply tailored business attire suited to the big Earth cities, she stood out even more than Mark in his G-Saviour flight suit. Although the residents here didn't throw her the puzzled glances she'd gotten in town, she still found herself eyeing Gaea with distrust and an intangible sense of not belonging. Uncertain and unsettled, at some point she began walking half-hidden behind Mark.

"All right, Kobi and Dieter, please head to the lab and start analyzing the samples. The staff there should be ready," Cynthia said, coming to a stop at a bend in the corridor.

"Got it," Dieter replied with an eager nod.

"We'll be busy elsewhere for a bit..." Cynthia began, but Mimi cut in, her voice pitched in a desperate-sounding plea.

"Before that... could I possibly take a shower? And maybe change clothes? If... well... if you have anything that seems more... Gaea-ish..."

"Of course, no problem at all," Cynthia answered with a smile. "Feel free to relax. Take as much time as you need."

She turned to Kobi.

"Could you show Mimi to the guest accommodations?"

"Sure thing. Right this way, Mimi," Kobi said, flashing a playful grin. She beckoned her toward the elevator hall visible in the distance.

As Mark's gaze followed Mimi's retreating figure, Cynthia tilted her head slightly and, in a playful gesture, lifted a finger and pointed toward a corridor on the side.

"Think you can keep me company for a bit? I have a meeting I'm not too excited about."

"A meeting you're not excited about?" Mark repeated, momentarily flustered by the almost girlish sparkle in Cynthia's eyes. He glanced down the corridor at a particularly large door.

"Exactly. It's not my field of expertise," Cynthia answered. She tapped a few numbers into the door's lock panel.

"Welcome back. The Councilor is expecting you," came a gentle female voice over the speaker beside the door.

Seated in a lavish chair within his office, General Garneaux of the Congressional Armed Forces shot a sidelong glance at Jack, who stood stiffly at attention by his side.

"As I suspected... they've gone ahead and trotted out a new mobile suit, have they?"

"Yes, sir," Jack replied in an ostensibly businesslike tone. "It appears to have been transported to Gaea along with Mark Curran and the others."

There was the barest twitch at the corner of his eye. Garneaux returned his gaze forward, letting his eyes drift over the historical swords lining the wall as if he couldn't be bothered to focus on any one of them.

"So they're calling it the G-Saviour... Hmph. The nerve of those Illuminati to brazenly use such a name."

He curled his lip in distaste.

"We should have crushed them much sooner," Jack said. "If Mark Curran and that G-Saviour were to throw in their lot with Gaea, it would... complicate things."

"What are you implying?" Garneaux's voice took on a dangerously soft edge, and he peered up at Jack from beneath lowered brows. "That this situation arose because of my incompetence?"

Jack's eyes flickered; he shook his head quickly.

"Never, sir. The real issue is that the Illuminati has grown into an organization far exceeding our expectations. And, above all, that Saviour Team has sided with them..."

Garneaux turned his gaze back to the front. "Saviour Team... I'd heard the name before, but I never did grasp their true nature. Looks like we can't afford to dismiss them any longer."

"Our investigation continues, sir. But there's no need to worry. With the overwhelming power of our new MW-Rai and MS-Rai units, the G-Saviour is hardly a threat."

"As it should."

Garneaux tilted his head back to look at Jack, but the usual placid warmth of his aging features was replaced by something colder.

"No matter how vast the Illuminati's network may be, no matter what technologies this so-called Saviour Team drags out, we have Earth on our side, an ideology that dwarfs all others. No matter how far into space humankind expands, no matter how many times they shout that a Settlement is a 'second Earth,' the fact remains that humanity sprang forth from Earth. As long as that memory, as long as that truth endures in the mind of humankind, my ideal society can still be realized."

"A restoration of the old Federation government, you mean?" Jack asked in a low voice.

"That's right. Though in truth, even that is just another stepping stone. Humanity, Earth's rightful conquerors, shall become conquerors of space as well. To that end, it must be guided by the chosen few, the truly gifted. It's only by the correct judgment of these select elites that humanity can become true rulers. Which means," Garneaux declared, "I have to show the world who is best fit to lead, just like the great conquerors of old, Napoleon or Caesar, once did..."

Jack observed the old man with the same detached, cool stare he always used, silently listening to this absurd ambition laid out before him. He had no idea when these grandiose dreams first took root in Garneaux's mind, nor did he particularly care. The fact that the general believed such an archaic notion could

become reality struck Jack as akin to stumbling on a set of fossilized dinosaur bones, nothing but crumbling remains from a long-dead world.

Yes, perhaps in its day, such a beast was fearsome and mighty, but now it was merely petrified bone. And what could a handful of brittle fossils possibly accomplish?

In Jack's eyes, the flame burning inside this white-haired relic was like a castaway's signal fire on a deserted island, doomed to wait in vain for a rescue that would never come.

"Still..." Jack thought, "fossils do have their uses in a museum. There, people can gape at the remains in wonder, conjuring up visions of some mythic past. They can even grow so enthralled that they plunk down money for cheap imitation fossils near the exit, never mind that once they return home, they'll realize how worthless the souvenirs really are, and eventually shove them into some garage corner. What I truly need are those museum-goers," he mused silently, expression as immovable as chiseled stone. Because once they've been dazzled by a fairy tale, they still leave behind their money. And then the question becomes how to use that money, digging up more bones to feed them the next fable, or securing a wholly new and genuine glory. For him, there was no debate.

He hadn't worked out any precise plan, but he knew beyond doubt that following this old fossil, this man enthralled by his delusions, would ultimately yield the power he sought for his own grand triumph. That was why he tolerated indulging Garneaux's fantasies for the time being.

Slowly, Jack parted his sculpted, statue-like lips.

"I understand perfectly. A global food crisis is an indispensable ingredient for making your ideal a reality, General."

"Indeed," Garneaux agreed, wholly unaware of Jack's inner musings, nodded and fixed his gaze on him once more.

"Famine is the mightiest weapon of all. As food becomes scarce, the masses will turn their backs on CONSENT's drivel about 'idealism' in no time. Which is why we cannot allow that 'deep-sea farming' or whatever it's called to succeed. That would be... inconvenient."

"Quite so," Jack said with a small nod.

"And when the food crisis grows dire, the masses will look for a leader who can secure their sustenance, no question."

"Which is why... we must bring Gaea under our control."

Garneaux sniffed.

"As long as you understand."

With that, he slowly rose from his seat.

"If those scientists have arrived in Gaea with their samples, then we have an ideal opportunity; two birds with one stone. We simply need to exploit it."

"I've already begun making the necessary arrangements."

Jack allowed a feral grin to twist his features at last.

"Then make whatever preparations you deem necessary. I'm giving you permission to amass enough force to completely subjugate Gaea. This time, let's

be sure nothing slips through our fingers. We cannot allow the Illuminati to roam unchecked."

"Understood, sir!"

Jack snapped to attention and offered a crisp salute.

Councilor Graves's office was of moderate size, with a symbol of Side Gaea, fashioned in the shape of a sheaf of wheat, presumably to evoke their wish for bountiful harvest, gleaming at the center of the wall. The room's interior, paneled in genuine wood with a subdued oak finish (no small luxury in most other colonies), lent a calm, dignified air that was both immaculate and suffused with a certain stately warmth, one that surely reflected the personality of its occupant.

"The Earth Autonomous District government has already sent its demands," said Councilor Graves, the representative of Side Gaea. Although his usual manner was mild, his expression was presently drawn tight as he slumped his solid, broad figure into the chair behind his desk. "They want us to hand over everyone involved in this incident to the Congressional Forces."

Strictly speaking, Gaea, which lacked official autonomy, had no "government" per se. Instead, representatives chosen from each district, as well as delegates from various occupational groups, gathered to form the "Gaea Central Committee." Through democratic discussion, this committee oversaw all of Side Gaea. Graves, though just shy of fifty, was no politician by trade but a scholar who possessed a broad perspective, a genuine humanity, and, most crucially for a consensus-based administration, an unwavering sense of fairness. The people of Gaea held him in high esteem, viewing him as the ideal leader to guide them toward eventual autonomy.

"We've responded that we can't comply with their demands until we've verified the facts and cross-referenced them with the Congressional Forces' own claims," he went on, "but—"

"They won't listen, is that it?" Mark asked, tipping his chin slightly to regard Graves.

Graves nodded slowly and gave a rumbling sigh.

"Exactly. They insist that Gaea, lacking autonomy, has no right to refuse them."

"That sounds just like Jack," Mark muttered under his breath.

"The Congressional Forces already have warships stationed near Gaea's airspace," Graves added. "Depending on our response, they're prepared to launch an immediate strike."

"How brazen..." Cynthia, pacing around the room with her large eyes clouded by distress, pressed her lips together.

"Though honestly," Graves went on, "I doubt it matters what we say. The Congressional Forces plan on marching in anyway. Their goal is clearly to bring Gaea under their control."

Mark nodded.

"That's right. We're only a convenient pretext. Their real aim is the sample."

"That does appear to be the case..." Graves paused, raising his gaze and fixing Mark with a direct look. "Mayor Suzuki of New Manhattan mentioned that the Congressional Forces have grown increasingly violent of late, especially toward New Manhattan. They'll stop at nothing to get what they want."

"Is that true?" Mark asked, unable to hide his surprise.

"It is," Cynthia chimed in, nodding. "Even when we were trying to leave for Earth, they actually planted a bomb on a civilian shuttle to stop us."

"What?!" Mark gaped at her.

"Fortunately, Mayor Suzuki intervened quickly. Thanks to him, we managed to escape New Manhattan and make it down to Earth..." Cynthia trailed off, then turned toward Graves.

"I've already thanked Mayor Suzuki for that," Graves said, looking at Cynthia in a way that made Mark sense something unspoken passing between the two. Cynthia caught Graves's eye, then deliberately glanced away, a faint, almost sulky look flickering across her face, a small departure from her usual poise, before she continued pacing.

There's something between them that goes beyond words... The thought floated through Mark's mind, and for a moment, he simply observed them in silence.

After watching Cynthia pace back and forth a few more times, Graves exhaled heavily and turned his attention back to Mark.

"What I truly can't fathom is why the Congressional Forces would want to use this sample as grounds for war in the first place. The research being done here marks a major step forward for all of humanity and could go a long way toward solving Earth's food crisis. You'd think they'd be celebrating its success, not condemning it."

Cynthia spun around, her voice rising.

"Isn't it obvious? They want exclusive control. Look at everything they've done so far, right when Dr. Riva's research was about to succeed, he was killed. Then they went after his son. And when we went after the sample, we were labeled traitors without any provocation. They'll do whatever it takes to keep this sample for themselves!"

"Then why not just hand it over?" Graves countered gently, meeting Cynthia's eyes. "If it could avert needless bloodshed, isn't that the wiser course? Dr. Riva started this project out of concern for humanity's food crisis. If it truly solves that crisis, why should it matter who claims the credit? A scholar's real satisfaction lies in the results."

"I see your point," Mark interjected. "In the end, as long as it helps ease the crisis, the purpose of the development is fulfilled."

But Cynthia whipped around to face him, emphatic.

"No! Do you really think they'll just back off once they get it? They've come here in warships to threaten Gaea. As soon as they have the sample, they'll crush Gaea by force next! I'm not just trying to defend my own pride. Once the Congressional Forces get what they want, they'll force us to expand food production on their terms, using the people of Gaea as little more than labor. Nobody knows how unjust their so-called 'food production plans' can be better

than we do. We've seen it firsthand, my fellow Gaeian scientists have borne the brunt of it. We cannot give in to them anymore! We have to stand and fight!"

Seeing her so desperate, Graves glowered at her from behind his desk.

"Why are you so quick to demand conflict?" he bellowed, slamming his palm on the table with a loud bang. "If you go in assuming we have to fight, no negotiations can succeed."

She shot right back at him.

"You know negotiations with these people are impossible! You've known that for a long time, haven't you?"

Mark's eyes widened at the intensity of her retort.

"You're oversimplifying it!" Graves snapped. "If you rush in without thinking about the consequences, do you have any idea what might happen? Or do you care so little you'd let someone dear to you lose their life again? You've already experienced that pain! You remember why I tried so hard to stop you, don't you? Think, Cynthia!"

He stood with a fierce motion, glowering at Cynthia across the desk. Unable to hold his gaze, she looked away. Mark leaned in and whispered almost inaudibly, "He's... your father?!"

Cynthia, clearly stung by her father's rage, and painfully aware of how justified it was, curved her mouth into a brief, wry smile in response to his startled question.

Meanwhile, having found a change of clothes that looked suitable enough, Mimi allowed herself to be led by a pleasant, if slightly too mellow, guide to a private guest room complete with a bed.

"This is the Gaea Tower guest suite," the attendant said, smiling broadly. "Please make yourself comfortable." She handed Mimi a card-shaped room key.

"Thank you," Mimi replied. She paused in the doorway. "By the way, do you know where Mark is?"

The guide tilted her head politely.

"Mark... you mean Mark Curran?"

"Yes. We arrived together. He should be with Cynthia," Mimi said, her impatience slipping into her voice.

"Oh..." The attendant bobbed her head in a lazy nod. "Ms. Cynthia is in a meeting with Councilor Graves right now."

"Councilor... Graves?" Mimi echoed.

"Yes, the representative of Side Gaea. Also, he happens to be Ms. Cynthia's father."

"What?" Mimi spun around, certain she'd misheard.

"That's correct," The attendant smiled brightly. "Councilor Graves is a renowned scholar, you see. Ms. Cynthia is his very accomplished daughter. If you need anything else, please use the phone inside the room."

With that, the helpful attendant pointed at a small intercom on the wall, then ambled away with the same unhurried gait that everyone in Gaea seemed to share.

Left alone in the guest room, Mimi placed her hands on the windowsill and gazed out at the thick, green landscape for a time, though she wasn't truly seeing any of it.

"Cynthia is the daughter of Gaea's representative..."

The revelation struck Mimi more than she cared to admit. She had assumed Cynthia was just some scientist, nothing more. But behind her stood Gaea itself. True, Gaea had no official autonomy, so her father's position didn't necessarily translate into overwhelming political power. Even so, being the actual daughter of the man who held the keys to running the colony surely set her apart from any "random academic" whose only skill was tinkering in labs.

Mimi thought back over Mark's behavior since the previous day, wondering if he'd known all along. Regardless, it was painfully clear that Cynthia was often on his mind. His eyes gave him away whenever he looked at her. There was no doubt he found Cynthia compelling.

"Yes... Cynthia's research specialty, growing and maintaining new food sources, aligned perfectly with his work right now. They had plenty to talk about." As for Mimi, although it was Mark's own choice to leave the Congressional Forces, she knew he must have mixed feelings about giving up his former rank. They rarely discussed each other's work at all, perhaps partly because of that complicated history. When Mark did spend weekends at Mimi's apartment, they mostly just watched TV or went shopping nearby. Their relationship over the past year had settled into something so routine it felt almost like the air they breathed.

Only now did Mimi realize she hadn't seen Mark's carefree grin, at least not in private, for what felt like ages. In her apartment, he was always lost in thought, and even their sparse conversations seemed slightly off track. She had chalked it up to differing interests and Mark's fatigue. And he always came back to her place, always woke up beside her on their off-days, wasn't that enough proof he cared? It had been enough for her.

But after all that happened at Sturgis Base, Mark's expression had changed. Little by little, it was as if he'd become another person entirely, someone more alive. At first, she thought it was just the thrill of being on the run. But since they'd left Earth, traveled through New Manhattan and that debris field, and finally arrived here at Gaea, the transformation was obvious. He reacted to every new development with wonder, anger, impatience, joy, excitement, relief... like a kid again, living every second to the fullest.

Mimi sensed something slipping away inside her, a stab of panic. She couldn't believe that three years of building a relationship could vanish in just a few days. But she couldn't deny Mark's attention wasn't on her at all right now.

All at once, she felt she couldn't stay in that room a moment longer. She dashed outside, recalling the attendant's words, and hurried toward the councilor's office at a half-run.

"This must be it!" she muttered, pressing the intercom button.

"You've reached the Office of the Gaea Central Committee Councilor," announced a male staffer as his face popped up on the small monitor.

"I'm looking for Mark, Mark Curran!" Mimi nearly mashed her face to the screen. "He was here with Cynthia, meeting the Councilor!"

"Huh?" The staffer blinked in mild surprise.

"Yes, the man who came with Cynthia to see the Councilor," Mimi repeated, then paused for breath.

"Oh," the staffer said, breaking into the same breezy smile the attendant had worn. "They left about thirty minutes ago."

"Thirty minutes?" Mimi echoed.

"Yes, the Councilor had another meeting. They departed together. Ms. Cynthia and Mr. Curran."

"Did they say where they were heading?" she pressed.

"I'm afraid I don't know." The staffer gave her a slightly apologetic grin on the monitor. "Perhaps the Oasis or... Ms. Cynthia's lab. It's the bioengineering institute just next door to Gaea Tower. There's a large greenhouse open to the public, so you can't miss it."

"Cynthia's lab..." Mimi repeated, almost tasting the words.

"Yes. You'll spot it right away," he answered cheerfully.

"Thanks!" Mimi replied, then spun on her heel and headed off without a second thought.

That facility was known affectionately by the people of Gaea as the "Oasis."

Formally, it was called the Gaea Institute of Bioengineering, a research complex founded on the principles of biotechnology, focusing primarily on plants, animals, and microbiology, and delving further still into cells, molecules, and atoms. Their overarching goal was to restore proper natural ecosystems, with a particular emphasis on Earth's environmental interdependence. Within this structure, they conducted experiments to realize a better ecological balance for all.

The building itself was a translucent dome shaped like a half-sphere, a striking sight, even in a colony as green as Gaea. At first glance, it looked like nothing more than an enormous greenhouse. In reality, it housed ongoing experiments dedicated to recreating Earth's original, long-lost biosphere. Through carefully cultivated cloning techniques, they'd succeeded in reviving a number of extinct species, all grown painstakingly from the few precious samples that remained.

In one portion of the institute, the scientists had gathered only those plant species already judged safe from extinction, species that had completed the experimental phase. This broad area was open to the public, divided into zones simulating tropical, subtropical, cold, and high-altitude environments through artificial means.

Outside, the artificial sky cast by Gaea's mirrors had begun to dim into evening. Men and women on their way home from work strolled leisurely through the public exhibits, as though savoring a wistful memory of Earth's once-vibrant nature.

Walking behind Cynthia through the research institute, Mark felt a sense of awe that went beyond mere surprise. It was close to reverence.

"This is incredible... It's like stepping into a time machine and going back hundreds of years to the Earth that used to be," he said, eyes alight with wonder.

Cynthia graced him with a radiant smile.

"I'm so glad you feel that way," she said. "From here on out is an area that's normally off-limits. But just for today, I want my special guest from Earth to see it."

With that, she pulled open a door made of transparent resin. Instantly, Mark found himself enveloped by a rush of mingled floral fragrance and the rich, well-tended aroma of healthy soil. He actually paused mid-step, caught off guard by the intensity of it.

Towering trees and curling vines draped in dense greenery filled this enclosed world. Shrubs grew thick at ground level. A crystal-clear stream flowed between them, complete with a tiny waterfall where fish shimmered like living shards of silver. Birds called out, insects buzzed, and a small ground squirrel darted past Mark's feet, along with little quail-like birds scurrying through the underbrush. Everywhere he looked, vibrant feathered creatures perched among the branches, their plumage flashing bright color. At the edge of his vision, he caught movement: a squirrel's bushy tail flicking up the trunk of a tree.

"It feels like a dream,"

Mark whispered at last.

"A place like this... I had no idea it could exist..."

Eyes wide, he kept scanning the lush canopy. A brilliantly hued bird swooped overhead, just out of reach.

"How can something like this be created, Cynthia?"

Mark asked, turning to face her in wonder.

She gave him the most radiant smile he had seen from her yet.

"We didn't really 'create' anything. Our role is just a tiny piece of the process. Once we take care of those small steps, time and nature do the rest."

"That can't be true..." he murmured, gazing up at the dome ceiling. A bird, a species he couldn't name, skimmed past, flashing vivid feathers. "I know enough to see how special these plants are. They're all unbelievably rare, each one worth a fortune on Earth. If someone held an auction for them there, they'd fetch unimaginable prices."

"Oh, stop,"

Cynthia laughed.

"I'd never sell them off like that. My dream is to take these plants we've nurtured and bring them back to a healthier Earth."

Looking skyward, she trailed her fingertips along the trunk of a nearby tree, almost as if caressing a beloved friend.

"They're the real doctors of the planet. If they're restored to Earth, the environment will improve by leaps and bounds. They absorb toxins from the soil, filter out poisons in the air, and replace them with clean earth and clean skies. I want to see the day when these living, breathing healers flourish under that real blue sky we've only ever seen in pictures."

As Cynthia's eyes traveled up the branches, Mark found a kind of radiance in her face that could only be described as divine.

"You're... like a sorceress," he said softly, eyes still half-lost in wonder.

"Hardly," she replied with a mischievous grin.

"I'm just a frustrated gardener, really."

The playful gleam in her eyes made Mark's heart skip a beat. Released at last from the wetsuit she'd been stuck wearing since the kidnapping, Cynthia now wore a sleek pantsuit in a deep shade of crimson. The soft fabric clung to her figure, accentuating arms and legs that had once seemed almost lanky. Her faint makeup caught the light, her skin dewy and radiant. Mark realized with a start that he'd been so captivated by the sparkle in her eyes, he hadn't noticed just how beautiful she really was.

Yet it wasn't solely a matter of well-defined features or a good physique. Something in the peaceful atmosphere of Gaea itself seemed to make her glow, even more likely, this was Cynthia as she truly was. Surrounded by flourishing trees and flowers, brimming with an endless curiosity and zeal for discovery, she appeared fully in her element.

"This place used to be just a tiny rose garden,"

Cynthia explained with a small, self-conscious laugh, turning a slow circle.

"But those roses were so beautiful that I wanted to grow more. Before I knew it, it expanded into... this."

She sighed good-naturedly, casting an amused glance around.

"It's strange, isn't it? When you really love something, truly love it, you start gathering all sorts of things without meaning to. Plants, animals... people. And because you love them, you want them even more. Over and over it goes. Then one day, you wake up and realize it's grown into something like this. Honestly, I'm as surprised as anyone."

"That's only because you've worked so hard," Mark said, offering a warm smile.

"I haven't really done anything,"

Cynthia replied with a faint, apologetic tilt of her head.

Glancing around, Mark gently brushed a small white bloom with his fingertips.

"Maybe you feel that way, but it's not true. Sure, you loved those roses, but they didn't just bloom by themselves. You watered them, fed them fertilizer, kept them free of pests, and it was only because of all that care and affection that they turned out so beautifully."

"Well... you're not wrong," she admitted, blinking in mild surprise.

"But I mean... it's just common sense, right? If they share their beauty with me, the least I can do is look after them properly."

Mark's face lit up.

"See, that's where you differ from most. For many people, it's 'Of course they bloom, of course they're pretty.' But not you. And that's why you could turn this place into a magical kingdom."

"I... well..."

Cynthia found herself fumbling for words, warmed to her core by his unguarded grin. She had never been told anything like this before. Ever since

childhood, people had labeled her an odd girl who spent too much time with dirt and plants. No one had tried to stop her, but they'd always watched her from a distance with polite amusement. Sure, it helped that her father was both a scholar and, eventually, Gaea's councilor, and that her area of research perfectly dovetailed with Gaea's overarching goals. She knew she was fortunate in that regard.

Even so, no one had ever called her a "wonderful sorceress" or admired her passion with such delight. And certainly not while standing in her beloved research garden, truly appreciating it with his whole heart.

Side by side, she and Mark strolled leisurely, pausing to take in their surroundings. Cynthia felt an unfamiliar but giddy sense of exhilaration rising in her, a mild flush heating her cheeks.

Then Mark spoke again, his voice taking on a lighter tone.

"I was pretty surprised, by the way. I had no idea your father was the Councilor of Gaea."

Cynthia gave a wry smile.

"I never meant to keep it a secret. But it wouldn't have mattered anyway, father or no father, I would've done the same things."

"So you basically ignored his orders, too," Mark teased.

"When you put it that way, yes, I guess I did," she admitted with a small laugh.

"Sure, he's furious now, but he knows we didn't have any other choice back then. That's why he reached out to Mayor Suzuki in New Manhattan, one of his old friends, on our behalf."

"Are you serious?"

Cynthia flashed a playful wink at Mark's wide-eyed look.

"Oh, and for the record, I think he secretly likes my rebellious streak."

"Ah. Then he's probably steeling himself for all the boy trouble you'll give him,"

Mark prodded, peering at her mischievously.

She rolled her eyes and strode off, taking deliberately long steps to hide her flustered state.

"That's too bad for him. I haven't given him that headache yet."

In truth, his joke stung more than she was willing to admit.

"Sorry! You're not mad, are you?"

He called, hurrying after her.

Suddenly, Cynthia spun around, her demeanor shifting from playful to serious in an instant. Mark froze, sensing something weighty in her gaze.

"Listen, Mark." Her voice was steady. "I really do appreciate everything you've done, from the bottom of my heart. I just... don't know how to repay you."

"You don't have to thank me," he murmured awkwardly, taken aback by her seriousness.

"No, I do," she insisted, her eyes wavering.

"You got mixed up in all this because of me... and now your life is—"

Her voice trembled, and Mark's heart thudded painfully in his chest.

"Let's... not talk about that, okay," he murmured with a gentle smile, fighting to steady himself. "No matter how it started, you and I are friends now. That's all there is to it, right?"

Cynthia paused, then extended her right hand.

"Then... as a token of our friendship..."

Mark hesitated for a second, his gaze catching on the elegant shape of her fingernails, but then he took her hand gently. He felt the softness of her palm resonate through his fingers, his arm, his shoulder, until it seemed to flood his entire body.

It was just a handshake, yet it nearly made Mark dizzy. Cynthia felt it too; the warmth of his hand was more intense than she could have anticipated, and for a moment, she swore her own body temperature soared by ten degrees.

Neither could say which of them moved first, but they found themselves drawn closer until their lips brushed in a soft, tentative kiss. A swirl of sweetness flooded them both, the first time either had experienced such vivid, gentle heat. It only lasted a few seconds, but it awakened powerful feelings they'd never consciously acknowledged.

Cynthia jolted back, returning to herself as she quickly stepped away.

"I... I'm sorry," she whispered, cheeks burning as she looked down. "You already have someone...someone you're with..."

But Mark cupped her cheeks in both hands and drew her back into a second kiss, firmer and deeper. He wasn't entirely sure himself what compelled him; he only knew that at this moment, he couldn't bear to push away the swell of emotions surging within him.

Over time, an unspoken bond had formed between them. It defied explanation or logic. In Mark, Cynthia found the bright, shining quality she had never seen in any other man, and Mark found in Cynthia an outpouring of life and warmth he had never quite received from Mimi. Words, glances, fleeting moments, the sum of it all, aligned perfectly with what they'd each been unconsciously seeking. And so, drawn beyond reason, they yielded to each other.

They stood in a silent, lingering embrace, sealed by a long kiss that seemed to bind their very souls. It was not a wild passion, but something tranquil, glowing, and fresh, much like the crisp air of Gaea itself.

When their lips finally parted, they looked into each other's eyes and exchanged soft, tremulous smiles.

"I think I finally understand," he said, watching the gentle sway of Cynthia's gaze.

"Understand what...?"

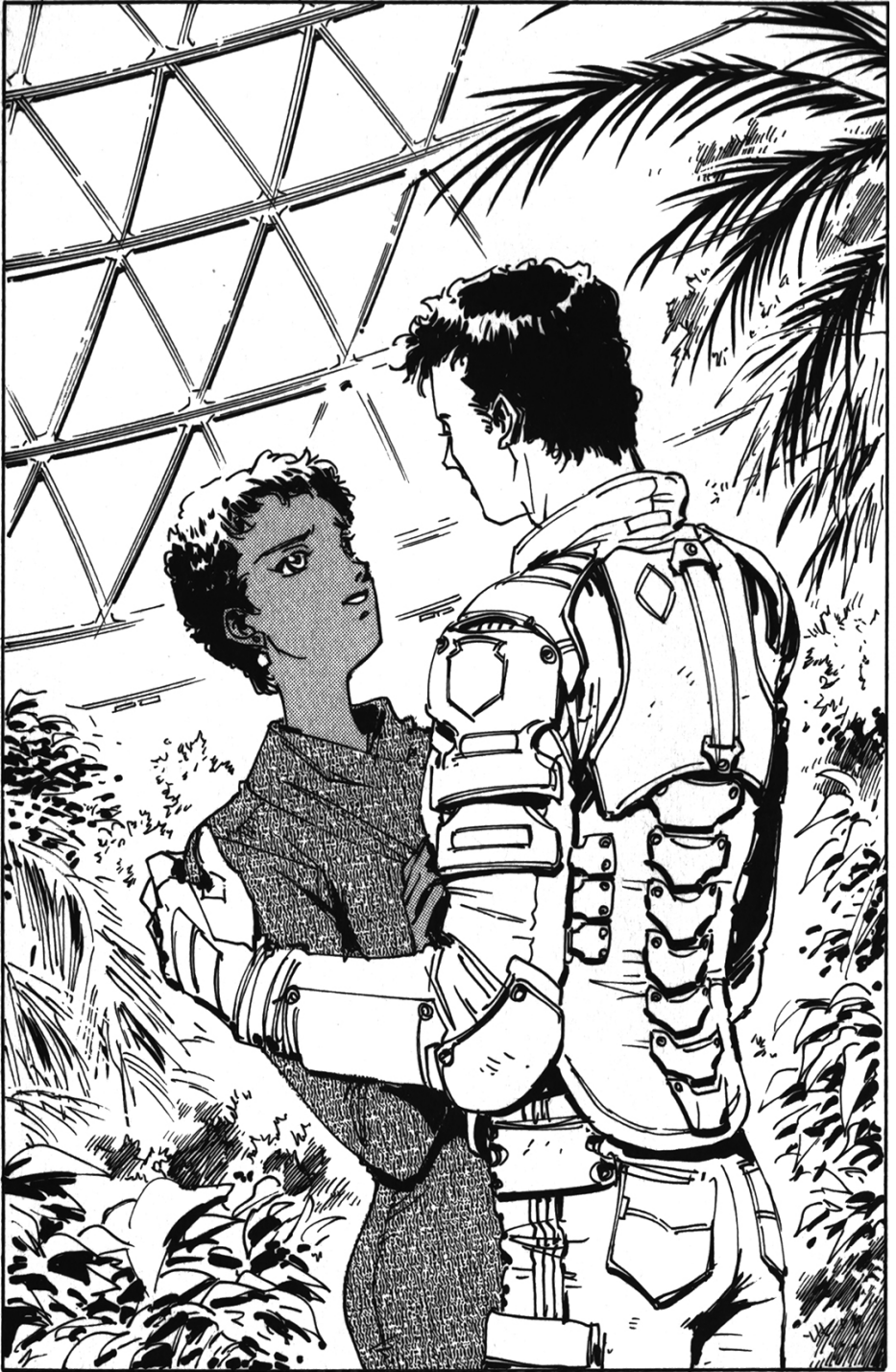
Her cheeks were still faintly pink.

"Why I never could commit to marrying Mimi, even after all the time we've been together," he replied quietly.

"You're... not using me as some excuse, are you?"

A pang of worry flickered across her face.

Shaking his head, Mark pulled her into his arms again, holding her tight.



"No. This just made me realize what I've been missing all along. The person I really needed is standing right in front of me. I'll talk to Mimi. I'll explain everything and apologize. And I'll try to make her understand."

"Mark..."

She pressed her cheek lightly against his chest, his heartbeat echoing just beyond the thin fabric of her suit. She poured all of her overwhelming sense of happiness into that single murmured word, letting it resound quietly in his arms.

Mimi burst into the room, flinging open the door with such force that it banged against the wall. She made a beeline for her handbag, haphazardly tossed atop a sideboard, and yanked out a small portable computer. The moment she flipped it open, the power switched on. Her fingers flew deftly over the keys, summoning the screen she needed, and she stared at it as though it held her very life. Tears fell, plopping one by one onto the console.

"This... can't be happening," she choked out in a husky whisper. "It can't, I refuse to believe it..."

She spoke as though forcing air through her lungs, tears still streaming.

"You're just drunk on Gaea's weird atmosphere, Mark... I'll be the one to sober you up if it's the last thing I do!"

Ignoring the tears on her cheeks, she began typing a message with single-minded intensity. Fragments of the memory replayed in her mind with brutal clarity: Mark and Cynthia, entwined in a passionate embrace. That gorgeous garden, bursting with blossoms and foliage like a heaven on earth, only to her, it felt like an endless labyrinth of tangled vines, no path out in sight. She had glimpsed them through the greenery, locked together in that hot embrace. In that instant, her mind had gone blank.

She couldn't understand how things had gone so wrong. She, who loved Mark so deeply.

How could she lose him to a woman he'd known for barely a day?

It was impossible.

A cruel joke.

She replayed that thought over and over as she pounded on the keyboard. Eventually, a message scrolled across the screen, and Mimi nodded firmly.

"Fine," she whispered. "If doing this will make Mark see sense again... If it'll let us reclaim our peaceful life...and let my Mark shine once more like a hero..."

She lifted her tear-drenched gaze toward the window, where nightfall in space had already extinguished any lingering light. Because after all, this was space, a place of cold, airless darkness lurking just beyond the colony's shell. No matter how lush that garden looked, it was nothing but a mirage. Peel away one thin barrier, and the void outside would freeze all those flowers and leaves in an instant. Mimi told herself that Mark had simply lost sight of reality, swept up in that false paradise Cynthia had created.

She stood abruptly and moved to the mirror. What she saw there took her breath away: a wretched-looking woman, with smudges beneath her eyes, hair and makeup in disarray.

"This... this isn't me!" she hissed, half-shouting.

She tore off her clothes and stormed into the shower, twisting the knob so hot water sluiced down on her like a sudden thunderstorm, soaking her hair, her shoulders, her face. Her hands scrubbed her cheeks with desperate force. She didn't care if the bar of soap at hand was some Gaea-made natural product with a scent she found strange; all she wanted was to wash away that pitiful reflection in the mirror, surely it was yet another by-product of Gaea's "poisonous air," and she needed to be rid of it at once.

She had to become Mimi Devere again, the bright up-and-coming intelligence officer in the Congressional Forces, someone with a reputation and a future. So what if her fiancé had become caught up in childish daydreams? It couldn't hurt her. Not when she was the woman a hero like Mark loved—*loves*, she corrected herself. As if to steel her own resolve, she repeated it in her mind while methodically washing every inch of her body.

Yet the feel of the scalding water running over her skin brought to mind Mark's fingertips, how he had caressed her in that same spot nearly every weekend not so long ago. A tremor wracked her entire body, and she began to sob. She hammered the wet tile wall with her fist.

"I won't let anyone else take him from me!" she raged, lifting her eyes to the showerhead above.

"Remember me, Mark... My silky, supple skin... my long, flowing hair you said you loved..."

The droplets that ran across her lips tasted faintly salty, whether from the water or her tears, she could no longer tell.

Chapter.02

Beyond What's Revealed

That night, Mark lay awake on his bed, staring intently at the ceiling until nearly dawn.

At Cynthia's lab, he had witnessed the cutting edge of Gaea's most innovative projects. For him, having spent so many years battling the food crisis on Earth, this was an exhilarating place, so absorbing that he lost all track of time. It was nearly midnight before he even realized how late it was.

After parting ways with Cynthia, he headed straight to the guest room where Mimi was supposed to be, only to find she wasn't there. He had something important to tell her, something he'd hoped they could talk through, alone, at least for one evening. He wanted to be honest about his own feelings and finally bring closure to what they shared. Yet, after waiting for almost an hour, Mimi never came back.

Concern gnawed at him as he searched nearby areas she might have wandered to, yet she was nowhere to be found. Still, he hesitated to sound any alarms; the people of Gaea Tower were already dealing with a difficult situation, and he didn't want to burden them further by stirring up unnecessary commotion.

Instead, he left a message on Mimi's room communicator with his room number and a note that he was waiting, then retreated to his own assigned quarters. But no matter how long he waited, she never called.

Mark found himself torn over what to do about the two of them from here on out. As things stood, neither he nor Mimi could return to Earth. If they did, Jack would arrest them both on sight, there was no doubt about that.

So should they stay here on Gaea instead? Mark himself wouldn't mind, but Mimi probably wouldn't adapt. She was an intelligence officer for the Congressional Forces, and she had known only city life her whole existence. Telling her to just drop everything and fit into Gaea's environment would be too much. Besides... he was already prepared to end their life together.

How could he possibly ask her to stay here under those circumstances? The very thought was absurd...

Maybe he could explain the situation to the mayor of New Manhattan, who happened to be Councilor Graves's friend, and send Mimi there for a while. Philippe was there, too; surely, he would lend a hand. Then Mark could try to prove she had nothing to do with this incident, clear her name so she could return to the Congressional Forces. Perhaps he could even contact General Garneaux directly...

At that thought, Mark's brow furrowed. After all, this whole mess had started because of Garneaux's request: "Find out why Cynthia is here, what her real aim is." That was the mission.

But something had gone terribly wrong somewhere. Yes, Jack was the immediate reason they were forced to flee, but Jack was Garneaux's trusted right-hand man. Why had he suddenly appeared and tried to kill them on the spot?

Mimi had said that the Congressional Forces had long known about Gaea, and about Dr. Riva's research. They'd known it all along, had done nothing, and then, out of nowhere, decided to go after the sample, to the point of putting military pressure on Gaea itself.

At that realization, Mark blinked in surprise.

"Were we... set up?"

Could it be that Garneaux already knew everything, used Mark so Cynthia would test the sample, and planned to claim the results for himself? If so, that would explain a lot, the meaning behind those Earth news reports Philippe had shown him, and the reason Dr. Riva had disappeared.

"But... would Garneaux really do that?"

Mark found it difficult to believe. He could picture Jack taking extreme measures, but Garneaux was the highly respected Governor General of the Congressional Forces, someone everyone trusted. Why would he resort to something so blatantly unjust?

Earth was still the Congressional Forces's main base, grappling with a life-or-death food crisis. Surely, Garneaux understood the value of Cynthia's research. So did he truly want to monopolize it? Would he commit these appalling acts simply out of that sort of... petty motivation?

No matter how he approached it, answers eluded him.

Regardless, Mimi was innocent. He had forced her to help him escape Earth; that was on him. One way or another, he had to let the Congressional Forces know that.

But how?

He mulled it over and over, but the solution never came. Eventually, exhaustion must have claimed him, because he dozed off without realizing it. Then the phone rang, loud and sudden, yanking him awake. His heart nearly slammed out of his chest, but he reflexively bolted upright and pressed the button.

"Mark? Get to the control room, now! Something awful's happened!"

Cynthia's voice was taut with urgency.

"I'm on my way!"

He gave only that quick reply before sprinting out the door. Beyond the window, the light caught by Gaea Tower's mirrors announced that dawn had already broken.

Jack strode briskly down the corridor of the Congressional Forces Earth Headquarters, his long legs moving with confident ease.

From the opposite direction came Garneaux, accompanied by his usual female administrative officer. Their eyes met for an instant.

"How's our situation progressing?"

Garneaux slowed his pace, approaching Jack as he stood at attention, saluting.

"Just as expected. They've taken the bait." Jack kept his voice low.

"Oh...?"

Garneaux lifted a brow flecked with silver and cast Jack a probing look.

"With your help, General, everything's perfectly in place. As long as we keep to our schedule, we'll have it wrapped up by today or tomorrow at the latest."

"Splendid." Garneaux nodded, a faint grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"I'll be in touch once preparations are complete, so please, go ahead and cancel your afternoon commitments... "

"Very well. I'll be in my office. Inform me at once if anything changes."

"Understood, sir."

When Jack saluted again, Garneaux offered a brief return salute and walked past him. Jack's lips curled into a quiet, triumphant smile.

Walking a step behind Garneaux, the blonde female staff officer subtly adjusted her pace so only he could hear her whisper, "Congratulations, General."

Garneaux kept his gaze forward, but the corners of his mouth relaxed just a bit.

"You're jumping to conclusions, my dear. Success isn't guaranteed yet."

"Even so... I suspect you'll be on Gaea in just a few hours, General."

"Hmm... you're quite the optimist, aren't you?" Garneaux's eyes crinkled at the corners.

"It's a woman's intuition. We're drawn to strong men, after all..."

She glanced up at Garneaux from beneath the brim of her officer's cap, her eyes shining like they were wet with longing. Garneaux, catching the look from the corner of his eye, gave a satisfied half-smile.

"Foolish creatures, aren't you... The moment you fixate on a man, you'll believe anything he tells you. Women can be terrifying that way." He let out a slightly caustic laugh.

But the staff officer replied in a sultry tone, "And that's precisely why men dote on us, wouldn't you say?" She smiled, her full pink lips parting just so.

"You devil."

Garneaux muttered in wry amusement as they arrived at his office. The officer tapped in the security code, and Garneaux stepped inside. Then he moved deeper into his private sanctum, pressing his eye mark to unlock the next door before turning back to her.

"Cancel all my appointments for this afternoon and tomorrow. That means I've got to tie up a bunch of dull administrative work now. Hold all calls and visitors for the next two hours. However, if Jack contacts us, notify me immediately. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

She offered him the same smoky-eyed look and a crisp salute.

"Oh, and cancel tonight's dinner, too," Garneaux added with a sly smile, closing the door himself.

"... What a relief."

The female staff officer murmured under her breath, as though spitting out the words, before closing the entrance door. She settled into her personal desk chair, slid on a headset, and began typing away at the keyboard in front of her.

Soon, Garneaux's administrative schedule, monthly budgets, and routine approval documents popped up on her monitor. She copied a few scattered numbers and text into some still-empty fields. Leaning into the headset mic, she started dictating a list of supplies, her voice low and businesslike.

"Three disk memories, five hydraulic ballpoint pens, Dehli Corp accounting software, site IOS, version five... "

"We have an incoming call from Chanelly!"

The operator's voice crackled through the speaker. Philippe, who had been talking to an engineer, whirled around at once.

"What did you say?"

Pushing open the door to the communication room built beneath the San Simon Theater, Philippe glanced at the operator, who turned in his chair to face him.

"It appears Lieutenant Colonel Hale is preparing some sort of offensive against Gaea."

Philippe leaned over the monitor glowing in front of the operator.

"That's hardly surprising... They must've known all along that Cynthia and the others had returned to Gaea. So? What's their plan?"

"A woman... and... "

The operator gestured with his eyes at the screen.

"A woman?" Philippe furrowed his brow.

"Also, this encrypted note here refers to the Key-ASAT Cannon."

"What?!"

Philippe clicked his tongue in frustration and looked up sharply.

"That bastard Garneaux! He really means to crush Gaea!"

The operator gaped at Philippe.

"They're moving faster than we expected. We've got to finish calibrating the Illusion right now! Has Abner arrived yet?!"

"I-I think so!"

The operator fumbled at the keyboard, nearly tripping over his words.

"Then get every engineer we have on deck! Things are about to get busy!"

Philippe's eyes blazed with renewed urgency as he dashed out of the communication room.

"What could possibly be going on at this hour?"

Bursting into the Gaea Tower control room, Mark scanned for Cynthia. As soon as he caught sight of her and Councilor Graves leaning in close to the central monitor, he called out again, louder this time.

"Hey, what's happening?"

Cynthia turned around at the sound of his voice. Her face had gone pale.

"A Congressional Forces destroyer got too close to Gaea's airspace. Now the Key-ASAT cannons have started activating!"

"Wha—?"

The shocking news momentarily robbed Mark of speech.

"There's a way to deactivate them, right? They were only built as charged-particle cannons to destroy debris that threatened the settlement... "

"That's exactly the problem," Graves cut in, turning toward Mark with grim urgency.

"We can't shut them down. We have zero control."

"That's impossible!" Mark gasped.

"We've got to halt the targeting system immediately—"

"Don't you think we would have done it already if we could? It's completely unresponsive."

Beads of sweat dotted Graves's brow. Across the room, an operator raised a trembling voice.

"Councilor! Two more Key-ASAT cannon have begun their activation sequence!"

The operator's tone was bordering on panic.

"It's... oh no... It's locked onto the destroyer!"

"Open a channel to them!" Graves ordered sharply.

"Tell them our system's experiencing a critical error!"

"Yes, sir!"

Desperate, the operator's fingers hammered the console.

"We're connecting now!"

He leaned into his headset, shouting,

"Congressional Forces Destroyer, come in! This is Gaea Tower, we have an emergency! Please respond!"

Behind him, Mark could only look on helplessly.

"Congressional Forces Destroyer, this is Gaea Tower! We're experiencing a system malfunction, please respond!"

The operator pressed the headset against his ear, visibly straining to hear anything. Then he gave an anguished shake of his head.

"No good! There's no reply!"

"How can that be?" Mark murmured, too stunned to say more.

A second operator spoke up, voice shaking.

"The Key-ASAT cannons are starting the firing countdown... Five... Four... "

Cynthia turned toward Mark, her eyes silently pleading for a miracle. But there was nothing he could do.

"Three... Two... One... "

Mounted along Gaea's exterior, the Key-ASAT cannons aimed themselves at the Congressional Forces destroyer moving steadily in the distance. In a simultaneous flash, they unleashed their charged beams. Three brilliant orbs of light streaked through the dark void of space and slammed into the side of the hulking ship.

A fiery burst erupted across the destroyer's hull, and it lurched at an unnatural angle.

"Direct hit!"

The operator's voice was half-scream, half-sob. Roughly thirty staffers in the control room stood paralyzed, faces drained of color.

"This... this is a nightmare... "

Cynthia whispered, staring at the monitor with shocked eyes that refused to blink.

"A terrible situation, indeed... " Graves groaned, voice low with dread.

"Why did it come to this... ?"

That was all Mark could manage, his mind numb. Graves turned back to the operators.

"Keep trying to contact the Congressional Forces. Let them know it wasn't intentional, that it was a malfunction."

"They won't believe that... " Cynthia said quietly, her expression pained. The anguish in her voice made Mark's chest tighten.

"They've been waiting for this chance, don't you see? Waiting for an excuse to invade Gaea..."

"We don't know that for sure..." Graves shot her a quick look and shook his head, though his uncertainty showed.

Mark took a step forward, speaking in a solemn tone.

"No... I think Cynthia's right. They're almost certainly going to send their main force now. And knowing the Congressional Forces... they won't hesitate."

"They'll send... their main force?" Graves spun around in alarm. Operators tensed, all eyes on Mark.

"Yes. Enough firepower to take control of Side Gaea as a whole, at least a full battalion of mobile suits."

"A mobile suit battalion..."

Graves stumbled back, speechless. Cynthia's breath caught, and a vivid memory of the monstrous Bugu she'd seen at Sturgis Base at dawn rose in her mind's eye. The thought of machines like that trampling across Gaea's rich, fertile lands made her blood run cold, but also ignited a surge of fury in her heart.

"No," she vowed silently. "We can't let them do this. We won't."

"We stand no chance," Mark said firmly. "It's wiser not to resist. We'll only get ourselves wiped out."

Cynthia whipped around, her voice trembling with anger.

"I refuse!!"

"Cynthia!" Mark stared at her, dumbfounded by her sudden outburst.

"There's no way we're going to become their puppets! It can't happen, it mustn't happen!"

"Don't be ridiculous! You can't fight off an entire army! They'll burn everything to the ground!"

Mark's tone rose in desperation, but Cynthia just shook her head in fierce denial.

An operator suddenly shouted.

"We have confirmed a spaceship launch. It's from Sturgis Base!"

Mark lunged toward the monitor, scanning the readings.

"It's too big for a shuttle or cargo vessel. Must be a mobile suit carrier... "

"A mobile suit carrier..." Graves echoed, words sticking in his throat.

Mark turned to face him.

"Yes. On Earth, that's the only kind of ship anywhere near this size. They're coming, and they're bringing at least a full battalion of mobile suits."

Graves wheeled around, calling out in a loud, resonant voice.

"Order an immediate evacuation across all of Side Gaea! Women and children are to board the emergency shuttles at once!"

"Understood!" an operator answered decisively.

"But how... ?" Mark gaped at Graves. "There's no way to escape!"

Graves lifted his head, resolve in his eyes.

"Then we'll stand and fight."

"That's suicide! If you fight, Gaea will be destroyed for sure!"

Mark rushed toward the councilor, voice cracking with disbelief. Graves glared at him.

"They're ignoring all our transmissions. Clearly they've never been interested in accepting a surrender."

"Even so, we have no hope of beating them!"

"Don't underestimate us. Gaea has its own mobile suit forces, at least for self-defense."

"You're not getting it! They're professionals. Their capabilities are on an entirely different level!"

"You might be right, but we won't stand here and let them slaughter us."

Graves muttered, casting a glance at the monitor.

"Time until that carrier arrives?"

"Approximately four hours," came the operator's response. Graves nodded.

"Then we've got enough time to mobilize our mobile suit teams."

"Councilor!" Mark shouted, and as if sensing his urgency, Cynthia called out.

"Mark! Over here!"

"Hold on," he said, torn between following Cynthia and trying to convince Graves to back down. He ended up hastening toward her, his face tight with worry.

"We have to stop him from doing this..."

Cynthia spoke in a fierce, resolute tone.

"We are not going to surrender."

Mark's eyes went wide.

"You too? What are you talking about...?"

"My father said so, didn't he? Gaea does have a mobile suit force. If we understand how to fight, we might actually stand a chance."

She fixed Mark with a steady gaze, her eyes bright with determination.

"Cynthia... come on. You saw what they're bringing. Gaea's old Freedom units are hopelessly outdated. Even if we had ten times their number, we still couldn't win. I know better than anyone. I've been in that army. I know exactly how powerful they are!"

Mark gripped her shoulders, voice almost pleading. Cynthia, however, looked back calmly.

"That's exactly why..."

"Why, what?"

Startled by the shift in her voice, he let go of her shoulders. Cynthia's eyes flashed.

"I want you to command this fight."

Her lips pressed together in a firm line, brimming with confidence that seemed to glow around her. Mark, caught completely off guard, took a step back.

"Don't—don't be ridiculous..."

"This is no joke. If you become our commander, Gaea will win. I know it."

A fierce glimmer lit her gaze.

"They still tell stories in the Congressional Forces about a legendary mobile suit pilot... You. Nobody else."

"Don't confuse tall tales with an actual war! This isn't some fairy tale. What difference can a single person make?"

Mark squared his shoulders, trying to steel himself.

"We're talking about real battles, real bloodshed. One pilot can't turn the tide!"

"But you wouldn't be fighting alone; you'd be our commander. And we have that G-Saviour. If you pilot it, I'm sure we won't lose!"

Cynthia was so radiantly certain that Mark found it impossible to look away from her. She seemed almost incandescent with resolve. In that moment, something in him wavered. Part of him even wondered, could it really be true?

But finally, he exhaled, shakily, and spoke.

"Stop. I told you, I'm done with war... I can't do it anymore."

His eyes shone with anguish.

"Mark..."

Cynthia's own gaze flickered, and her face clouded over.

"I'm done piloting mobile suits to hurt people. Killing isn't something I'm willing to do ever again!"

Mark's voice cracked with finality as he spun on his heel and dashed out of the control room. Cynthia stood there watching him leave, heartbreak etched across her features.

A tremor of sadness passed through her. Then, so softly she almost didn't hear herself speak, she murmured,

"... Mark... if that's your choice... you'll never stop running..."

Tears shimmered at the corners of her large eyes.

With Jack in tow, Garneaux strode down the corridors of the mobile suit carrier, covering the distance in long, purposeful steps.

Soldiers lined both sides of the hallway, saluting with rifles held at attention. Garneaux marched proudly between them, his lips twisting into a smirk that he couldn't completely conceal. Jack followed, seemingly as impassive as ever,

though a certain glimmer in his eyes hinted at something different, like a child fascinated by a brand-new toy. He stared intently at the empty space before him, his pale complexion, likely the legacy of a White lineage, flushed with excitement.

"Gaea... Finally showing its true colors, are they?"

Garneaux glanced back at Jack.

"Yes, sir! They refused our ultimatum to hand over the rebels and have now launched an attack on our destroyer."

Jack's voice was calm, but his gaze flickered ever so slightly at Garneaux's words.

"And with that, their autonomy is forever forfeit... What a foolish gamble on their part."

Garneaux let out a theatrical sigh, then lowered himself slowly into his designated seat. Jack settled in beside him and, for the first time, allowed himself a faint smile.

"At least Earth's food crisis should improve, however marginally."

"Indeed... It's regrettable that Gaea chose to rebel, but if it leads to them atoning for their sins, so be it."

Garneaux gave a quiet snort of amusement.

"Spoken like a truly benevolent leader, sir."

Jack offered Garneaux a pleasant smile, then raised his voice.

"All right! Prepare for launch. Stay on our current course."

"Copy that!"

The pilot's response elicited a satisfied nod from Jack. He shot another grin at Garneaux.

"Please strap in, General. I have every confidence in this carrier's safety, but better to be certain."

"Quite right. We soldiers must never grow too confident in our own power."

Smiling, Garneaux pulled the restraint harness forward from behind his seat. Within ten minutes, the massive Congressional Forces mobile suit carrier lifted off from Sturgis Base and ascended into space.

This carrier, roughly four hundred meters in length, was classified as a medium-size vessel in the Congressional Forces' fleet, yet when it came to ships capable of leaving Earth's atmosphere and reaching orbit, it was among the largest. With no true "top" or "bottom" in space, its design emphasized lateral hangars and catapults. From a protruding catapult, jutting from what one might call the carrier's "side," mobile suits were raised on an elevator system from the storage decks below, then rapidly launched toward the bow. The Congressional Forces touted it as their most advanced space carrier.

Around the same time, Garneaux's personal female staff officer was typing frantically on her console.

"Mobile suit carrier with one battalion deployed toward Gaea. Overall command: General Garneaux. Assault force commander: Lt. Colonel Jack Hale.

Armaments onboard: 24 MW-Rai, 1 MS-Rai, and 2 Bugu. Estimated travel time to Gaea: four hours, twelve minutes."

The woman tapping away at the keys, codenamed Chanelly, a secret member of the Illuminati, muttered under her breath, "They're moving faster than expected... I hope the others are ready in time... "

Though an officer of the Congressional Forces, she harbored deep misgivings about how it now operated. In particular, Garneaux's actions in recent years set off alarm bells in her mind. Using her extensive career experience and her undeniable attractiveness, she had maneuvered herself into a position as Garneaux's personal staff officer. She had been triggered by the stark difference between Garneaux's flattering rhetoric toward women in public and how he really behaved within the military's walls.

Sure enough, Garneaux saw women as creatures to be dominated by men. In an era where terms like "male chauvinism" had long been purged from the dictionary, and where gender equality was the standard across worlds, it was jarringly anachronistic that Garneaux treated women as status symbols for displaying a man's power. He idolized bygone figures like Caesar and Napoleon, and for him, women seemed little more than trophies.

That attitude reflected his larger worldview. Garneaux's dream was unilateral control of all humankind, an ambition he equated with dominating women. He envisioned a universe where the Congressional Forces wielded supreme power, using military might to dictate the course of civilization. No matter how one looked at it, it was the twisted daydream of an old man fixated on historical legends. Yet it was terrifying precisely because that old man had the commanding power of the Congressional Forces at his beck and call.

When Chanelly realized the extent of Garneaux's intentions, she made up her mind, she would serve as a liaison for the Illuminati. Every piece of information that reached Garneaux's office would flow straight to them, including every one of his schemes. It was a life-threatening role, but her conscience compelled her. She was determined to keep humanity from piling on any more tragic mistakes than it already had.

She'd heard there were a few other people within the Congressional Forces who shared her convictions. For mutual protection, they never showed any sign of their membership in the Illuminati, but each of them held fast to the same hope, that they might someday restore Earth to a better path. They wanted humanity to stand tall, able to look upon Earth from deep space or from the planet's surface with genuine pride. They'd joined the Army to help shape that future.

Their aims were, in essence, the same. It was only that their methods differed slightly. In that sense, Chanelly, too, was a soldier of the Congressional Forces, more fittingly, a soldier of the "Earth Army," through and through.

Inside Gaea, chaos reigned.

An evacuation order had gone out to every district in the side colony, and people were boarding large buses with only the barest necessities in hand,

heading en masse to the ports of each Settlement. At these ports, a sufficient number of large shuttles, enough for the entire populace, were always kept on standby for emergencies. Now, civilians poured into those shuttles.

Even with everyone making an effort to board as orderly as possible, the sheer volume of people living in the Settlements made the process fraught with tension. Minor scuffles broke out here and there, and loading everyone became a daunting task.

For those who worked in livestock, it was even more complicated, animals had to be fed and cared for in their absence, so these ranchers struggled desperately to prepare feed, arrange managers, and keep their animals alive during the evacuation.

At the same time, mobile suits from all over the settlement began converging on Gaea Tower. Yet this so-called "Gaea Mobile Suit Corps" was no professional army. It was more akin to a civilian "volunteer squad," made up of ordinary people who normally led ordinary lives.

Worse still, the mobile suits on Gaea were all old "Freedom" models, an outdated line in widespread civilian use across Earth's sphere. While they were versatile, they had no particularly standout capabilities. Most were over thirty years old, originally decommissioned and sold off by the military. Gaea had patched them up and repurposed them for general labor. Weapons like the head-mounted Vulcan guns had been removed long ago, and many of the machines had deteriorated so badly they couldn't hope to reach their original output levels. Most of them hardly deserved to be called "weaponry."

Even so, people kept arriving at Gaea Tower. Among them were some brave souls who volunteered simply because they happened to know how to pilot mobile suits for their day jobs. You could even see eager young students among the crowd, flush with reckless energy. But in truth, none of them had received formal military training. They understood on a basic level that war was brutal, yet not one truly grasped what it meant to take up arms and fight. Their only motivation was to protect Gaea and their loved ones, nothing more. It was with that resolve that they took up these old machines, preparing to square off against the Congressional Forces.

Among those determined to fight was Dieter. Cheeks flushed, he sprinted through Gaea Tower, with Kobi racing after him, yelling.

"Are you serious? You're really gonna fight in a mobile suit?!"

"Of course I am! You don't get a chance like this every day!"

Dieter glanced back at Kobi mid-run, baring his white teeth in an almost feral grin.

"This is war, you know! You get that?!"

Kobi's face was tense. But Dieter didn't seem to notice his friend's concern at all.

"Obviously! I'm gonna protect Gaea, no question about it. Just you watch!"

"If you get shot, you'll die!!!"

Kobi shouted with everything she had, trailing behind Dieter on the way to the hangar.

"Don't be stupid! I'll be in a mobile suit! Plus, I'm not about to go down!"

Dieter waved one hand dismissively before sliding through a gap in the elevator doors just as they began to close. Turning back around to face Kobi, who was finally catching up, he gave a loud, exaggerated wink.

"Dieter, you idiot!"

Kobi yelled again at the shutting doors.

"Who's supposed to hold down the fort if you get yourself killed, huh?!"

But her words, half-choked with tears, never reached him. The elevator was already moving downward toward the underground levels, carrying him out of sight.

Mark was, in all honesty, completely overwhelmed.

He understood, perhaps better than anyone, how desperate Gaea's situation really was. As he'd told Cynthia and the others, even if they raised a white flag right now, the Congressional Forces would almost certainly invade, subjugate Gaea, and force the people to live in fear. That alone was unthinkable. Gaea had done nothing wrong. They simply cherished humanity's lost respect for Earth, the mother of all life, and worked tirelessly to repay that debt of gratitude in whatever small ways they could.

More than that, this groundbreaking bioluminescence research, which had triggered the current crisis, wasn't even meant for Gaea's benefit alone, it was a lifeline extended to the very people on Earth who now threatened to crush this tiny artificial colony by brute force. Why couldn't the Congressional Forces understand that? And why, confronted with such blatant injustice, couldn't he, Mark, stand proudly against it?

But... he hated war. Humanity had no right to wage another. He remembered the barren, desolate landscapes of Earth, scarred by old conflicts, soulless and terrifying remnants of war. Those lifeless wastelands had claimed countless lives. How many empty eye sockets lay beneath that scorched ground, staring up at those living now with unspoken accusation? The thought alone made him shudder.

He grieved every day for the loss of a single friend; if another war broke out, hundreds, thousands, would be obliterated under a hail of mobile suit fire in an instant. The very idea was unbearable. Even if the Congressional Forces was unforgivably blind, the thought of playing any role in wholesale slaughter made Mark sick to his core.

He pressed through the crowds in Gaea's corridors. Normally calm and unhurried, the residents now bustled to prepare for evacuation and possible battle. Their urgency made the hallways almost unrecognizable. Mark raced alongside them, his heart torn by two clashing impulses.

"What should I do? How can I act in a way that won't shame my conscience, and that might still lead to a better outcome for these people?"

Still unable to find any answers, he kept running.

"Mimi! Are you in here?!"

Mark burst into the guest room where he'd waited fruitlessly for her the night before. The door wasn't locked.

"Mimi!"

He scanned the space, and from the adjoining closet stepped Mimi, dressed in some bright, Gaea-style attire that she must have chosen. She looked unexpectedly radiant.

"Finally checking out, are we? You're awfully late."

She gave him the bright, girlish smile she often wore. Mark couldn't imagine she was oblivious to the chaos outside, yet somehow her face was free of worry. It puzzled him. He grabbed her hand without preamble and tried to pull her away.

"We've got to get out of here. The Congressional Forces are attacking. This place will become a battlefield!"

But Mimi merely flashed a mischievous grin and pulled her hand free.

"Don't panic. We don't have to run at all."

"What are you talking about?"

He stared, dumbfounded.

"We have to board a shuttle. Right now, we can still avoid getting caught in the fighting—"

"Heh... "

Mimi tilted her head forward, eyes glinting as she gazed up at him with a playful laugh.

"Mark... I know exactly what you're up to. You just want to get rid of me, don't you?"

"W-What are you talking about?"

Mark stared at her, stunned. Then she lifted her chin, looking down at him with an uncharacteristically chilly gaze.

"Still, if you apologize right now, I'll forget all this happened."

"W-What is that supposed to mean?!"

Heat flared through Mark's entire body as he instantly understood. The way Mimi's face tightened into a half-smile, her jaw set and eyes cold, reminded him of Jack.

"You think I'm going to just let you throw away our future for good? Absolutely not."

Mark fell silent. Last night, he'd spent hours planning what to say, only to discover that Mimi already knew about Cynthia. Now he wasn't even sure how to begin.

"You and I are meant to live somewhere refined, back on Earth, where our future is secure, not this backwater country bumpkin colony. We'll be safe, happy... just like we planned."

She let her chin drop, eyes softening as though she were about to plead.

"Because I love you, Mark..."

She reached out with both arms, wrapping them around his neck. Her lips pressed against his, and the familiar perfume she always wore enveloped him. Memories of the days they'd spent together drifted through his mind.

Yes... He really had loved Mimi. He did love her, once. He slipped his hands around her slender waist, gaze momentarily drawn downward. That was when he noticed the open laptop on a small table. Without thinking, he let his gaze flicker across the screen, and instantly froze.

It was footage of a Key-ASAT cannon on Gaea's outer wall. And just like that, the puzzle pieces in his head clicked together.

"It was... you... "

He said it in a faint, trembling voice.

"What was?"

Mimi's tone dripped with sweetness.

"Don't tell me... You messed with the Key-ASAT cannons..."

Still clinging to him, she whispered into his ear.

"I did it for you... You understand, don't you? My Mark..."

"What do you mean?!"

Mark instantly pried Mimi off of him. She looked up, eyes dancing with mischief.

"The General promised me," she said with a quiet laugh. "If I helped the military, he'd wipe the slate clean, make us heroes back on Earth."

"Are you insane! Do you even realize what you've done?!"

He was almost shouting.

"You—you're practically handing the people of Gaea a death sentence—"

"That's not my intention at all. The General wants nothing more than cooperation from Gaea's council. That's all."

"No, Mimi, you don't get it! Garneaux's orchestrating this entire fiasco! You're helping start a war!"

Mark shoved her away.

"Then the real culprit is that woman, isn't it?"

Mimi glared back at him fiercely.

"What did you say?!"

He was beyond shocked.

"Don't pretend you're serious about her. I won't accept that you fell in love with some muddy-boots scientist!"

"What are you talking about?! That has nothing to do with—"

"It has everything to do with it! The only reason you're so hung up on Gaea is because she's here!"

"This has nothing to do with Cynthia!"

Mark's voice rose in anger involuntarily.

"You're out of your mind! You really think it's okay to pit Gaea against the Congressional Forces, to kill countless people, over such a stupid grudge?!"

"I'm doing it all for you!!!"

Her eyes flared wide.

"Think about it! You're not guilty of anything! That woman dragged you into her reckless schemes, and you got branded a criminal and chased to this godforsaken corner of space. You're just losing yourself, bewitched by that false garden! Don't you remember who you really love? It's me! Come back to Earth with me, become a hero again!"

"I never wanted any of that!"

Mark practically roared, fists clenched.

"You're the one who's been misled! Sacrificing so many lives just to climb the ranks. What kind of 'hero' is that supposed to be?!"

"You're wrong! It's for you!!"

Mimi clung to him desperately.

"Enough!"

He shouted as though spitting out everything bottled up inside and thrust her away. His hands shook with fury.

"I never imagined you were this kind of woman!"

With that, he stomped toward the door. Panicking, Mimi lunged after him.

"Wait!"

As she desperately tried to follow, Mark forcefully pushed her back and then slammed his fist against the key panel outside the door with all his might.

"Mark!!"

She called out, but the door slid shut mercilessly in her face.

"Maaark!!!"

Her voice could be faintly heard in the corridor as she pounded on the unyielding door, but he didn't turn around. He strode off through the chaotic hallway, vanishing into the crowd.

"Mark! Listen to me! Let me out!!"

Inside, Mimi pounded on the door, calling out as tears ran down her cheeks.

Why won't he understand?

She wasn't lying, it really was all for his sake. She couldn't bear to keep wandering the galaxy like fugitives, branded as criminals for crimes they never committed. She wanted him to reclaim his place of honor, piloting a cutting-edge mobile suit with that brilliant smile on his face once more.

As an intelligence officer, she knew Gaea's ragtag forces had no chance against the Congressional Forces, and that true war would never come to pass, it wouldn't escalate that far. The Army would overrun Gaea quickly, take the sample Garneaux desired, and solidify control. It was ridiculous to think they'd destroy a colony this vital to food production. Earth's shortage was too dire for such stupidity. Perhaps Gaea's freedoms would be limited, but the people would be provided for. That was how the Army operated. Garneaux himself had guaranteed it.

Wouldn't that be the best solution for everyone?

Why couldn't Mark see that?

She kept beating on the door, but it wouldn't budge. Finally she sank to the floor in defeat. Beyond the door, she heard frantic footsteps and agitated voices, people consumed by evacuation efforts and last-minute defenses.

"They just don't get it..." Mimi thought. "They have no clue how strong the Congressional Forces is."

They were likely rushing around, trying to mount a foolhardy resistance. Sure, if Gaea kept that up, the Army might fire a round or two in retaliation, maybe a bit more if Gaea stubbornly overestimated itself. If that happened, a battle might actually break out...



Suddenly, Mimi lifted her head.

"The General wants the sample..."

She murmured to herself, then stood in a flash.

"If I can get him that sample, maybe he'll ease off..."

Glancing around, she grabbed a chair from the writing desk. She looked up at the ceiling near the door. There was a vent cover, most likely the air duct. Mimi placed the chair directly underneath, climbed up, and grasped the grating with both hands.

"I need to get out of here first..."

Giving it a forceful shake, she pushed upward. With a clank, it came free.

The opening looked just big enough for her. She hoisted herself up, shoulders first, into the dark space overhead. There was a faint glow farther down the passage. Brushing away stray strands of hair from her face, she crawled toward that light without a moment's hesitation.

It was Mimi, she was the cause of all this!

The realization struck Mark like a physical blow, filling him with a white-hot mixture of anger and despair. How could something so mindless, so disastrous, possibly be happening? He felt as though his very body might burst from the force of his emotions.

He glanced down at his right fist, he must have scraped it on the corner of the door panel when he slammed it. A thread of blood seeped from the cut, and he clenched that trembling hand as tightly as he could.

No matter how hard it was to accept, he had to face the truth. Thanks to Mimi's actions, Gaea was on the brink of being crushed, and he couldn't allow that. Even if it meant throwing his life on the line...

He lifted his head, gaze steeled with resolve, and set off for the underground hangar where the mobile suit force was gathering.

Chapter.03

Mobile Weapon

Beneath Gaea Tower, the mobile suit hangar bay was teeming with staff and pilots bustling about. Engineers clambered up the assembled Freedom units, though most of them were little more than amateurs. Still, for people who'd spent years operating their own mobile suits for day-to-day work, doing basic maintenance on them was second nature. Combat, however, was another story entirely. Only a handful of professional technicians were on hand, racing desperately from one suit to the next to make each one battle-ready.

"Hey, what happened to the Vulcan trigger that was in here?"

A technician had ducked into a cockpit and was now yelling at the suit's owner, who was busy tightening the bolts on a shoulder joint.

"Never had one from the day I picked this thing up!" the owner hollered back.

"Seriously?" the technician groaned, sighing in exasperation.

Elsewhere, inside another Freedom's cockpit, someone was fine-tuning the engine, cursing under his breath at the stubbornly low power output.

Across the hangar, someone else was adjusting another Freedom's engine, clicking his tongue in annoyance when the output refused to rise.

"Damn it! At this rate, there's no way we can power up the beam saber!"

True enough, the right shoulder of a Freedom was mounted with a beam saber, but for mobile suits used around the Settlements, at the port, or in routine maintenance and repair, a beam saber was practically useless. It had sat neglected for years, of course it wasn't going to spring to life just like that.

A middle-aged man next to him, working on a different Freedom, let out a hearty laugh.

"Even if we got it working, it'd be useless! None of us have the advanced piloting skills to actually fight with beam sabers anyway!"

Indeed, the row of Freedoms looked imposing at a glance, but many were entirely unsuited for combat: either their power outputs had degraded, or they lacked key parts necessary for fighting, or they simply had never been equipped with certain weapons in the first place. Ultimately, only about forty machines could be coaxed into any real battle readiness, and another ten were in questionable shape, just barely "reserve" material.

Still, everyone fought tooth and nail, doing whatever they could to get these Freedoms combat-capable. In a sense, these aging mobile suits, now considered antiques, were Gaea's last hope. Their historical value was a separate matter; as weapons in a modern war, it was unclear how much these older units could really accomplish, and even the people working on them weren't sure.

Deeper in the hangar, crates of Freedom weapons were being rolled out: submachine guns, noticeably shorter in length than the G-Saviour's beam rifle.

"Wow... they're huge," muttered one man helping unload them.

"Well, these suits are ten times the size of a human, so of course the weapons are big," another man laughed as he peeled off a protective cover. "But I had no idea we had so many in storage."

"Same here," agreed the first man, nodding. "Guess nobody ever imagined we'd actually need them."

They stood a moment, eyebrows drawn, gazing uneasily at the towering stack of giant guns. A large man's voice bellowed from the back:

"Hey! Has anyone seen the shields that go with these things?"

"Yeah! They should be in the lower hangar!" someone yelled back.

"Weren't Freedom-era mobile suits supposed to have beam shields?" another worker asked, turning in surprise.

The man by the cargo shrugged.

"Beam shields from the Freedom days eat up a ton of power, and calibrating the generator is tricky. Modern suits don't bat an eye at that system, but back when Freedoms were cutting-edge, beam shields were still pretty unstable. That's why these suits also came with a standard hand shield. Probably as a backup, I guess. For us now, it's a blessing."

Meanwhile, in a small side-hangar near the main storage area, the volunteer pilots struggled into the unfamiliar space suits they'd been issued. Which zipper to pull first, which Velcro straps connected where, these were brand-new concerns, and men and women alike fumbled awkwardly. Still, with a little help from one another, they managed to squeeze in, fastening emergency packs to pockets and hooks.

"What's this tube for?" one man asked, squinting in confusion.

"No clue. Just take it along," said the buddy who was helping him fasten the clasp on his back.

Dieter was in the thick of it all, letting Kobi help him secure the zippers and clips on his own space suit.

"Are we sure the oxygen system works?" Kobi wondered, flipping over a helmet in her hands.

"Of course it does! It's a space suit. We'd be in real trouble if we couldn't bail out in an emergency," Dieter retorted, spinning an armband belt around his arm.

"That's no good," came a sudden voice. "You'll lose oxygen during an emergency escape that way."

Startled, Dieter and Kobi both looked up to see Mark strolling toward them.

"Mark!!" Kobi beamed. "You really came!"

Mark gave Kobi a faintly sheepish grin, then glanced over at Dieter.

"So... is this everybody? Where's the backup squad?"

"Backup? We have no such thing," Dieter answered casually.

"You're kidding." Mark's eyes swept the crowd. By his rough count, there were maybe fifty people total.

"How many are we talking, exactly?"

"Fifty-three total. Enough to fill the forty Freedoms we've got," Dieter said, flashing those white teeth as usual.

For a moment, Mark felt a surge of despair. The Congressional Forces were on their way with a full battalion, common sense would suggest you want at

least twice, maybe three times their numbers for a fair chance. But these Freedoms, with their patchwork repairs, meant each set of three Freedoms might have to handle two enemy mobile suits. It was going to be an uphill battle, no doubt.

Then a voice spoke from behind him, softly.

"You changed your mind?"

He turned to see Cynthia smiling at him. Mark gave her a tiny wry grin.

"You look like you knew this was bound to happen."

"I did," she said, her dark eyes brimming with that same self-assured gleam as before. Seeing her confidence somehow chased away Mark's dread.

Yes... she really is a magician, he thought.

Still surveying the frenzied hangar, Cynthia let out a slightly rueful laugh.

"As you can see, these are amateurs. None of them have ever piloted a mobile suit in real combat. That's why we absolutely need your leadership."

Mark offered a firm nod. "I understand. Sure, they haven't fought in a shoot-out, but these are the same people who poured all their energy into nurturing their land, right?"

"That's right. They're all incredibly brave," Cynthia answered. A glow returned to her face.

Mark inclined his head decisively. "Then we'll be fine."

Watching this exchange from the sidelines, Dieter blinked in confusion, while Kobi murmured, "...Wow, that's...pretty cool, Mark."

She stood there, peering at Mark and Cynthia's faces. Then the corners of her eyes softened, and she whispered, "So that's how it is, huh...?" to no one in particular.

Dieter elbowed her.

"Hey, what do you mean, 'that's how it is'? What's going on?"

Kobi shot him a disgruntled glare.

"Figure it out yourself, you big lunkhead!" She turned away with a huff.

"Huh? 'Big...lunk, ' What does that even mean?"

Dieter stared blankly, prompting Kobi to heave an exasperated sigh.

"So how's the mobile suit situation?" Mark asked, looking around.

Cynthia cupped her hands to call to someone across the hangar.

"Status on the suits in the main storage area?"

A young man holding a headset raised a hand.

"About eighty percent of the Freedoms are in deployable condition!"

Mark nodded, scanning the crowd.

Although everyone had more or less gotten their space suits on, the hangar was still a jumble, people were standing around in groups, each chatting in their own little worlds.

He hopped onto a cargo lift, pulling the lever so it rose with a low mechanical hum until he was at shoulder-height above the crowd. He whistled sharply, then clapped his hands once, catching everyone's attention.

All at once, the hangar fell silent, and the volunteers turned to look up at him.

"My name's Mark Curran," he announced. "I have some experience piloting combat mobile suits in the military."

Kobi snickered quietly. "Some experience," she repeated, suppressing a grin. Cynthia shot her a playful 'shhh,' smiling all the while.

Mark continued, voice ringing out over the gathered crowd.

"I'm going to split you into four groups based on your line of work. Those in agriculture, you're Foxtrot. Service industries, Sierra. Engineers, Echo. Transportation, Tango. Those designations will be your call signs."

A ripple of confusion swept through the crowd as people exchanged glances.

"So... that means I'm Tango?"

"I guess I'm Foxtrot?"

"What was that? Sierra something?"

"Are we not on the same team then?"

No one seemed to know exactly what to do or where to stand. Mark tried not to let it faze him.

"Each group needs to pick ten pilots and choose a group leader. The leader's call sign is 1."

"Ah ha."

"Ah, so that's how we call each other."

"Oh, that's how the military does it," someone murmured, sounding impressed. Others nodded in agreement, but everyone stayed rooted to the spot as if waiting for more directions. Mark blinked, surprised at how slowly they were reacting.

"Got it?" he prompted again. Still they hesitated. So he clapped his hands briskly again.

"Start now!"

Finally, the crowd began stirring.

"Hey, I'm Sierra, anyone else Sierra?"

"Echo, over here!"

Watching them shuffle around, Mark realized the gulf between soldiers and civilians was wider than he'd imagined.

"Excuse me, I'm a student, so which group should I join?" called a man from the back, raising his hand toward Mark.

Mark cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted back, "Join whichever group has the fewest people!"

"Got it!" The student waved enthusiastically and started moving.

"Could they really fight like this?"

Mark couldn't help but feel anxious as he maintained his composure and climbed down from the lift. Then again, it was up to them to stand firm now, no matter how anxious they all might be.

"Sorry, but there's something I'd like you to explain," several people gathered around Mark from both sides.

As Mark answered their questions as thoroughly as possible, he thought, *"If they didn't at least attempt to resist, the Congressional Forces would only tighten their stranglehold in the days to come."*

They'd keep putting their so-called "military honor" and ordinary lives on the same scale, something Mark found utterly unacceptable. Everybody deserved the right to protect what they held dear. Everyone had a right to live. Even if

they were born and raised in settlements that had left Earth's gravitational sphere, their homeland was still Mother Earth. Humanity—no, *all* living things—could not survive without that mother's love. Its children had no business sorting each other by the "weight" of their lives.

A young man came up to Mark with a hesitant look.

"How do I defeat an enemy? Is there some trick to it?"

Mark hesitated, at a loss, until he looked into the earnest clarity of the man's eyes. Then a simple answer surfaced in his mind.

"Don't force it. And don't die," he said quietly.

"If you realize you're outmatched, just run."

The youth blinked in shock, clearly not expecting that.

"Huh?"

"As long as you survive, you'll get another chance to defeat them. If you die trying to rush things, someone else has to fight your share of the battle too, and our odds of winning drop. Living is the key to victory. That's the real trick."

The young man broke into a grin.

"I see... All right, then. I'll fight while running away."

Mark chuckled back, nodding.

"Trust me, knowing that, you won't lose."

Standing off to the side, Cynthia watched Mark speaking to the volunteers and thought he looked wonderful.

Just then, a man in work clothes sprinted off an elevator and called to Cynthia, "Hey, Ms. Cynthia! We moved the transport ship... uh, Nimbus...down to the subterranean deck, just like you asked."

Mark spun around in surprise, looking at Cynthia.

"Thanks," she told the worker with a wave. "I know you're busy, I appreciate it."

Mark stared at her, puzzled. "What's this about?"

She smiled softly. "It'd be a hassle to reach the port if something happens, right? This way it's right here."

"But... the underground deck in Gaea Tower is for the mobile suit unit—"

"That's exactly why," Cynthia said.

Mark looked at her again, and she returned his gaze with those deep, dark eyes.

"It's better this way. The G-Saviour is like our guardian angel. Just having it here gives us the courage we need."

"Cynthia, I—"

Mark felt his chest tighten. He knew what it meant that she'd brought the Nimbus here, though she was saying nothing outright. Instead, she was calling the G-Saviour their "guardian." That unwavering faith in him and the mobile suit touched him in a way that almost hurt.

The Congressional Forces' mobile suit carrier, with General Garneau aboard, arrived in Side Gaea's airspace in just over four hours, right on schedule. Ahead, the twenty-four Settlements still looked no larger than pinpricks of starlight. Yet

a closer look revealed them arrayed in flawless intervals, each colony turning slowly as its three vast mirrors caught the sunlight and hurled it back in dazzling flashes.

Garneaux regarded the image on the seat-back monitor and allowed a satisfied curl to tug at one corner of his mouth.

"Now the masses will hold even greater admiration for the Congressional Armed Forces," he murmured. "They'll realize it's only our power that can save them from hunger, everyone throughout the Earth Sphere shall learn that truth."

"General," said Jack, who sat beside him, passing a headset in his direction with a sly grin. "The MW-Rais are ready to launch."

"Hm." Garneaux's answering grin matched Jack's as he accepted the headset and brought the microphone to his lips.

"Citizens of Gaea," he declared. "I am General Garneaux with Earth's Congressional Armed Forces. Due to your unprovoked attack on our destroyer Ulysses, we have lost six soldiers, an undeniable violation of Earth Sphere regulations. Under the Earth Sphere Accord, Gaea must face the consequences for these crimes. Surrender immediately. Otherwise, the Congressional Forces will have no choice but to invade and occupy your Settlement as stipulated by the Accord."

His broadcast reverberated across all of Gaea, cutting through the emergency channels. People rushing for evacuation paused briefly, frowning in frustration.

"To hell with your precious Accords!" barked a man sprinting down a corridor.

"You never even bothered to hear our side!" a woman rushing past spat at a ceiling speaker.

"By the authority vested in me as Governor General, I grant you five minutes to comply," Garneaux continued. "Consider it an extraordinary display of leniency. We await your calm and prudent decision to surrender. That is all."

With that, Garneaux flicked off the mic and handed the headset back to Jack.

"Cut communications with Gaea," he ordered coolly.

"Yes, sir," Jack replied, his mouth curving with a faintly merciless smile. He turned the headset's switch and spoke into it.

"Terminate communications with Gaea."

"Communications with Gaea have been severed," reported the radio operator at the cockpit station. Garneaux and Jack exchanged glances, indulging in a self-satisfied smirk.

Mimi fought the tide of evacuees, sprinting up the Gaea Tower corridor toward the main entrance. Garneaux was already almost here, he would force his way into the Settlement, that much was certain. And if someone had to greet him, it had to be her.

Gaea didn't stand a chance; anyone could see that. Yet its people were bound to resist. If that happened, Garneaux might actually eradicate the colony. Mimi's top priority was to keep that from happening, Mark was here, after all.

Outside the tower she spotted an electric car abandoned in the plaza and vaulted into the driver's seat. Whether its owner was among the crowd, or had bolted in panic, the keys were still dangling in the ignition. Knowing these easygoing folk, they probably never bothered to pull them out. For once, Mimi silently thanked a citizen of Gaea for their carelessness.

She jammed the accelerator, speeding down the single road that led to the port. It wouldn't take five minutes by car. She didn't like Gaea, but that didn't mean she wanted a war. She'd been truthful when she told Mark that all Garneaux needed was the sample, if they got it back, he might not have to resort to violence at all.

There was still time. She pressed the pedal further.

On either side of the rushing roadway stretched the same rolling farmland, lush and green. A gentle breeze drifted through clean air, and under the blinding sun the scattered blossoms blazed with color.

"It really is... beautiful..."

A sudden flash of memory: the streets she usually raced through, endless ranks of towers; shop windows flaunting cutting-edge fashions and ever-sleeker lifestyle gadgets; chic offices, theaters, cafés, restaurants; throngs of people in the latest business suits hustling to and fro. It was a world buzzing with energy, forever challenging her, sharpening her, feeding her curiosity. That life was her norm, and she loved it.

But there was no scent of grass there, no riot of vivid flowers, no birdsong, no butterflies flitting, no whisper of wheat fields. No gentle, contented smiles on passing faces.

"Maybe neither world is right or wrong... It's only a matter of which one I prefer."

Just as she craved shopping and a jolt of new information, the people here loved soil, plants, and the work of farming. That was why Gaea was the way it was. And, setting the food crisis talk aside, maybe that wasn't such a bad thing.

"Ugh, get a grip," Mimi murmured to herself, half-smiling wryly. "Am I letting Cynthia's illusions fool me too?"

Soon, the same plaza she had seen the day before appeared up ahead, marking the entrance to the port. She eased off the accelerator, but something felt... off. Rolling to a stop and stepping out of the car, she craned her neck in suspicion.

"No one's here," she whispered. She recalled the groups of people who'd been milling about the previous day: folks waiting for the bus, others meeting arrivals at the port, a mother guiding her child by the hand, a strolling elderly man tapping a cane, young couples chatting and laughing. Now, that tranquil everyday life was nowhere to be found.

"They must've evacuated," she said out loud, as if forcing herself to believe it. An empty place was strangely unsettling. Though the flowers still flourished and the greenery swayed, the absence of people made it feel unnaturally hollow. So she wanted to shout her presence to the silent scenery, at least to remind it that one human being still stood there.

When Mark returned to the control room, it hummed with an unexpected energy. Operators manned consoles, fielding transmissions from the newly assembled pilots. In one corner, a bank of monitors flashed with the Freedoms' readouts, energy supplies, ammunition levels, while staff ran to and fro, relaying messages. Large overhead displays showed a three-dimensional chart of Gaea's surrounding space, plus a magnified image of the Congressional Forces' carrier.

Observing all this, Mark felt his anxieties pile up anew, but at the same time, he sensed that perhaps, just maybe, they stood a fighting chance.

"Weapons check complete!"

"Power adjustments are in place!"

In truth, nobody wanted a war. Mark himself had no desire to be a commanding officer. And yet, inexplicably, his body thrummed with a strange heat, an undercurrent of excitement stirring in his chest. He found it puzzling, and a bit frustrating, but he couldn't deny it.

Suppressing that mixture of adrenaline and apprehension, he walked, step by determined step, toward the tactical panel displaying the colony's airspace, Cynthia right beside him.

Councilor Graves turned, tension visible in his face.

"They've severed all lines of communication with Gaea. That means they can pretend we never surrendered, exactly the pretext they need to claim we resisted."

Cynthia scowled.

"How low can they go?"

But Mark let out a slightly daring smile.

"Which also means they can't see what we're doing for a few minutes, right?"

Graves blinked, surprised.

"So we can launch before they realize and maybe mount a preemptive strike, if only briefly."

"Yes," said Mark.

"Ah!" Graves nodded vigorously. Without missing a beat, he raised his voice to fill the control room.

"Deploy the mobile suit forces, launch at once!"

"Activating launch sequencer!"

"Life support online!"

"Telemeters active!"

The pilots, now in their space suits, donned helmets and flicked the necessary switches. In each cockpit, console lights blinked to life.

"All right, here I go..." muttered a middle-aged pilot, pressing a small photograph onto a corner of his panel, a golden wheat field where his soon-to-be ten-year-old daughter and smiling wife posed. "I'll come back alive. Count on it." He turned back to the controls, eyes set.

"Avionics!"

"Fire-link system, go!"

All around, pilot expressions quivered with tension.

"I pull the trigger... then right pedal first, right?" the college student mumbled, trying to recall the fundamentals.

Dieter's palms were already damp with sweat on the control stick.

"All green!"

"Systems on standby!"

"Now launching!"

An operator turned to Graves.

"Ready, sir."

"Good," said Graves. "Open the airlock doors. Green signal to depart."

As the operator's voice echoed across the loudspeakers, the double locks of the hangar slid open, revealing the pitch-black vacuum of space beyond, studded with stars like grains of sand.

The indicator lights above the row of Freedoms switched from red to green.

"Departing," said Echo One's leader. The first Freedom lifted from the hangar floor, drifting into the boundless void. One after another, all forty Freedoms ventured out into that vast, stark realm, so different from the lush interior of Gaea, both beautiful and terrifying.

"Echo One, Echo Two, Echo Three, Echo Four: launch complete."

"Tango Five's engine output is lagging, I'm holding back."

Voices poured in from the Freedoms' channels as operators relayed each new update, while Mark, eyes on the monitors, measured the distance to the Congressional carrier.

"Stick with your squads, don't get separated," Mark called. "Keep each other in visual range."

"Copy!" Tango One answered. "All right, Team Tango, time to show the haulers how tight we can fly!"

"Yeah, spacing's our specialty," Tango Three came back, voice riding a rush of adrenaline.

"Sierra Four, you're drifting too far ahead. Get back to your group."

"Ah, sorry!"

"Echo Team, shift a bit more to the nine o'clock bearing. You're bunching up on Sierra, watch out for collisions."

"Sierra One here, copy that. Sierra Team, shift to nine o'clock, folks."

"Tweak your nozzle angle by about twenty-three degrees to the right, keep your speed steady."

"Roger that, Mark."

Monitoring friendly units' positions, Mark continued issuing small commands.

"Impressive," Graves murmured. Next to him, Cynthia let out a spirited grin, very much like a young boy's fearless smirk.

"He's still the pilot everyone admires," she said. Graves, taken aback by the expression on his daughter's face, paused to reflect. She had always been headstrong, stubborn about her convictions, and at times he, her father, had been forced to concede because her logic, even as a child, was remarkably sound. Her mother used to laugh that Cynthia had gotten that streak from him.

Watching her now, Graves felt proud of the woman his daughter had become: the one who had nurtured her passion for plants and flowers until it

blossomed into a scientific contribution that might help save humanity. She wore the same unwavering expression, yet there was a new light in her gaze, something that hadn't been there before she embarked on that reckless trip to Earth. This light wasn't rebellious or defiant; it was stronger, brighter, and more beautiful than ever.

He had a pretty good idea what inspired that change.

"She's no longer just my daughter," he realized.

There was a flash of wistful sadness, but it was soon replaced by a gentler feeling. One day, another man would take her hand in his, and Graves would watch from a distance, just as his own father-in-law had once done for him, granting quiet acceptance.

Jack pressed the headset to his ear, confirming the data streaming in from the cockpits.

His brow furrowed. Over by the bridge console, Garneaux sat with arms folded, counting down the final seconds of Gaea's grace period. Jack turned to him.

"General."

"What is it?"

"Settlement Gaea has deployed a mobile suit squadron."

"They've what?!"

Garneaux nearly jumped from his seat. "Since when did that backwater have anything like that?"

Jack merely shrugged, a cool smile reaching only his eyes.

"At best, they're outdated Freedom units left over from the old army. They're hardly a shield worth noting."

"I see."

Garneaux scoffed, a dismissive snort through his nose. "Then we'll have no need to hold back. Launch the MW-Rai."

"Yes, sir," said Jack, nodding. Garneaux lifted one brow. "I assume you plan on going out yourself?"

Jack's pale eyes narrowed. "With your permission."

"Then by all means," Garneaux replied, smirking.

Jack's face lit with a keen, steely smile, a look that made his refined features appear even more striking, revealing the latent beauty behind his aloof exterior. As he unbuckled his harness, Garneaux, satisfied, turned back to the monitor showing the Settlement.

"It's thrilling, isn't it, battling a real enemy, not just a training target. Nothing more enjoyable."

"My sentiments exactly," Jack said, and pushed off the deck.

"A soldier lives for the fight; without it the uniform is just cloth. The thrill of pumping live rounds into a foe with no reservation." Jack reveled in that one explosive moment when an opposing mobile suit, feared by all, became slag thanks to his shot. The mere thought of it set off an exquisite rush in his brain.

"Sig, Bud, we're going!"

He leaped out into the corridor, calling sharply to his two closest subordinates, who sprang to follow.

"Yes, sir!"

The subordinates quickly left their seats and kicked off to follow Jack.

Inside the hangar, ranks of unmanned combat Mobile Weapons, called MW-Rai, were being wheeled onto the catapult lifts one after another.

Jack glanced their way as he hastily suited up in his combat space gear. Likely chosen for Garneaux's taste, he was an old war-history buff, this suit had a strange, archaic samurai-like design, though made of cutting-edge materials. Black with a rigid structure, it lent Jack's slender figure a surprisingly imposing presence.

He drifted into the cockpit of a manned MS-Rai, essentially the piloted version, and snapped his helmet on in a practiced fluid motion. Flipping each switch with expert ease, he watched the instrument lights flicker across his visor. His face, so neutral a moment ago, gained a predatory glint.

"This is Bugu Unit One, Sig. Standing by."

"This is Two, Bud. All set, Colonel Hale. Awaiting your orders."

"The Rai are faster. You two go first. I'm moving to the catapult."

"Yes, sir!"

Their two Bugu units rolled onto the elevator that led to the carrier's side-mounted catapult. The twenty four MW-Rais were already launching with shocking speed, one after the next. Sig and Bud's suits followed, then Jack's. As soon as his MS-Rai was locked in, the catapult hurled him out into the black expanse of space. The crushing G-force pinned him to the seat, yet his smirk didn't waver.

"So the damn Gaeon's tried for a preemptive strike, hmm? Not happening..."

MS-Rai's lower half was clad in a high-speed thruster module resembling an enormous hakama, making it look as though it had no legs. But this booster let the Rai blitz through space far faster than a Freedom, which relied on simpler rear thrusters.

"Your little head start poses no threat," Jack muttered, eyes glued to the monitor.

A blinking alert from one of the unmanned MW-Rais signaled that the enemy mobile suits had been spotted.

"They're in four close-knit formations... All right. We'll stay in Mode F. Attack."

Jack's right hand tapped the console with quick efficiency. The MW units, unmanned, fully autonomous, and therefore devoid of hesitation, cut free their booster modules in unison and barreled toward the targets their search cameras had locked onto.

Meanwhile, Gaea's mobile suit squad advanced in formation under Mark's instructions. But their old Freedoms had limited sensor range, and the men and women inside them were oblivious to the enemy careening straight at them.

"The Congressional carrier has launched mobile suits!" an operator shouted, turning a pale face toward Mark.

Mark scowled at the grainy image of the enemy vessel.

"Of course... They brought the Rais..." Indeed, he'd seen them by chance at Sturgis Base, but he still had only vague intel on their performance. He recalled hearing, back in the army, rumors of unmanned mobile weapons reaching practical use. The Bugu had already shown strong specs, but these presumably outclassed Bugus by far.

He spun to the mic.

"Heads up, everyone, enemy units are state-of-the-art mobile weapons, Rais. They're fully autonomous, unmanned suits!"

"Fully autonomous?" Dieter repeated, brow creasing before he snorted.

"Right, that's what we saw before. So nobody's actually in them? Then they're just machines."

"Exactly!" Mark said reflexively.

"Then taking them out doesn't count as killing people, right?" another pilot ventured with a shaky grin.

But Mark's voice hardened.

"No pilots also means no emotions. They won't feel fear, they won't hesitate or show mercy. You understand?!"

"Mercy...?" the pilot echoed, perplexed.

Dieter sucked in a breath.

"S-so... that's what it means..."

Only now did the true horror of no emotions sink in.

At the same moment Mark stared at the hostile blips streaking across his display.

"They're fast..."

He shouted into the mic.

"They're practically on top of you! Heads up!"

"On top of us?! I don't see a—whoa!"

A sudden onslaught of fire made one pilot yank his controls in desperation.

"Where are they shooting from?!"

He hastily raised his shield, but the repeated concussive impacts almost caved it in, rocking the cockpit.

"Aaaaah!" The pilot screamed.

"Get out of there! Evade!" Mark yelled. But before the pilot could fully maneuver, rounds slipped past the shield, striking the cockpit. A web of cracks spread across his forward monitor. Shards peppered him like bullets.

"Gyaaah!"

In a flash, his Freedom exploded.

"Foxtrot Three! Foxtrot Three!"

One glowing dot on the control panel vanished.

"Augh!" Mark's headset relayed another frantic cry.

"What... what is that thing?!"

A young pilot found himself face-to-face with a MW-Rai. Its design evoked some ancient Earth creature, maybe a rhinoceros, or a dinosaur from eons before. Shoulder plating jutted out ominously, two grenade launchers mounted behind it. Though it was humanoid in shape, it looked nothing like a Freedom, its menacing aura was overwhelming. And because it had no human pilot, it

harbored no fear, no reluctance. Holding its rifle, it fired, heedless of the terrified human in front of it. Another Freedom, utterly defenseless, vanished in a cloud of debris.

Once it registered that its target had been destroyed, the Rai pivoted its sensors onto the next Freedom, paralyzed with terror, and locked on for another kill.

Similar scenes played out everywhere. Some Freedoms attempted to hide behind colony mirrors and return fire, but that was futile against the Rais' advanced detection gear. A few brave souls managed to block shots with their shields and get off bursts from submachine guns, but the difference in both speed and firepower was too vast.

One Freedom after another was shot down, unable to deal any damage in return.

"...This can't be happening..."

Cynthia's eyes widened in shock at the display. The operators, ashen-faced, could only stare helplessly. Mark's expression twisted in bitter frustration as he watched his side's icons blink out on the main board.

"It's a damn shooting gallery..." he muttered. Before his eyes, another Foxtrot team leader vanished from the screen.

"Foxtrot Two, take over as leader!" he called.

"R-roger!" came the shaken reply from Dieter. Gritting his teeth, Dieter tried aiming at one of the swift Rais from behind his shield.

"Damn you! You can't just make fools of us!"

Bullets hammered his shield.

"Ugh!"

He avoided a direct hit, but the shock almost tore his Freedom's shoulder loose.

"Our power gap's too big," Mark said through clenched teeth.

"I'm not out of the fight yet!"

Dieter squeezed the trigger, firing burst after burst. Yet each bullet streaked harmlessly through empty space where a Rai had been a split second before, the ammo counter ticking down alarmingly.

"Shit, I'm dry!" he yelled. At that instant, a grenade explosion rocked his shield from above.

"Waaah!"

Damage alarms blared at the head unit. The shield's top half had been blasted clean off.

"No good! I can't hold on much longer!" he shouted.

Mark's voice boomed back, "Pull out! Retreat, Dieter, run!"

"Dammit!"

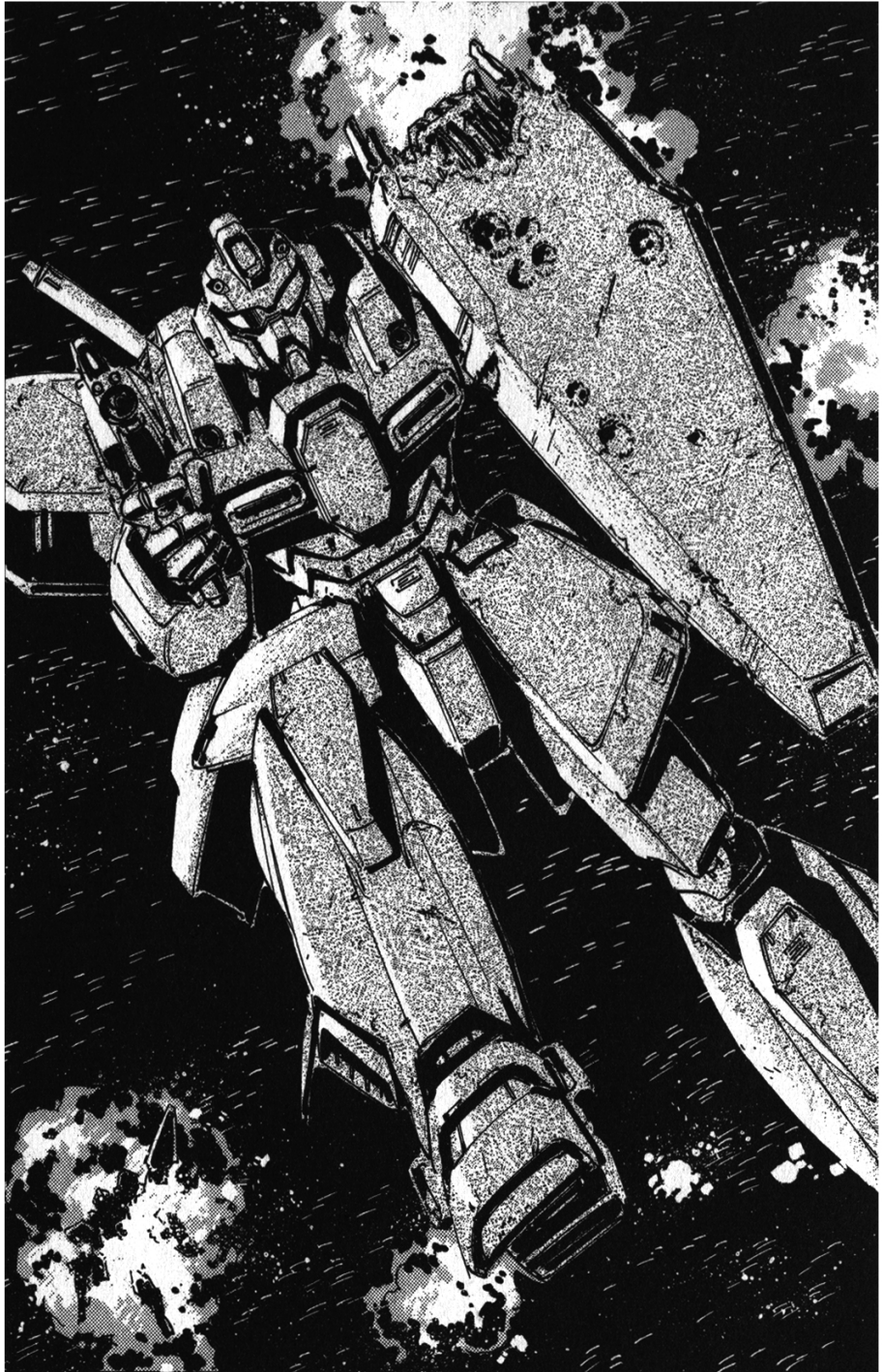
Dieter spun away and jammed his boosters, but a pursuing Rai locked onto him.

"Shake it!" Mark yelled, knowing he could only watch.

All around, frantic shouts flooded his headset.

"Running out of ammo!"

"My gun's empty!"



"Then use your Vulcan cannons!" Mark hollered.

"Don't have 'em on my suit!"

"I used up mine already!"

"Damn it..." Mark ground his teeth.

The peaceful Side that had never known war was never going to stock mountains of machine gun rounds or vulcan shells.

People who loved soil and green fields had no use for them. Looking back, it was obvious: there was never enough ammunition for a battle of this scale, and pilots with almost no gunnery practice were never going to bring down this many enemies with the meager loadouts their Freedoms carried.

Yet seeing that reality, seeing it on the screens, stole the words from Graves, Cynthia, and Mark alike.

Before their eyes, one friendly blip after another blinked out.

Inside every fading dot was a life beyond price; the light of those lives vanished into the black along with the icons, carrying hopes half-fulfilled and words left unsaid.

"At this rate...our forces will be wiped out," Graves muttered, his voice strangled.

"So, we were doomed...?"

Mark swallowed the words "with a bunch of amateurs" and felt a suffocating tightness in his chest. His quiet murmur drew Cynthia's and Graves's eyes upon him, piercing him with their unspoken plea. They didn't need to say what they wanted from him, he already knew.

"But..."

Mark still hesitated, tormented by the thought of plunging himself back into the very war machine he'd rejected. War, after all, was just killing people. And the mobile suit that had upended his sense of right and wrong, should he again climb into one and embrace combat?

Suddenly, an operator broke the heavy silence.

"Councilor! A small vessel from the Congressional Forces is entering our port!"

"They're here..." Graves said in a low voice.

"Garneaux," Mark muttered under his breath.

Graves turned to the operator. "Sound the alarm. Order all Gaeen ships and evacuation shuttles to stay put. Nobody leaves the colony until we lift the warning."

"Understood!"

The operator nodded and relayed the message. Graves faced Cynthia.

"You must evacuate. Gaea Tower will be a prime target," he said gravely. But Cynthia shook her head vehemently.

"I won't!"

"Cynthia!" Graves snapped. "Don't be selfish! Staying here only makes everyone worry. You serve no purpose in this control room."

"I won't leave you alone!"

"Foolish girl!" Graves roared.

"Cynthia!" Mark called suddenly, his voice decisive. She turned to look up at him on the raised platform as he bounded down the steps. "You have an important job, remember?"

"A job...?" she echoed, perplexed.

"That sample," Mark said, nodding. "You said we couldn't let Garneaux have it. This is your responsibility. Protect it."

Cynthia drew in a sharp breath.

"You protect the sample, and I'll protect Gaea. I'm launching the G-Saviour."

"Mark..." Cynthia's eyes grew huge, brimming with emotion.

"So, you and Kobi will take the sample and evacuate, all right?"

Her gaze quivered, torn between gratitude and fear for Mark's safety. He smiled gently. "You said it yourself: the G-Saviour is our guardian angel, Gaea's protector, your sample's protector, humanity's future. So let me be that guardian now."

Tears welled up in Cynthia's eyes. Mark drew her into a tight embrace.

"I'll be fine. I'm not dying today. I'll come back with a win."

"Mark..." A single tear trailed down her cheek.

He gave her a soft, reassuring look.

"Tears don't suit you, Cynthia. You're stronger than that," he said with a quiet laugh.

She let out a shaky breath, faint color rising in her cheeks. Kobi stepped up with a grin, offering Mark his helmet.

"Go get 'em. We'll guard the sample!"

"Thanks." Mark took the helmet and nodded. "Don't worry, I'll make sure Dieter returns in one piece, too."

Kobi blinked, then blushed bright red in a rather obvious way. Mark, catching sight of her reaction, gave a small, knowing smile and turned once more to Cynthia.

"There are only two things I need right now," he said. Cynthia looked at him, eyes wide. He continued, "Luck, and your faith in me."

With that, he pressed a light kiss to her lips and spun on his heel. She watched him go, torn between anxiety and hope.

"Counting on you," Graves said quietly as Mark passed. The young man shot him a brash grin.

"You mean count on me for Gaea's sake, or for Cynthia's?" he bantered, jogging off down the corridor.

Shaking his head with a rueful smile, Graves raised his voice to the operator.

"G-Saviour will be launching from the Nimbus in Gaea Tower's private hangar, open the hatch, now!"

Chapter.04

Saviour

Jack's lips curled into an exhilarated, sinister smile, a rare sight on his usually cold, emotionless face, as he effortlessly destroyed the Freedom, which had desperately sprayed submachine gun fire toward him. The mobile suit exploded violently right before his eyes, sending shockwaves rippling through the empty void of space.

Jack reveled in the subtle vibration transmitted to his own cockpit as debris scattered in all directions, glowing brightly like scattered stars as fuel ignited into flames and sparks. The spectacle thrilled him utterly. Ever since he'd first tasted this exhilaration, he'd grown enamored with mobile suits, or rather, the incomparable joy of fighting within one. He cared nothing about the human lives extinguished at the point where the fiery projectiles he unleashed converged. If he felt anything at all, it was perhaps a twisted sense of gratitude toward the inexperienced pilots who provided him such intoxicating sights.

He calmly steered through the sad emptiness where another life had just been reduced to sparks and addressed the two accompanying subordinates piloting their Bugu units.

"The General's arrived at the port. You two, take control of the Settlement's interior."

"Sir!" replied Bud immediately.

"Are you sure you'll be all right alone, Colonel?" Sig interjected.

Jack flashed his teeth in a smug grin.

"Naturally. Even if we lower the MWs' combat levels by two more steps, they'd still be more than enough to handle these weaklings."

"Understood," Sig responded, his voice betraying a faint amusement.

The two Bugu units promptly accelerated toward the Gaea Settlement's port. Jack swiftly keyed several commands, causing a series of instructions for the MW units to scroll across his main monitor. He methodically selected options and finalized each decision with swift, decisive taps.

"Enemy combat capability is minimal... avoid unnecessary fire. Prioritize expanding the search range. Let nothing escape Gaea."

With a few final keystrokes, Jack transmitted the revised orders to the MW units and returned his gaze to the void ahead.

"Come on out..." he whispered, his thin lips twisting again into a sinister smirk. "I know you're here... You won't stand idly by and let Gaea's people get slaughtered. No... You're not that kind of man, are you...?"

"Not that kind of man," Jack repeated softly to himself.

Suddenly, from his peripheral vision, he saw Freedom barreling toward him, energy drained, out of ammo, and desperately wielding its beam saber in a final, suicidal charge.

"Dammit! Even a piece-of-junk Freedom can still handle a beam saber!" roared Echo One from the engineering team, piloting his prized machine, a symbol of his engineering pride, meticulously maintained.

"Oh?" Jack's eyes softened slightly, mockingly amused.

"RAAAHH!" Echo One screamed in defiance.

"Impressive... for a thirty-year-old antique," Jack sneered.

Freedom lunged, beam saber blazing, striking toward Jack's MS-Rai, which inexplicably halted its movement, appearing momentarily vulnerable. But just as Freedom's strike descended, brilliant azure light erupted from MS-Rai's left arm.

"AAARGH!" Echo One yelled in shock at the violent recoil.

The expansive V-shaped beam shield that had unfurled from MS-Rai's arm effortlessly repelled Freedom's all-out saber strike. Jack's mouth twisted upward wickedly.

"Consider it an honor, I allowed you that one strike in respect for your bravery and effort. Be grateful."

In a heartbeat, MS-Rai raised its rifle and blew Freedom's right arm clean off at the shoulder.

"Wha?!"

The beam saber extinguished instantly. Next went Freedom's left leg, then its left arm. Echo One, stripped literally of his limbs, struggled to stabilize.

"H...Help me...!" the pilot whimpered involuntarily.

Jack's grotesque grin widened as he pulled the trigger again.

"Your efforts were admirable."

Echo One erupted into a blazing fireball, swiftly becoming another fleeting star in Jack's wake as his MS-Rai sped toward the firestorm erupting around the settlement's open mirrors.

The Gaea Tower's dedicated hangar bay opened slowly, its enormous doors parting to reveal the Nimbus as it drifted forward automatically, emerging gracefully into view.

From the specialized container's exchange tube shot the G-Saviour, smoothly settling its feet onto the launch catapult's high-speed deployment palette. Its form shimmered silver-white in a configuration specifically designed for space combat: six aerodynamic fins spread wide from its back, while powerful boosters flanked its waist, its Space Mode ready for action.

"Catapult systems: launch preparations complete."

"Trajectory clear."

"G-Saviour, roger that."

Mark lightly gripped the controls, bracing himself for the impending jolt from the catapult launch.

His heart was no longer troubled by doubt.

He'd joined the military, and eventually left, for one simple reason: he cherished life. He'd hated those bleak, lifeless scenes that haunted his memories, wastelands devoid of even the faintest flicker of life. It was unbearable, and he had wanted, desperately, to do something about it.

In the end, all anyone ever wanted was to protect life.

Yet he had been running away. Mark finally recognized that bitter truth: he'd fled from what he most wanted to protect because he couldn't bear his own inadequacy, the fear that he might fail to save anyone.

But now, running away was no longer an option.

Confronted by the ruthless destruction of everything he held dear, forced to witness precious lives crushed one after another, Mark knew there was nowhere left to escape.

No, what truly drove him now was something even simpler. He finally understood what it meant to possess a life he could not bear losing. It was no lofty ideal, nor some abstract notion of justice drilled into him by others. It was deeply personal, the pure, undeniable bond of something he refused to surrender, something he'd discovered for the first time. Stronger than a million words, deeper than all the experience in the universe, this single, unwavering feeling compelled him forward, bringing him here, poised on the brink of battle.

Mark glanced briefly toward the beautiful blue sphere floating serenely in the distance. The same thing existed behind him now, within his own chest, and undoubtedly within Cynthia, who was surely safeguarding the sample as she evacuated, as well as within Kobi. It existed inside every soul fighting in this battle.

"Let's go...partner," he whispered.

"Launch!!"

An explosive impact, like an enormous rock slamming against him, pressed Mark violently into his seat.

"Ugh...!"

With a small grunt, he absorbed the forceful acceleration. The dark canvas of space expanded swiftly across his monitors, illuminated by blinking instruments and critical data streams. His body instinctively handled every required maneuver, almost without conscious thought.

Within moments, his screen displayed an MW relentlessly chasing a fleeing Freedom.

"I won't let you kill anyone else!"

Mark leveled his beam rifle at the distant MW and squeezed the trigger. Just as the enemy machine prepared to fire on the helpless Freedom, it was pierced through and erupted in flames.

"?!"

The pilot inside Freedom, braced for imminent death, stared blankly at the sudden turn of events. A dazzling, white machine streaked past at blinding speed, gleaming brilliantly in reflected sunlight.

"W-what the hell was that?!"

The stunned pilot heard Mark's commanding voice break through his confusion.

"Rally with your surviving teammates! Head behind the mirror!"

"Mark...?!"

Shock seized him again. Before his astonished eyes, the G-Saviour swiftly swung its beam rifle left and right, annihilating multiple MW-Rais in quick succession.

“My God...he’s destroying them in a single shot...!”

The pilot was utterly speechless.

“Move quickly! There’s still plenty more enemies out here!”

Jolted back to reality by Mark’s urgent shout, the pilot straightened, finally regaining his composure.

“Understood!”

But already the G-Saviour had dwindled to a speck on his display, a trail of explosions marking its rapid advance.

“This is Echo Seven! All remaining Echo Team members, regroup behind Mirror Three!”

“Echo Four, acknowledged! Trying to reach the rendezvous now!”

“This is Echo Two! What the hell just happened out there?!”

The bewildered cries of friendly forces filled the comm.

“A savior happened! Gaea’s got an incredible mobile suit too!” Echo Seven’s voice trembled with excitement.

“An incredible mobile suit?”

Echo Two blinked, unable to comprehend. Echo Seven’s exhilarated voice exploded over the radio again:

“It’s a pure white mobile suit! Like a knight with wings!”

Garneaux departed from the Congressional Forces’ mothership in a compact landing shuttle, escorted by MW units, effortlessly docking at Settlement Gaea’s port. Inside the bay, several evacuation shuttles waited, packed with civilians anxious to flee.

He cast a satisfied sidelong glance at the helpless passengers as he strode toward the elevator, flanked by about ten heavily armed soldiers. The elevator doors slid open silently.

“We’ve been expecting you, General.”

Mimi stood before the doors, smiling politely.

The startled soldiers instantly raised their assault rifles, leveling the barrels directly at her chest. Mimi, however, glared fiercely back at them.

“Who do you think opened Gaea’s doors for you in the first place?!”

The soldiers froze, momentarily confused. Garneaux calmly extended a hand, gently pushing aside the rifle barrels pointed at Mimi, then gazed down at her. His expression, contrary to Mimi’s expectations, was coldly detached.

Still, Mimi defiantly lifted her chin, returning his gaze with a confident smile.

“Thank you, General. Gaea won’t resist anymore. They’re practically surrendering as we speak.”

“Don’t state the obvious,” Garneaux sneered dismissively.

Just then, two Bugu units thundered overhead, engines roaring loudly enough to shake the very air around them. Mimi’s eyes widened involuntarily.

“So, the Congressional Forces, and Garneaux himself, truly intended to completely subjugate Gaea. Graves and Cynthia would lose all chance at a free tomorrow.”

Mimi felt an odd blend of bitter satisfaction and inexplicable sorrow at the realization.

“More importantly,” Garneaux interrupted her thoughts sharply, “have you secured the sample?”

Mimi’s body stiffened abruptly.

“N-no... Not yet, not directly. But I know exactly where it is. I can take you there myself.”

She gestured toward an electric car waiting nearby.

The appearance of a new, deadly opponent triggered the MW-Rais’ programming. They automatically targeted whichever enemy registered as the greatest threat. Detecting the swift destruction of their allies by a foe whose speed and maneuvers vastly exceeded previous encounters, the MWs shifted their focus in unison, much like beasts responding to a wounded companion’s desperate warning, converging simultaneously on Mark’s G-Saviour.

A barrage of rifle fire erupted from long range, intensifying the brilliant glow of the G-Saviour’s beam shield as it absorbed the incoming blasts. Yet Mark quickly reversed the trajectory of these attacks, swiftly calculating each MW’s exact position based on the incoming trajectories.

His arms moved fluidly over the controls, smoothly adjusting the beam rifle’s aim at lightning speed, locking precisely onto the enemies indicated on his monitor. Bright beams streaked like meteors across the darkness, hitting their distant targets dead-on. Far away, MW after MW erupted into bursts of flame, exploding instantly. Even as one burst into flames, Mark had already locked onto the next target.

One shot, then two, then three...

Just as he’d effortlessly cleared away debris in the shoal zone, the G-Saviour pivoted left, right, up, down, even behind, changing directions at dizzying speeds while firing his rifle with pinpoint accuracy.

An MW charged forward at close range, launching grenades. Instantly, Mark activated his waist thrusters, dodging gracefully even as he fired his rifle into the enemy’s torso. Flames erupted from the MW’s belly, and it burst apart in a flash.

Another MW lunged, stubbornly attempting to grapple the G-Saviour despite losing both arms to Mark’s earlier fire.

“Get off me!” Mark snarled instinctively, angling sharply upward and unloading the head-mounted Vulcan cannons directly into the MW’s face. The MW, robbed of its sensor array, drifted helplessly away. Mark followed up mercilessly, blasting it again with the beam rifle. Metal fragments from the exploding MW pinged sharply against his armor.

“Come at me all you like, I won’t go easy on you!” he growled, glaring fiercely at the MWs depicted on his monitors.

"G-Saviour just destroyed another enemy mobile suit! That's the seventh one!" the Gaea Tower operator shouted, flushed with excitement.

Cheers filled the control room.

"He took them all down single-handedly... what unbelievable power!"

The staff's eyes sparkled with newfound hope.

"G-Saviour eliminated yet another!"

"He truly might be our guardian angel..." Graves murmured thoughtfully.

Suddenly, an urgent voice shattered their momentary optimism.

"The Congressional Forces' Bugu units just breached the port! Two of them!"

"They're really attacking Gaea Tower directly!"

Anxiety flooded back into the control room as the soldiers shouted their frantic reports. Moments later, Jack's subordinates, piloting the Bugu suits, arrived ahead of Garneaux's group, firing several rifle shots at random around Gaea Tower as a threat.

A heavy, shuddering boom shook the tower walls.

"Whoa!"

As the tense reports echoed, staff members instinctively grabbed their desks for support.

"Stay calm!" Graves called firmly. "This tower won't crumble from a few mobile suit rifle rounds! But inform everyone inside who isn't essential staff not to leave the tower, it's far more dangerous outside."

"It won't matter where you hide," mocked a voice coldly, as Garneaux strode confidently into the control room, a sinister smirk on his face.

Soldiers scattered throughout the room, rifles pointed.

"Nobody move! The Congressional Forces now control this area!" barked a soldier, prompting staff members to freeze in fear.

Garneaux approached Graves with slow, measured steps.

"It's been a long time, Councilor Graves... though I suppose we've only actually met once before, if that," Garneaux said, his smirk deepening the age lines around his mouth.

"I'm afraid I don't recall," Graves replied, standing proudly, unwaveringly blocking Garneaux's path.

Garneaux, shorter and slighter than Graves, still gazed upward with a smug expression.

"No matter. Since we've at least met once, as acquaintances, perhaps you could enlighten me? Where is the sample now?"

"I have no idea," Graves answered bluntly.

"Don't insult my intelligence."

"Then perhaps you'll enlighten me instead: why exactly must Gaea surrender the sample to the Congressional Forces? Have you brought some official authorization from Chairman Hawke himself?"

Garneaux's eyes flickered angrily.

"You insolent traitor, how dare you!" Garneaux spat, signaling sharply to his soldiers. "Councilor Graves, you're under arrest for violation of the Earth Sphere Accords."

A soldier grabbed Graves roughly by the arm.

"We of Gaea have committed no such violation!" Graves roared, glaring fiercely and attempting to shrug off the soldier's grip. The soldier stumbled slightly, caught off-guard by Graves' large frame.

"Resisting, huh?!" snarled another soldier, who slammed his rifle butt violently into Graves' stomach.

"Ugh!" Graves groaned, doubling over in pain as soldiers twisted his arms harshly behind his back, snapping cuffs around his wrists.

Garneaux observed coldly, sneering dismissively.

"As councilor, I'd expected you to show more dignity in defeat."

Graves winced in pain but defiantly raised his head, a bitter smile spreading across his face.

"You'd do well to follow your own advice," he replied boldly.

Garneaux's expression darkened angrily.

"Get him out of my sight!"

Soldiers roughly dragged Graves from the room, watched uneasily by the operators left behind.

Mimi, who had observed quietly from behind the soldiers, felt a sharp pang of unease at Graves' words, knowing he was right. Gaea hadn't truly committed any crime, except that four of its people had smuggled themselves onto Earth and stolen a military shuttle, a feat only accomplished with her own covert assistance. Outwardly calm, Mimi's mind reeled in turmoil.

Mark's earlier accusation echoed vividly:

"You don't understand! Garneaux is behind all of this! Everything is his scheme!"

Could Mark have spoken the truth? Could this old man before her, the respected General of the Congressional Forces, a revered hero who'd fought countless battles defending Earth, truly be capable of such treachery? She didn't want to doubt him, yet looking at Garneaux now, a chilling suspicion stirred within her heart, whispering that perhaps the hero she'd trusted might be nothing more than an illusion.

Yet even if that were true, the only one who could save Mark, who could grant him hero status, was Garneaux himself. Mimi swallowed the rising doubt and forced herself back into composure.

Garneaux turned sharply toward her.

"You said you know where the sample is?"

His eyes pierced Mimi, freezing her momentarily in place with their icy stare.

"Yes... it's with Cynthia, Graves' daughter."

"Oh, I see...that reckless scientist woman is Graves' daughter, is she?"

Garneaux smiled darkly.

"Where is this Dr. Cynthia now?!" he demanded loudly at the operator nearby.

The operator hesitated. A soldier immediately pressed a rifle muzzle against his neck.

"S-she's...downstairs, in the emergency shelter..." he stammered meekly.

Garneaux chuckled softly, nodding in satisfaction.

"Let's move!" he barked, signaling to Mimi and the soldiers flanking her.

"Yes, sir!" Mimi responded quickly, trailing closely behind Garneaux and his escort.

After destroying his twelfth MW, Mark heard Dieter's panicked, tearful voice break urgently through the comm.

"Mark! Help me, I'm stuck on the mirror and can't move!"

"Where are you exactly?! I'll be right there!"

"Above Mirror B!"

"Understood!"

Mark tightened his grip on the controls.

"Sierra, Foxtrot, Tango, Echo, every team, listen carefully! Anyone damaged, withdraw from combat immediately! Those still able, cover your wounded teammates and retreat to the docks! I'll handle the MWs myself!"

"Roger, Mark!"

"Don't you dare die on us, Mark!"

"I won't!"

With that brief reply to his comrades, Mark opened his boosters to full power, hurtling directly toward the mirror array. Immediately, nearby MWs moved to pursue him, leaving a gap that scattered Freedom units desperately exploited, regrouping while they had the chance.

One MW chasing the G-Saviour tried slipping past them.

"We can still take at least one down!"

Two battered Freedom units simultaneously fired every remaining round from their machine guns into the passing MW. Fire erupted violently from the MW's flank, engulfing it instantly in a bright explosion.

"We did it!" both pilots shouted together.

It was the first moment in the battle that Gaea's Freedom units had successfully taken down one of the Congressional Forces' state-of-the-art MWs.

"Tch..." Jack clicked his tongue irritably as he glanced over the status readouts of his MWs on the monitor.

"Those pieces of junk couldn't possibly produce such results on their own... He's finally shown himself."

Jack rapidly tapped several keys, pulling up fresh tactical information. As he absorbed the details, his lips twisted into a satisfied, sinister grin.

"Just as I expected... things are finally getting interesting."

He pulled sharply on the control stick, steering his MS-Rai eagerly toward the fight.

“Uwaaahhh...!”

Sweat poured down Dieter’s face as he sat frozen inside his Freedom’s cockpit, the damaged suit sprawled helplessly atop the massive mirror array, shaking uncontrollably.

The MW pursuing him unleashed a grenade.

“I’m gonna die!”

Instinctively, Dieter raised what remained of his shield, now only half its original size, in front of the cockpit’s chest armor.

A deafening explosion rattled the Freedom violently, nearly shattering it to pieces.

Yet, miraculously, he remained alive.

Dieter’s features twisted in raw terror, his panicked breathing echoing harshly inside his helmet. Now he truly understood, this was real war, real death bearing down relentlessly upon him. The dream of mobile suit battles he’d idolized for their sheer coolness suddenly appeared as a cruel joke.

Perhaps the Freedom was old and weak, he knew that now. But beyond that, the horrifying truth that both his machine and the enemy MW hunting him existed solely to extinguish human lives struck him mercilessly.

These instruments of war now fulfilled their purpose, aiming to erase his existence entirely. As images of family, friends, and every precious memory flooded Dieter’s mind, the realization that all of it would vanish in an instant sent tears streaming down his cheeks, shameful yet unstoppable.

The MW coldly raised its rifle toward the defiant enemy, preparing to finish him off. At this range, it was hopeless. Paralyzed by despair, Dieter let out a primal scream of terror and anguish,

“Uwaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!!”

In that instant, the MW suddenly burst into flames, erupting violently before his eyes. Debris rained down on Dieter’s Freedom, clanging heavily against the armor.

He sat there, utterly stunned, unable to grasp what had just happened.

“You okay?!”

Mark’s voice broke through the silence. Simultaneously, a gleaming white-silver mobile suit descended gracefully above him.

“...”

Dieter could not speak. He stared as though glimpsing an impossible miracle.

It reminded him vividly of an old, faded illustration he’d once seen in a library as a child, a towering figure with great white wings spread wide.

If he remembered correctly, beneath that ancient drawing had been written: “The Archangel.”

“Dieter! Answer me, you’re alive, right?!”

At Mark’s insistence, Dieter suddenly realized he’d stopped breathing, finally releasing the breath he hadn’t known he was holding.

“Y-yeah... I’m okay...”

“Thank God.”

Mark's warm voice comforted Dieter deeply. A wave of relief surged through him, blood finally circulating once more, and fresh tears, this time of overwhelming gratitude, flowed uncontrollably.

"I'll get you out of here now!"

G-Saviour knelt carefully, preparing to lift Dieter's damaged Freedom from the mirror. Just as Mark reached out, a shrill alarm blared inside his cockpit.

Mark jerked his head up in alarm, eyes scanning the monitors.

The screen flashed ominously: ENEMY MS APPROACHING.

Instantly Mark made G-Saviour rise, directing his main camera toward the incoming threat. The suit's human-like eyes flashed brilliantly as they locked onto their new enemy.

"I've found you at last!"

Jack's MS-Rai plunged from above, beam saber blazing blue-white, aiming to cleave G-Saviour apart.

"Jack!" Mark shouted, deploying his beam shield just in time to intercept the saber strike.

A dazzling burst of energy erupted as the two beams collided violently.

"I've waited so long for this moment, Mark! Never thought we'd reunite like this!" Jack sneered, utterly ignoring Dieter's incapacitated Freedom.

"So it really was you in command of this slaughter..." Mark's gaze hardened sharply.

"Who else could it be?" Jack mocked coldly. "No one else could carry out this mission so ruthlessly, so efficiently, except me."

As usual, Jack tilted his chin arrogantly, sneering down upon the G-Saviour through his monitor.

"You're right...no one else could be this cold-blooded about killing," Mark retorted bitterly, glaring back fiercely at the MS-Rai towering above.

"Today, we finish this once and for all!" Jack shouted, raising his saber aggressively.

"Settle it?!" Mark growled, gritting his teeth as he blocked another ferocious strike.

"You always infuriated me!" Jack seethed, repeatedly hammering down with immense force. "A mere soldier, constantly daring to get in my way!"

"Stop blaming your own failures on me!"

"Failures?! That's exactly why I despise you!"

With immense force, the Rai battered Mark's shield repeatedly until it finally knocked the rifle from G-Saviour's grip.

"Damn it!" Mark instinctively drew his own beam saber from behind, igniting it just in time.

Brilliant flashes erupted as two glowing blades clashed violently in mid-space, illuminating the darkness with dazzling intensity. Their movements, quick, precise, graceful, reflected across the mirrors, blazing brighter than the stars themselves.

The brilliance was so intense that Dieter instinctively shielded his eyes. Yet he couldn't look away, he was mesmerized by the sight unfolding before him, like

something from an ancient movie depicting medieval knights locked in mortal combat.

Left, right, high above their heads, then striking swiftly far below their waists, the glowing sabers danced furiously, throwing sparks like showers of shooting stars. Dieter couldn't believe these were mobile suits, machines made of metal, moving with such lifelike grace, precision, and elegance.

Moments ago, he'd been paralyzed by the pure horror of battle. But now, inexplicably, these same terrifying machines appeared breathtakingly beautiful.

In that moment Dieter realized something profound: the very least he could do, his only remaining duty, was to etch this extraordinary battle deep into his heart and memory, never to be forgotten.

Spotting the ominous silhouette of a Bugu outside the window, Cynthia rushed urgently out of the laboratory, clutching the precious bioluminescence sample.

Gaea's fall to the Congressional Forces was inevitable now.

Soon, they would seize the research facility itself, and once that happened, the invaluable sample would fall into their hands. She couldn't let that happen, not as a scientist, not with her pride at stake, and certainly not after Dr. Riva had likely paid for this research with his life.

As she raced with Kobi through the beloved greenhouse, Cynthia silently prayed that the delicate plants would not be brutally crushed beneath the giant feet of the enemy suits. The greenhouse was a sanctuary, home to priceless organisms, the living proof of Earth's miraculous history.

But Earth's own people, or rather, the warmongers within the Congressional Forces, cared nothing for such irreplaceable treasures. Their minds were filled only with conquest, domination of the weak, and self-preservation. As long as such men held power, restoring Earth's natural beauty was impossible. That was why Gaea was so critical for humanity's future.

As Cynthia dashed toward the elevator leading to the shelter, she cast another anxious glance toward the threatening Bugu. If the G-Saviour was a guardian angel, then the Bugu and that new model mobile suit were devils incarnate. Both were mobile suits, yet one was protector and the other destroyer, machines amplifying the true nature of whoever piloted them. She understood this deeply now.

"This way!" Kobi shouted, pointing Cynthia toward the corridor.

"Right!" Cynthia nodded, sprinting behind her assistant into the corridor leading to the shelter, but abruptly halted.

"Mimi? You're still here? Why didn't you evacuate?"

Mimi greeted Cynthia's shock with a calculated smile.

"How could I possibly leave here all by myself?"

Cynthia felt her heart waver uncertainly.

"Mimi..."

"You don't have to say it. I already know exactly what you're thinking," Mimi replied coolly. "But right now, what I really need from you, is that sample you're holding."

"What did you just say?"

Cynthia was so stunned by Mimi's words that she wondered momentarily if she'd misheard her.

"Give me the sample," Mimi insisted, stepping aggressively toward Cynthia. "You have it with you, don't you?"

"What are you talking about?"

Before Cynthia could grasp what was happening, Garneau stepped from the shadows of the corridor.

"Hand it over quietly, Doctor," Garneau commanded, his face twisted into the same deceptively affable smile he'd worn at the party. Behind him, two soldiers appeared and instantly leveled their guns at her.

"Mimi...you..." Realizing the truth, Cynthia stared at her, her large eyes filled with hurt and disbelief.

"Don't blame me, Cynthia. This is your own fault, after all," Mimi said, managing a faintly regretful smile. "Now, the sample!"

At her command, the soldiers raised their guns threateningly. Cynthia hesitated, frozen by the impossible choice. She couldn't surrender the sample, yet resisting here meant certain death.

Slowly, reluctantly, she slid the bag from her shoulder. Just as one of the soldiers reached out to seize it, Kobi lunged forward and snatched the bag away.

"You can't give it to them!"

"Kobi!!"

Gunfire from the soldiers assault rifles erupted instantly. Kobi screamed as a bullet tore through her shoulder, sending her sprawling helplessly onto the corridor floor.

"Kobi, hold on!" Cynthia cried, rushing to cradle her fallen assistant.

"But...Doctor...Cynthia..." Kobi whispered weakly, eyes half-closed.

"We...promised...remember...?"

"Oh, you reckless girl..." Tears filled Cynthia's eyes.

For a moment, Mimi's expression softened as she stared at the two women, but catching Garneau's impatient glare, she quickly hardened herself and strode forward.

"This is what you get for resisting," Mimi said coldly, wrenching the bag from Kobi's trembling hands. Kobi's weak protests faded into a barely audible moan.

Garneau took the bag from Mimi, a victorious smile spreading across his lips. Opening it, he pulled out the metal container housing the sample. Cynthia tore off a sleeve from her own uniform, pressing it desperately against Kobi's bleeding shoulder.

From within the case, Garneau removed a glowing test tube, radiating brilliant golden light. He admired it with satisfaction.

"Magnificent indeed... A true treasure for humanity. You've done commendable work, Dr. Graves."

Glaring fiercely, Cynthia spat back, "Stealing that sample means nothing. You can't do anything practical without the knowledge that exists only in my mind."

Garneaux chuckled quietly.

"What's so funny?" she snapped.

"Practicality... only matters if one intends to actually use it," Garneaux answered cryptically, sliding the glowing tube carefully back into the case.

"What...do you mean?"

His face now twisted into a wicked smile, utterly devoid of his earlier geniality.

"Of course, I won't destroy it. Such valuable property deserves special safekeeping. Perhaps deep within Congressional military headquarters, or better yet, in my own private vault, forever sealed away from prying eyes."

Cynthia's eyes widened in disbelief, flaring with sudden fury.

"So, from the very beginning...you never planned to actually use this discovery?! You never intended to help relieve the food crisis at all?!"

Garneaux laughed mockingly, deepening Cynthia's outrage. Even Mimi stared at him in stunned disbelief. Wasn't the point of this operation to benefit humanity, to allow the Congressional Forces to develop the sample for food production?

Noting Cynthia's anger, Garneaux sneered, "Since we'll likely never meet again, I'll enlighten you. Throughout history, great leaders maintained control by wielding fear. Humanity, left comfortable and content, inevitably grows decadent. Only when people feel threatened, constantly reminded of impending crisis, can they be controlled effectively. The food shortage is humanity's greatest fear now. Living obediently within a regime that claims to protect them from starvation is the only way to secure an ordered, disciplined society. Under such rule, humanity will finally earn the right to dominate space, to rise beyond Earth and grasp our destiny as supreme rulers of the cosmos."

"You... you're insane," Cynthia whispered bitterly, her eyes blazing with fury.

Garneaux smiled cruelly. "Who's truly insane here? You, who foolishly seek to restore Earth to some sentimental past, inefficiently clinging to petty self-sufficiency? Such naiveté stagnates progress!"

Cynthia's voice rose defiantly, eyes blazing.

"To think that you still equate reckless acceleration with progress! It's you who've become obsolete, a foolish old man stuck in the past, utterly blind to genuine human progress!"

It was precisely because of narrow-minded, power-hungry fools like Garneaux that Earth would never recover its true beauty. He would never understand the immeasurable value of Earth, the precious oasis amid the icy void of space. Someone so blindly arrogant could never lead humanity into the stars.

Yet Garneaux merely shrugged off Cynthia's fury. Her defiance was nothing more than the meaningless howl of a defeated opponent.

"I suppose a gardening hobbyist like you could never grasp the sophistication of my ideals," he sneered contemptuously, passing the bag containing the sample back to Mimi.

Mimi stared numbly at the bag, replaying Garneaux's chilling words: a society controlled through fear, a world shaped by manufactured crises. Was this truly what she had believed in? She had trusted the Congressional Forces, trusted Garneaux himself, to wield this discovery for humanity's benefit.

Unable to hold back, Mimi timidly asked, "General... you'll use this sample to increase food production... won't you?"

Garneaux regarded her with cold contempt. "Were you even listening? Why would I waste this invaluable asset on such inefficient nonsense? I expected more from an ambitious officer like you. Don't tell me Gaea has made you soft as well."

"I... my apologies," Mimi muttered softly, lowering her head despite the turmoil in her heart.

As Garneaux turned away, Cynthia demanded sharply, "Tell me one thing, what happened to Dr. Riva?"

Garneaux paused, glancing back with a ruthless, mocking smile. "He was a brilliant scientist, I'll admit. But not a wise one. So, I retired him permanently, from this entire world."

Cynthia's fists trembled, her anger beyond words, her soul screaming silently in fury and despair.

Supporting their wounded comrades, the group of battered Freedom units slowly made their way toward Gaea's port. Naturally, MWs moved to intercept them, but due to Jack's earlier orders to lower their aggression level, their assaults were weaker now.

On the other hand, the Gaea pilots had gradually improved at piloting their mobile suits, and importantly, they were now fighting as a cohesive group.

Whenever one pilot spotted an MW, he called out its position, prompting several suits to concentrate their limited remaining ammunition into a single focused volley. Even their weak submachine guns could inflict significant damage when their shots hit simultaneously. While far from efficient, it allowed them to take down some of the MWs on their own.

Jack, however, paid no attention whatsoever. He was fully engrossed in his duel with Mark.

Beams clashed violently, each impact shaking their machines fiercely. The thrill of fighting an opponent who wouldn't simply burst apart like a balloon was exhilarating, each exchange filled with a satisfying tension and danger.

Jack's beam saber sliced down repeatedly, grazing the G-Saviour's silver armor and shattering mirrors into fragments of glittering dust. The broken mirror shards floated around them like tiny galaxies, beautiful and surreal despite the chaos.

On Mark's monitor, the gauge indicated less than half the energy remaining in G-Saviour's beam saber. He couldn't tell how much power Jack's MS-Rai still possessed, forcing him to carefully consider how to fight with the little time and energy he had left.

Dodging another fierce swing from the MS-Rai, the G-Saviour leaped back across the mirrors.

"What's wrong? Losing your nerve already?" Jack mocked, pursuing him mercilessly, trampling mirrors underfoot as he attacked.

But in that instant, Mark saw an opening. He surged forward, slamming G-Saviour's shoulder hard into the side of the MS-Rai.

"Urgh!!" Jack shouted as his machine stumbled, crashing onto the mirror surface. He struggled repeatedly to stand, but it seemed some critical part had sustained damage, making it difficult for the MS-Rai to recover.

"Got you!" Mark raised his saber, poised to deliver the final blow,

Suddenly, the MS-Rai twisted sharply, its shoulder armor popping open to unleash a volley of rockets.

"Dammit!" Mark cried out as explosions erupted across G-Saviour's armor. Trying desperately to evade the blasts, his footing collapsed beneath him, sending his suit crashing down against the shattered mirrors.

"Hahaha!" Jack howled wildly, eyes blazing with bloodlust as he forced the MS-Rai upright again, advancing triumphantly.

"You were faking?! You're a dirty bastard, Jack!" Mark yelled, furious.

"Dirty?" Jack sneered viciously. "I'll use any tactic necessary to defeat you!"

G-Saviour struggled to rise, but its arm was hopelessly snagged in the tangled mirror framework.

"Damn it!" Mark pulled frantically at the controls, trying to free his machine.

Jack's towering MS-Rai loomed menacingly above him.

"At least I'll never have to see your hated face again. But before you die, I'll acknowledge this: you're the finest pilot I've faced. You're the only one who's ever matched me. That's why you had to go. Thanks for giving me one last thrill before I finish you!"

Jack's expression contorted with triumphant ecstasy as he raised his beam saber high above.

In that split second, Mark detached the trapped armor plating on G-Saviour's arm, a maneuver only possible thanks to its modular design, something Jack never anticipated.

"What the?!" Jack froze as G-Saviour's beam saber flared brilliantly, flooding his cockpit monitors with blinding blue radiance.

The next instant, a dazzling blade the color of Earth itself sliced deep through the torso of the MS-Rai.

"Uwaaahhh!" Jack screamed as his suit stumbled violently. Before he could react, the G-Saviour pivoted smoothly, delivering a second devastating slash diagonally across the MS-Rai's chest.

Sparks erupted as the MS-Rai toppled onto its back, helpless.

"Damn...!" Jack desperately tried to move, but his screens flashed red, alarms blaring as the suit's internal systems failed one by one. Powerless, Jack stared hatefully at the G-Saviour, which now stood calmly above him, saber raised.

"Well, what are you waiting for?! Finish it!" Jack roared furiously.

Mark slowly lowered his weapon, breathing heavily.

"Sorry, Jack... It's going to be a hell of a lot more fun watching your ass fry before a Congressional subcommittee."

He sheathed the saber onto G-Saviour's back, leaving Jack trembling with rage and humiliation. But suddenly, Jack's expression twisted into manic delight.

"Hahaha! Well, my day might be bad, but yours is going to get worse!"

"What?!" Mark spun around in shock. His monitors lit up urgently, and he immediately deployed his beam shield.

At that very moment, heavy fire rained down upon him from above.

Surviving MWs, having lost their original targets when the Freedom units managed to reach the port, had now zeroed in on G-Saviour.

"Ugh!" Mark grunted as his shield expanded to maximum power, desperately covering both himself and Dieter's damaged suit. Explosions shattered mirrors around him, sending jagged fragments flying. The strain on the G-Saviour's arms was tremendous, threatening to snap under the relentless assault.

"Mark!" Dieter cried out helplessly.

Jack laughed wildly once more, savoring Mark's peril, but the laughter abruptly ceased.

One by one, the attacking MWs exploded violently. For a moment, Mark didn't understand what had happened.

From the smoking remains emerged an entirely new squadron of mobile suits, unlike anything Mark had ever seen. Sleek, agile, and streamlined, these suits resembled a more advanced, refined version of the G-Saviour. Each unit bore eight folding fins on its back, far surpassing G-Saviour's space-mode capabilities. Their slender limbs and pointed torsos, combined with clawed feet designed specifically for zero-gravity stability, gave them an avian grace, like giant, swift swallows.

Illusions.

At least thirty of them appeared at once.

A familiar voice crackled cheerfully over Mark's helmet comm.

"What the hell are you just staring for?"

"Philippe?!" Mark stammered, stunned. "Philippe, is that really you?!"

A wide grin spread across Mark's face as excitement surged through him.

"Leave this mess to us Illuminati, Mark! Switch your suit to Terrain Mode and get inside the Settlement immediately! Two Bugu units are already inside, tearing the place apart around Gaea Tower!"

"Roger that!" Mark responded sharply, gripping his controls tightly.

The G-Saviour sprang up from the broken mirrors, rocketing at full throttle toward the Nimbus waiting patiently on Gaea Tower's deck.

Philippe watched his friend proudly as Mark's figure shrank rapidly into the distance. Dieter stared wide-eyed in awe, hope brightening his exhausted face. Jack could only watch in bitter disbelief.

Suddenly, a soldier rushed urgently toward Garneaux.

"General! A massive squadron of mobile suits has appeared! Our MW forces are under heavy attack!"

Garneau's eyes widened in shock. "What?! Impossible! Who's mobile suits are they?!"

"They're unknown units, sir, they call themselves the Illuminati."

"The Illuminati!" Garneau ground his teeth furiously, his face darkening with rage. "Those meddling bastards again!"

Upon hearing the soldier's words, a radiant smile broke across Cynthia's face. Kobi, lying weakly in her arms, opened her eyes faintly and smiled.

"We won... didn't we?"

"Yes... yes, we did!" Cynthia nodded, tears of relief in her eyes.

Watching them quietly from a few steps away, Mimi felt a sharp pang twist inside her chest. Gaea would win after all. Mark would return soon. And then...

She glanced briefly at Cynthia. The pure joy illuminating Cynthia's expression, as she shared relief with Kobi, was almost painfully bright.

Here was a woman who had believed completely in Mark, who risked everything she had to protect something precious. They had both desperately tried to safeguard something dear to them, but unlike Mimi, Cynthia's precious thing was not her personal ambition or reputation. It was a sample that could save humanity itself.

At that moment, Mimi finally began to understand, if only vaguely, why Mark had chosen Cynthia instead of her.

She had forgotten. Long ago, Mark had told her repeatedly why he had joined the military, why he had fought so hard in the first place.

Because he wanted to stop Earth from being ruined further.

Because he wanted to protect its beautiful lands.

"Oh... I see now," Mimi whispered softly to herself.

She had never truly understood Mark's ideals, no matter how hard she tried. But Cynthia had. And with that, Mimi finally felt she had found the answer she'd been searching for all this time.

Garneau barked sharply at his soldiers, "We have the sample we came for! Prepare our shuttle, we're leaving!"

"Yes, sir!"

The soldiers hurriedly rushed to comply.

"Move out!" Garneau ordered Mimi curtly, turning to leave without another glance.

Mimi hesitated, then quickly approached Cynthia and Kobi. Cynthia glared fiercely, protectively, at her approach.

"I expected better from you," Cynthia snapped bitterly, her words slicing sharply into Mimi's heart.

Still, Mimi knew she had to say this. If nothing else, she owed it to them.

"I'm sorry... for everything. It was my mistake. Tell Mark for me, please, that all of this was my fault."

Before Cynthia could respond, Mimi swiftly turned and hurried away, running after Garneau and leaving them behind.

The moment G-Saviour landed within Nimbus's specialized container, the floor of the exchange tube smoothly secured its feet.

"G-Saviour Terrain, convert to Ground Mode!" Mark commanded.

Instantly, Nimbus's integrated maintenance computer responded with calm precision.

"G-Saviour commencing Ground Mode conversion."

As the mobile suit moved steadily through the rotating exchange tube, automated arms swiftly removed its armor plating, replacing each component to adapt it for combat under gravity. The new armor, thicker and sturdier, offered enhanced durability suitable for terrestrial battlefields.

The feet widened significantly, calves reinforced with heavier plating. Sharp, angular shoulders became squared and robust. The complex thrusters and boosters around the waist, essential in space, were replaced with armor reminiscent of a battle tank, optimized for ground-based stability and defense.

Behind, the six space-mode fins detached, replaced by a powerful booster unit equipped with a large, heavy-duty nozzle. While this configuration couldn't achieve prolonged flight, it provided sufficient thrust for rapid leaps and evasive maneuvers even under gravity.

Remarkably, the entire transformation was completed in mere seconds.

"G-Saviour Terrain Mode conversion complete," the computer announced calmly as the cockpit displays shifted seamlessly into terrestrial mode.

"Good!" Mark shouted, gripping the controls tightly as he launched G-Saviour back out from the Nimbus, ready for action.

The electric car sped away from Gaea Tower toward the docks, carrying Garneaux, Mimi, and their escort of Congressional soldiers.

"Look over there!" one of the soldiers shouted suddenly from his post at the rear.

All eyes swiftly followed his pointed finger. Across the gently curving landscape of the cylindrical settlement, a gleaming white mobile suit leaped toward the vertical surface of the inner colony wall.

"Is that one of Gaea's suits?" The soldiers squinted suspiciously at the unfamiliar machine.

But Mimi knew instantly what it was.

The G-Saviour... Mark...

Mark had come back to defend Gaea. Her heart clenched sharply, overwhelmed with longing, choking her so deeply she nearly called his name aloud. Yet she forced herself to swallow the cry back down.

She would never see him again. No, she could not ever see him again. She had betrayed everything he believed in. Mimi knew with painful clarity that no matter how deeply she loved him, he would never love her again.

Her heart called desperately for him, over and over. Yet she refused to cling helplessly to a man who could no longer love her. To do so would destroy the last fragile scrap of pride she had left.

As she stepped onto the elevator platform at the docks, Mimi glanced backward just once.

From among the lush, green trees, a brilliant flash erupted, followed shortly by a distant, heavy explosion. Even without seeing clearly, Mimi knew exactly what had happened.

Mark had defeated the Bugu.

She smiled quietly to herself.

Of course he won. Mark is strong. He's always been strong, because he's a hero.

Even without her, he had always been destined to be a hero.

Yes... she thought, warmth and sorrow mingling in her chest, Mark Curran is the hero I loved with all my heart.

With a faint, bittersweet smile, Mimi turned resolutely away from the direction of the man she would always love most.

Stunned by the sudden appearance of an unfamiliar mobile suit, Sig, the Bugu pilot, froze in disbelief.

"Wh-what the hell is this thing?!"

"Is this really... the G-Saviour?!" Bud gasped.

"G-Saviour...!" Sig growled through clenched teeth, eyes wide with disbelief as he swiftly raised his rifle.

But before Sig could squeeze the trigger, the G-Saviour charged forward, slamming directly into his chest.

"Uwaaaah!!!"

Thrown off balance, Sig's Bugu crashed heavily backward, smashing into the warehouse behind him.

"You think I'd let you fire that rifle inside the settlement?!" Mark roared defiantly.

"You bastard!" Bud shouted furiously, charging toward the G-Saviour, rifle aimed and ready. Just behind Mark stood Cynthia's precious greenhouse, a place she deeply treasured.

Mark's decision was instantaneous. Drawing the beam saber swiftly from the G-Saviour's shoulder, he slashed decisively through the charging Bugu's torso.

The Bugu split cleanly, upper body separating from the lower half and tumbling slowly downward.

"Ahhhhh!!!"

Helpless within his cockpit, Bud could only scream as his mobile suit fell apart around him.

"D-Damn it!"

Just as his Bugu managed to rise shakily and lift its rifle, its entire arm fell to the ground with a heavy, metallic crash, severed cleanly at the elbow.

"Wha?! Aaagh!"

Before Sig could comprehend the disaster, his cockpit violently lurched again. The G-Saviour's beam saber sliced cleanly through his Bugu's thigh, cutting straight through in a single swift stroke.



With an earth-shaking boom, the upper half of the crippled Bugu toppled helplessly onto the ground. Sig, thrown hard against his cockpit restraints, stared numbly at the monitors in front of him, each blinking the same urgent, hopeless message: MOBILITY LOST. FUNCTIONALITY COMPROMISED.

At the console reclaimed after the soldiers withdrew, Gaea Tower's monitoring staff erupted into jubilant cheers.

"We've been saved! Gaea's safe now!" someone shouted excitedly.

"We won!" another voice yelled triumphantly, prompting applause and even louder cheers from the group.

"Wait, there's still a shuttle from Gaea," an operator said sharply, eyes fixed on his monitor.

"It's the ones who were here earlier! They're escaping!"

"They won't get far," another staff member scoffed confidently. "The Illuminati suits outside will tear them apart in seconds."

But the operator shook his head grimly. "No, that's exactly why they're doing this, they're using a Gaea shuttle."

"What?!" The group crowded urgently around the monitor.

True to the operator's fears, Garneaux had boarded a Gaea shuttle instead of the small landing craft he'd arrived in.

Garneaux smirked with satisfaction.

"They wouldn't dare attack a civilian shuttle so easily," he muttered, securing his seatbelt. "Maintain complete radio silence. Once we're clear of the combat zone, signal our mothership immediately. The MW units remaining there will escort us safely."

"Understood, sir." The pilot nodded, activating the engines. With a slight tremor, the shuttle began smoothly gliding out from the settlement dock.

Mimi sat silently in a seat opposite Garneaux, across the narrow aisle. She had no idea what awaited her now. But one thing felt certain, the happiness and fulfillment she'd experienced during those days with Mark would never again be hers.

"Where's the sample?" Garneaux snapped suddenly.

Mimi cast him a cold glance, then calmly held out the bag she'd snatched from Kobi. Garneaux snatched it from her, smiling greedily. But his face drained of color as he searched the bag's contents.

"Where is it?! Where's the damn sample?!"

Mimi laughed softly, amused by his panicked expression.

"Did you honestly think I'd give something that precious to a delusional old fool like you? But I suppose that makes me even more foolish for falling for your absurd delusions."

"Wh... What did you say?!" Garneaux sputtered, trembling with rage as his face flushed crimson. "You insolent vixen!"

"If I'm a vixen," Mimi retorted coolly, unflinching beneath his fury, "then you're something far worse. You're nothing more than a disgusting parasite, the worst vermin infesting the Earth!"

Roaring with anger, Garneaux hurled the empty bag at the shuttle's bulkhead. It rebounded sharply, narrowly missing Mimi's face, yet she remained perfectly composed.

Garneaux turned violently, shouting toward the cockpit just beyond the partition.

"Turn this shuttle around immediately! Return to Gaea!"

"Y-Yes, sir," the pilot responded shakily, but his voice quickly tightened with dread. "General, MWs! MW-Rais are approaching."

"What are you babbling about?!" Garneaux snapped irritably.

"They've identified us as a hostile target!"

"That's impossible!" Garneaux shouted, ripping open his seatbelt and leaping toward the cockpit partition. "This is a civilian shuttle!"

"I know, sir! But the MW targeting system is locking onto all unidentified vessels, it sees us as enemies!"

"What is the meaning of this?!" Garneaux roared, vaulting desperately into the cockpit, staring in horror at the rapidly approaching MW units displayed on the monitors.

From behind, Mimi's laughter rang out suddenly, clear and mocking.

"Hahaha, ahahaha!"

Garneaux whipped around to glare furiously at her. But Mimi met his gaze unflinchingly, smiling with genuine delight.

"It's the perfect end for fools like us! You reap what you sow. Killed by your own mindless killing machines, fitting, isn't it? It feels wonderful!"

Her eyes sparkled cruelly, and for a brief moment, her arrogant gaze bore a striking resemblance to Jack's.

The surviving MW units, faithfully obeying Jack's earlier command, had expanded their targeting parameters to include all craft leaving Gaea airspace. Jack could never have imagined Garneaux would attempt to flee aboard a Gaea shuttle.

Two MWs locked their rifles precisely onto the shuttle, aiming directly at the cockpit and fuel tanks, the surest way to destroy their target in a single strike.

"General!" the pilot screamed in terror.

Garneaux's face twisted in desperate fear.

"Stop! Cease fire! I'm your commander, I'm a friendly unit!"

But the MW units followed their orders mechanically, emotionlessly. The identity of their target, whether friend or foe, was irrelevant. They merely executed the instructions given.

The MWs fired simultaneously, brilliant beams streaking toward the shuttle, leaving trails of stardust glittering in their wake. Their shots pierced straight through the cockpit and fuel tanks.

An instantaneous flash illuminated the shuttle's interior, revealing each passenger's terrified face. Only Mimi sat calmly, a serene smile upon her lips.

It was a smile Mark had never seen, an expression of pure, radiant beauty, like a goddess finally freed from regret.

Chapter.05

A New Garden

"The alert has been lifted. Gaea has returned to normal operations."

The announcement echoed repeatedly throughout the Settlement as evacuees began filtering back into their homes. Freedom pilots, who had survived by the skin of their teeth, stepped down from cockpits into the joyful embrace of waiting families.

Yet, for some, there would be no such reunion. Behind each joyous embrace lurked quiet tears of sorrow for those who would never return.

Dieter, having heard about Kobi's injury, rushed anxiously toward the control room. He nearly stumbled into Cynthia, who was standing quietly at the corner of the hallway.

"Cynthia! I heard Kobi's hurt!"

As she turned, Dieter froze momentarily, seeing the faint trails of tears on Cynthia's face. However, she quickly offered him a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry. She took a round in the shoulder, but the bullet went straight through without hitting any arteries or veins. She'll recover quickly."

"Thank goodness..." Dieter exhaled deeply, a relieved, slightly embarrassed smile forming. "I... owe Mark an apology."

"Mark?" Cynthia looked puzzled.

"Yeah," Dieter admitted honestly. "I shot my mouth off without knowing anything. It's embarrassing."

Cynthia gently smiled and placed her hand on his shoulder. "It's alright. Mark knows exactly what you've learned from all this."

"Cynthia..." Dieter's expression brightened into his characteristic grin, before he tilted his head curiously. "But... why were you crying?"

"Hm? Oh... that." Cynthia's eyes softened as she smiled gently. "It was because I was happy."

From the jacket she was holding, Cynthia carefully withdrew the sample in its case.

"Happy?" Dieter looked even more puzzled.

She nodded slowly.

"Yes. Very happy."

She hadn't known it at the time, but when Mimi had come close at the end, she had slipped the sample, quietly, deftly, back into the coat pocket Cynthia had draped over Kobi's shoulders. Only when the medics carried her away had Cynthia discovered it.

Reflecting upon that moment, Cynthia now understood the truth. She had said terrible things to Mimi, not knowing her true intentions. Mimi's final words had indeed come from the heart. Cynthia saw clearly now, Mimi was genuinely wonderful. Of course she was. After all, Mark had loved her. She couldn't possibly have been a bad person.

"If I ever meet her again," Cynthia resolved, "I'll apologize from the heart, and if I can, I'd like us to be friends."

The thought glowed inside her.

Seeing Dieter's baffled expression, she chuckled and gave him a gentle push.

"Kobi's at the Tower's medical center. You should hurry and see her."

A flush crept up Dieter's fair cheeks as he nodded and hurried off down the corridor.

The brief conflict that raged for a single day was later dubbed "the Light of Gaea Incident."

It was never entered into the record books as a formal war, officially dismissed as an unfortunate event born of mutual misunderstanding.

Nonetheless, the unjust invasion by the Congressional Forces against Gaea was deemed worthy of judicial scrutiny. Consequently, Governor General Garneaux, though absent, faced trial in his stead.

At the same time, eager to stave off further backlash, CONSENT moved swiftly. Only ten days after the incident it formally recognized Side Gaea as an autonomous colony, certifying it as the eighth Side, Side Eight, and acknowledging its independence.

Under the watchful eyes of every Side, former Councilor Graves, now serving as President, stood before a massive gathering in the square in front of Gaea's symbolic "Gaea Biotechnology Research Institute," known affectionately as the Oasis, to deliver the declaration of independence.

"Citizens of Side Gaea, we have endured a difficult battle and finally arrived at this historic day. What has this battle taught us? Above all else, it has reinforced the preciousness of peace. We must dedicate ourselves to preserving peace, striving tirelessly to build a society where humanity never again takes up arms against itself. Let us create a community of mutual recognition, respect, and genuine equality, a society reflecting the beautiful ideals from our shared birthplace, Earth, where we live together as one family. We, the people of Gaea, shall always strive towards this ideal society, and it is with great pride that today we proclaim our true independence."

Applause and cheers erupted from the crowd as Graves slowly surveyed the faces of those gathered. Television stations from each Side, Earth, and even the Congressional Government had established simultaneous broadcasts to deliver this historic moment to humanity, making countless people witnesses.

In a bar in New Manhattan, Philippe and his companions watched intently. On the Rig, Dagget and Simmons observed quietly. On the CAF monitors, even the administrative officer Chanelly was a witness.

"Under this equality, we have achieved humanity's longstanding dream, the resolution of the food crisis. Side Gaea pledges to tirelessly work for the betterment of all humanity and our beloved Earth. This commitment honors the brave souls who risked and gave their lives to see this glorious day. We must never forget their sacrifices. May their honorable deaths become the foundation upon which a new humanity rises. Today, let us solemnly swear to

always remember that Gaea's independence was secured through their courage and sacrifice!"

People embraced, wept openly, applauded, and raised their voices in tribute to Graves' powerful address. Among those celebrating were Kobi, fully recovered, Dieter, and Mark, each joining in the chorus of joy and hope.

One week after Side Eight's declaration of independence, Mark had successfully re-established regular communication and travel routes to Earth.

The Rig had returned to normal and was now preparing for upcoming bioluminescence experiments. Yet Mimi's whereabouts remained unknown. Mark knew she had left Gaea Tower alongside the Congressional Forces, but beyond that, her trail had vanished completely.

From Cynthia, Mark learned the truth, that Mimi had secretly returned the sample and expressed regret for misunderstanding him. Mark felt deeply touched. Despite their differences, Mimi was undeniably remarkable; they had merely envisioned different futures.

He yearned to find her, even if only to say a single word: "Thanks."

There was much still unresolved, and Mark decided returning to Earth was necessary to settle these lingering matters. He packed his things and went to visit Cynthia's lab.

Since the conflict ended, he'd seen Cynthia almost daily. They still had much to learn about each other, careers, families, childhood memories, there was endless conversation. Yet, beneath it lingered a subtle awkwardness. Mark's presence in Gaea felt temporary, suspended between two worlds, leaving everything uncertain.

The lush greenery around Cynthia's lab thrived undisturbed, safeguarded by Mark's determined defense against the Bugu attack. The lab stood amidst flowers, like a hidden sanctuary. Cynthia peered intently into her microscope.

"Cynthia..." Mark called softly.

She turned slowly, sensing immediately the intent behind his words. Her expression was different, heavier.

"I need to talk to you..." he hesitated, struggling to find words.

With surprising calm, she responded, "You're leaving, aren't you?"

"Yes," Mark admitted quietly.

She lifted her gaze thoughtfully.

"My father told me. You declined asylum here on Gaea. I suppose Earth calls you back, doesn't it? Friends waiting, work unfinished, and it's your home, after all."

"If you have something to say, please, just say it," Mark sighed, seating himself on the brick border of the flowerbed.

Cynthia slowly turned to face him, her eyes shimmering softly.

"My father truly appreciates you. Half of that speech was gratitude toward you."

Mark managed a wry smile.

"I'm grateful for that. But I must return to Earth to stand trial. The false charges against me remain. I refuse to live with the suspicion of being a murderer hanging over me."

"Here, no one sees you as anything but a hero," Cynthia interjected. "Nobody believes you guilty."

Mark's expression hardened slightly.

"Please, just stop. That makes me sound like a real criminal. I need to prove my innocence. If I can't, none of this matters."

Realizing her mistake, Cynthia quickly murmured, "I'm sorry..."

"Please understand," Mark said, rising and turning his back slowly.

"But remember," Cynthia called after him, her voice trembling, "Gaea will never forget you, our white guardian. We'll always welcome you, we'll wait for you!"

He could hear the ache behind her words, begging silently for him to stay, mirroring his own heart's reluctance to part. Despite humanity's advancement into space, the distance between people remained vast and unchanged. Earth and Gaea were separated by an unforgiving vacuum, each orbit an obstacle, making their connection increasingly fragile.

Yet, suddenly, clarity dawned on Mark. Earth was their common mother, so why remain fixated on separate territories? The solution was astonishingly simple.

He turned sharply. Cynthia stood there, eyes filled with tears. Seeing her face, Mark couldn't hold back any longer.

"Then let me suggest something," he began.

"What?" Cynthia blinked, startled.

"You could continue your research on Earth..."

Cynthia stared, her expression like a child unexpectedly gifted something precious.

"My work is in an underwater farm, after all," Mark continued gently.

"You're asking me to dive to the bottom of the ocean with you?" Cynthia's eyes softened.

"If that's what you want. But I'd rather you built a new garden there," Mark said warmly.

Her tears overflowed, accompanied by a radiant smile.

"That's a wonderful idea..."

"Isn't it?" Mark chuckled playfully, wrapping his arms tightly around her. Their warmth melted together amid the lush greenery.

Cynthia murmured into Mark's embrace, "But what will my father say when he hears I want to go to Earth...?"

Her voice brimmed with happiness despite her concerns.

Mark laughed lightly, pulling back slightly to look into her face. "If he objects, we'll just enlist Dieter and Kobi's help again and sneak back hidden in trash."

"Oh no!" Cynthia laughed. "I've had enough of that! If anything, let's hijack one of Gaea's shuttles!"

"That sounds perfect," Mark agreed, sweeping her up and kissing her tenderly.

Around them, soft air, gentle and welcoming as the Earth he loved, filled the verdant space where they stood, embracing a hopeful future.

Afterword

Hey, you there, yes, you!

Have you actually seen the original G-Saviour?

If you haven't, trust me, you really should.

Sure, it might sound odd coming from me, but while reading this book will certainly give you a good grasp of the G-Saviour story, words and visuals speak to us differently. They engage different parts of the brain. Even if the story is essentially the same, this novelization was crafted specifically to resonate through text.

What I'm subtly hinting at is that even if you've already watched G-Saviour, this novel offers you a fresh way to experience it.

I've already revealed how I ended up writing this novelization in the afterword of the first volume, so all that remains is expressing my gratitude. G-Saviour allowed me to meet countless amazing people.

I've gained numerous international friends I couldn't even have imagined a few years ago. I've met many Japanese individuals passionately working in the U.S. and Canada. Despite language barriers, we enjoyed each other's company immensely, staying at friends' homes, joining American-style weddings, and more.

In Canada, a lovely Chinese lady working in the hotel housekeeping learned of my mother's passing during my stay and kindly said to me, "From now on, I'll be your Canadian mom." Experiences like this taught me firsthand how trivial distinctions like borders, race, or language truly are. In the end, we're simply individuals.

That's why, even if we one day reach an era like G-Saviour's, as long as we understand this, we won't needlessly ruin our precious Earth with senseless ideological conflicts. This, to me, is the truth I've encountered through G-Saviour. If you've grasped this, I'm genuinely satisfied.

To all who've supported me along the way, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Mr. Syd Mead, never did I dream that someone I admired so deeply would treat me with such warmth. You were a true source of strength for all of us involved in G-Saviour.

Mieko Ichikawa, your overflowing energy and encouragement have continuously inspired me.

To Bob, Michelle, Fasid, Tesca, Roger, BG, Harumi, Taro, Mori, everyone at the Gardener Hotel, Fukuhime, UMaya, Poochi, Yohei, Shoko, Izumi, and so many others, alongside all the dedicated G-supporters nationwide: it was thanks to you all that G-Saviour came this far. You have my heartfelt gratitude.

Special thanks to K, who's always burdened by my requests, and my beloved KOH and S, truly, thank you.

May G-Saviour hold a special place for each and every one of you.

2000.12.22

(Wow, talk about lucky numbers lining up!)

Yoshie Kawahara

NEW AGE MOBILE SUIT
Mobile Suits of the Coming Era

Text by
Ann Kiju
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Mobile Suits for a New Age

A century and a half have passed since the birth of the mobile suit. This article aims to explore the anticipated future developments of mobile suit technology.

OLD DOG

Unlike the current models we see today, early mobile suits had significant operational and deployment restrictions. Primarily designed for zero-gravity environments, early units were severely limited in their mobility on planetary surfaces, relying largely on two-dimensional movement. Historical records show that initial mobile suits, despite their military applications, were incapable of true flight under Earth's gravity, managing only rocket-assisted jumps at best. Indeed, during past conflicts, numerous mobile suit units were helplessly annihilated by airborne attacks. To us, accustomed to fully flight-capable mobile suits, this seems almost bizarre.

Considering this history when looking at the Freedom, an older-generation mobile suit, one realizes it still holds significant value. Certainly, this model has aged considerably, over 30 years since its original prototype deployment, making its performance inevitably inferior to modern standards. Yet, like an old dog, it possesses unique qualities younger counterparts lack. So what are the merits of this old dog?

Foremost among these are its reliability and ease of maintenance, traits that newer models seldom achieve. The Freedom was continuously refined through extensive field use, benefiting directly from pilot and operator feedback. Additionally, its core design remains exceptionally adaptable. Despite aging propulsion and electronic systems, it readily accepts upgrades. Information from sources allegedly tied to the Illuminati indicates the renowned Saviour Team once developed a modified Freedom variant, known by the codename "F-Saviour." Details beyond this are scarce, yet its existence is credible.

Originally a military model, the Freedom rapidly spread due to civilian surplus sales and commercial production, finding myriad applications among civilians even today.

SINGLE-EYED SOLDIER

Weapons systems are typically designed to fulfill specific user (military operator) requirements. History is littered with cases where this logical sequence reversed, often yielding politically motivated yet practically useless equipment. Conversely, weapons developed free of political interference generally prove functional.

However, by the late era of the old Earth Federation, military dysfunction permeated weapons development. The Saviour Team was reportedly created as a special unit to navigate these suffocating conditions and produce genuinely

practical weaponry. Their major accomplishment is the current primary mobile suit of the Congressional Armed Forces: the Bugu.

The Bugu is an outstandingly engineered machine, unmatched in overall performance and maneuverability, though it employs no groundbreaking technology. Instead, the Saviour Team combined existing, proven components into a brilliantly balanced design, reducing logistical and maintenance burdens. Its main armament cleverly includes both high-powered but energy-consuming beam rifles and conventional solid-projectile machine guns. This pragmatic design philosophy made it beloved among frontline troops, solidifying its role as their trusted partner.

SUPERSONIC

Mobile suits are said to have emerged in response to scenarios where digitally networked armies could be disabled. Reviewing weapons history, the mobile suit is indeed peculiar, characterized by large, conspicuous bodies with minimal stealth capabilities. At least on land, electronically equipped armored fighting vehicles (AFVs) might seem superior. Yet mobile suits have consistently proven themselves indispensable frontline weapons. Why?

Mobile suits excel remarkably under ECM (Electronic Countermeasures) cover, demonstrating immense combat effectiveness. Their systems function independently; pilots use manipulator-based hand signals to communicate, allowing coordination even when conventional networks fail. This analog communication capability becomes even more advantageous in space combat. Mobile suits' larger frames accommodate vastly more powerful thrusters than fighter craft, enabling them to perform both complex maneuvers and high-speed engagements effortlessly.

The evolution of mobile suits mirrors an ongoing quest for speed. The MW Project's Rai similarly adopted booster units like the Bugu's, enhancing acceleration significantly.

HIGH MANEUVER COMBAT

What truly constitutes a mobile suits greatest strength? Is it heavy armor or devastating weaponry? While both are essential, neither is irreplaceable. The genuinely irreplaceable element is speed. Heavy armor has limits, and lower firepower can be compensated through coordination with allied units, but neither strategy works effectively without superior acceleration and agility. High speeds improve evasion capabilities, while exceptional maneuverability grants advantageous attack positions.

The Illuminati's mobile suit, the Illusion, confirmed during the Light of Gaea Incident, epitomizes this philosophy. Though specifics remain unclear, visual records indicate its specialized role in high speed maneuvering combat.

BLACK PROJECT

The Freedom demonstrates the potential for performance enhancements through tuning, while the Bugu underscores that overall balanced performance remains paramount for military mobile suits. Future mobile suit designs will undoubtedly gravitate between these two paradigms. Meanwhile, autonomous mobile suits like the Rai (referred to as MW) briefly showcased self-guided weapon effectiveness but ultimately succumbed to political agendas.

The MW Project originated under General Garneau, prioritizing absolute obedience over practical military requirements. As mentioned, ignoring frontline demands invariably yields ineffective weaponry. Following the Light of Gaea Incident, the military struggled with the Rai's lack of operational doctrine, eventually revising the project to manage the fallout.

CROSSROAD

Several months ago, an individual claiming affiliation with the Illuminati provided me with intel about the G-Saviour. This informant desired public disclosure, selecting me as the conduit. Regardless of the Illuminati's motivations, I will relay the intel as per their wishes.

The G-Saviour, though exceptionally high-performing, was explicitly noted as unsuitable for military use. As previously discussed, military units necessitate consistent overall performance rather than peak specializations. The G-Saviour stands diametrically opposed to this concept. Its modular components allow specialized space or terrestrial capabilities, initially attractive features, but maintaining such versatility demands an excessively sophisticated technical support infrastructure, reminiscent of the MW Project's complexity. Yet precisely due to this, the G-Saviour serves excellently as a testbed for emerging technologies. While unsuitable militarily, its high-risk, high-reward nature is ideal for technological innovation.

ADVANCED

The next generation of mobile suits will likely emphasize adaptability, allowing specialization based on operational demands. Illuminati mobile suits, despite their excellence, are ill-suited to the balanced performance requirements of military applications. However, their specialized capabilities remain appealing. A military mobile suit moderately incorporating these aspects will likely define the future.

Astute readers may have realized that the Bugu exemplifies this ideal. Continually refined, the Bugu promises sustained prominence into the foreseeable future.