

機動戦士ガンダム

小説

# 閃光のハサウェイ

〈下〉

新装版

# Hathaway

Mobile Suit GUNDAM

Yoshiyuki Tomino

Illustration by Haruhiko Mikimoto

ZeonicScanlations

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MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM

# HATHAWAY'S FLASH (VOL.3)







# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter.01</b>	Local Broadcast .....	006
<b>Chapter.02</b>	Camouflage Aggressive .....	015
<b>Chapter.03</b>	Different Place .....	021
<b>Chapter.04</b>	In the Morning.....	027
<b>Chapter.05</b>	Touch and Go .....	032
<b>Chapter.06</b>	Pinpoint Defense .....	037
<b>Chapter.07</b>	Get Ahead .....	045
<b>Chapter.08</b>	Under the Forest .....	050
<b>Chapter.09</b>	Again .....	057
<b>Chapter.10</b>	Be Defeated.....	062
<b>Chapter.11</b>	Willy Willy .....	071
<b>Chapter.12</b>	Before the Day.....	078
<b>Chapter.13</b>	Shooting .....	082
<b>Chapter.14</b>	After That.....	091
<b>Chapter.15</b>	Murrumbidgee.....	096

# Chapter 01

## Local Broadcast

Adelaide, tucked away in the southern reaches of the Australian continent, was one of the few cities untouched by global trends, maintaining the aura of a bygone era as if the white man's colonization had not disrupted its quiet existence.

Its streets, echoing British colonial charm, contrasted sharply with the sleek, smart buildings of the last Christocentric century end, creating an atmosphere of depth. For those weary of the artificial aesthetics of space colonies, it was a most fitting place to return to Earth.

Above all, the city's architecture, requiring minimal refurbishment, offered a pleasing sight to the eyes of the Earth Federation government's top brass. Hence, their peculiar attachment to this city.

For those indifferent to the details of the congress held here, unless they intervened in the form of Mafty, their attention might not be drawn to this location, which had become a sealed-off realm for the ministers.

On that particular day in Adelaide, all the ministers were able to attend the Central Cabinet meeting.

Despite certain risks, the Federation government had many ministerial candidates lined up, making it easy to fill any vacant posts.

As midday approached, final preparations for meetings led by heads of various departments took place, and the security of Adelaide, led by the Circe Unit, tightened further.

Captain Kenneth Sleg was flanked by staff officers dispatched from the headquarters, and he had been promoted to the rank of Commodore.

Such ranks of responsibility were a common device for the Federation government and military.

"The objective of the Adelaide Conference is for the Federation government itself to take command and carry out the Earth Cleansing Operation."

As General Chief of Staff of the Space Forces, General Medinum Guggenheim met Kenneth at the airport and immediately issued orders, leading him to the conference at the Festival Center.

Without even having time to catch his breath, Kenneth learned of the complete annihilation of the unit that had accompanied Gigi.

"Mafty, eh?"

Gigi's prediction was correct, and the result had tipped in favor of Mafty.

"Gigi Andalusia has been abducted by Mafty," reported Commander Stagg Mainzer, who had only impressions of Gigi from their time in Davao and was bitter about those left behind at Ayers Rock reporting about Gigi.

"I see. So the goddess of victory has sided with them..."

"The goddess?" Mainzer questioned Kenneth's peculiar phrasing.

"Yes. I just hope this doesn't dampen our pilots' spirits."

"Do you think that's possible?"

Listening to Mainzer's vague response, Kenneth realized how childishly romantic his wish to mythologize Gigi's existence had been. It was a sobering thought.

Yet, he didn't want to be evaluated so easily by others.

"I wanted to observe human fortunes a bit longer, Gigi..." he mused as he entered the integrated defense headquarters set up within the airport building. Unfortunately, Kenneth's longing for Gigi was far from over.

Furthermore, the mobile suit that had abducted Gigi was rumored to be a Gundam copy.

"I'd rather not believe Gigi had any connections with Mafty... but her sudden desire to visit Ayers Rock..."

With that thought, Kenneth could interpret that Gigi approached him to probe the Circe Unit's movements, much like Hathaway.

"Did she simply come to see me out of sheer delight...?"

If that was indeed the truth, allowing Gigi to get close would be a stain on Kenneth's record. It gnawed at him.

"But that's impossible..." he dismissed the thought, yet with a lingering sense of uncertainty.

From his office, he surveyed the lineup of Base Jabbers, the Kessaria BJ-K232s, and the mobile suits, the Gustav Karl FD-03s, all arranged in formation on the apron.

The planned number seemed to be in place, at least.

However, Kenneth had no time to indulge in personal sentiment.

"Um... Commodore?"

"Yes?"

Francine Baxter, his secretary past her prime, already knew about Kenneth's promotion, so she was not puzzled by the insignia on his uniform.

"I will replace your epaulets later, so please review this... It's the security shift schedule, orders and messages from General Staff Headquarters, and various other matters."

She spread a mountain of documents on the desk as if proudly showcasing her career, arranging them neatly for Kenneth's convenience.

"My apologies."

Kenneth handed his coat to the secretary and skimmed through the top document.

"So... the 13th Autonomous Fleet is coming."

Imagining the sight of Captain Bright Noa's fleet floating in the St. Vincent Bay facing Adelaide, Kenneth smirked.

But his smile was not about receiving reinforcements.

He had set a goal to annihilate all of Mafty before reinforcements arrived, so he laughed.

Kenneth had such determination.

He needed to quickly achieve military success, even considering the possibility of Gigi becoming a stain on his record.

"What about the barrier setup? How's that progressing?"

"Commander Mainzer should have reported that directly to you, shouldn't he?"

"Hmm...! Call him for me."

While still holding Kenneth's coat, Francine called for the Commander from the next room.

For a woman of her age, her movements were remarkably spry.

"Isn't it strange? Can't we see any movement from these Mafty dissidents yet?"

Even while scanning the documents, Kenneth hadn't forgotten to keep an eye on the reconnaissance unit's computer display.

Moreover, the large display behind his secretary showed charts of the area around Adelaide, and the movements of the reconnaissance unit were input in real-time.

The area within a 200-kilometer radius of Adelaide should have been combed through, but to the ten Kessarias, it seemed conspicuously sparse.

"Is it impossible to deploy aircraft from the European region now?"

Kenneth questioned the officers dispatched from the staff headquarters, who were huddled under the large display.

"It's impossible. The dissidents are not only in this area, and more importantly, we should have prepared for this much earlier..."

"That's ridiculous! I should have made a request in Davao."

"We didn't hear about that."

"Even if you don't listen to my orders, you should have arranged it considering your own safety!"

"Sir..."

The four officers just wore blank expressions on their faces like dolls.

"Huh, so you're saying that you haven't even heard that the wannabe Gundam that Mafty has is equipped with a Minovsky Craft system?"

"What? Really?"

"Absolutely. Isn't that right, Commander?"

Upon the arrival of Commander Mainzer and Lieutenant Minecche Kestalgino, Kenneth affirmed.

"Yes... we reported that to the staff headquarters along with the report of Penelope's defeat."

While presenting Kenneth with the barrier setup progress chart, the Commander responded to the dispatched officers.

The four officers began hurriedly making phone calls, clearly, a group accustomed to a comfortable life within their own faction.



"Unbelievable! Nothing was done by Kimberly, and they were a month late in calling me. And now this, Commander? What's this progress report? The barrier setup should have been completed by this morning, shouldn't it?"

"We took longer than expected to set up the power lines..."

Looking every bit the good man, Lieutenant Kestalgino tried his best to smooth things over.

"That's why I dispatched you here first, Commander! Let's test it before nightfall."

"Yes, sir!"

Whether it was the Commander or the officers in the background as Francine started stitching, they were of the same ilk. They couldn't get anything done.

Lane Aim and his officers, who served under the Penelope, found humor in the report of Gigi's failed rendezvous in Adelaide. They had always bristled at Gigi's and Kenneth's boisterous behavior, so they took a perverse pleasure in this outcome.

"Even if we were to take over the defense of Adelaide's on our own, it wouldn't just be Kenneth getting all the credit in front of the bigwigs at the central command!"

They had found their own path to promotion, independent of Kenneth, within this operation.

This perception quickly spread among the pilots of the Circe Unit, and there was no sign of the decline in morale Kenneth had feared.

However, that afternoon, an incident occurred that left them speechless. It was the broadcast of Mafty's declaration of war.

The only channel that was on air in Adelaide had an audio interference announcing it, and a significant number of people were able to watch the broadcast on a secondary channel.

The matter of Mafty's radio interference was conveyed to the chairman of the preliminary meeting. High-ranking bureaucrats witnessed it on the large display in the conference room.

Of course, most of the ministers also watched it in their individual lodgings and conference rooms.

"I am Mafty Navue Erin. Until today, the organization centered around me has been purging the ministers of the Federation government who have come to Earth. Each time, I have explained why we had to resort to actions akin to an assassination squad. The considerable public support we have received for this should be known to the members of the Federation government. Despite this, the Federation government, showing no signs of remorse, is even plotting to enact a law in Adelaide to further contaminate the Earth."

The young man speaking amidst the backlighting of the television camera would be unrecognizable as Hathaway to those unfamiliar with him.



However, Kenneth, who had been watching the broadcast at the integrated defense headquarters of the Adelaide airport, recognized him as Hathaway Noa.

"Trace the location of that radio transmission!"

Before Kenneth's order was even issued, a Kessaria and several mobile suits had taken off.

"Listen up! Even if you triangulate the source of the radio transmission, don't just blindly bomb it. Secure it as evidence. If there's an explosive device set up, defuse it!"

Kenneth did not forget to issue these orders to the unit heading to trace the source of the transmission.

"The formal cabinet meeting will begin tomorrow, and it will be agreed upon that any support will be provided to eliminate Mafty. However, this is only a matter of the Federation government's attention being directed at us, and I will not condemn it. Terrorism is never acceptable, regardless of the circumstances."

Kenneth felt that Hathaway, who spoke so calmly, had prepared himself for death.

But,

"Hey! Is what Mafty just said true?"

"Huh?"

Commander Mainzer, who had been watching the TV behind Kenneth, widened his eyes.

"Depends on how the meeting proceeds! Verify whether what Mafty said is true or not!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

The commander hurriedly picked up the receiver.

"We fight under the name of Mafty and alongside the  $\Xi$  Gundam against the Federation government to correct those who have drowned in corruption within the organization. We know this may not be an ideal battle, but according to the space immigration law, the Earth will never truly be purified unless everyone leaves for space. Currently, humanity can live equally in space. In Oenbelli, there were those who tried to illegally reside on Earth and organized an army, but is their forceful removal not the same as the methods of the old-century people who caused the extinction of countless species? The problem is that new discrimination arises, and only those who follow the Federation government are considered just, according to a one-sided intelligence."

"Commodore, it seems the agenda of the discussion Mafty spoke of was only finalized last night."

"So, there must be someone selling information to Mafty at the top of some agency."

Kenneth growled at the television.

"Shall we investigate?"

"Yes... Arrange a meeting with Director Yeoksan."



"Sir!"

The commander returned to the phone.

"How many of you are aware that this Adelaide conference aims to legalize the discriminatory mindset of the Federation government? Among the topics on the second day of the Adelaide conference, there's an agenda item for the revision of the Federation government's investigation rights regarding Earth preservation zones, which is nothing short of an atrocious law."

Hathaway's silhouette held up a piece of paper to the light behind him.

The faint light illuminated the silhouette's face, and Kenneth recognized without a doubt that it was Hathaway.

"Loosely translating this bureaucratic text from the added Article 23, if requested by a Federation government minister, landowners in the Australian continent will be required to provide their land at will. Of course, even those with proper residence permits can have their land taken away. The compensation is that they can claim an area of land in a space colony of the owner's choice equal to the land taken away."

"Is that true?"

Kenneth, taken aback, asked the secretary and officers from the General Staff who were watching the TV by the door.

"I'm not privy to such detailed content."

"That does sound like something a bureaucrat would come up with..."

"Why?"

"Hasn't there been talk of building a new continent in the Universal Century here for quite some time?"

One of the lieutenants explained.

"I didn't know that..."

As Kenneth turned his face to the TV, the commander's phone in front of him rang.

"Yes... Commodore, it's from the Kessaria that went out for reconnaissance."

"And?"

While watching Hathaway explain other bills to be decided at the Adelaide conference with another sheet of paper, Kenneth took the call from the reconnaissance team.

"Don't stop the broadcast! Let it continue!"

"Why!? The two trailers are unmanned. The signal from Mafty's broadcast hijack can be stopped immediately."

The voice of the excited pilot who had the spoils of war in front of him came through.

"Listen... We can learn something from this too. Even Mafty has suggestions that might make the Earth Federation a little better. Besides, that tape might reveal Mafty's next target, or a self-destruct mechanism could be activated once the broadcast ends. Be careful!"

"Y-yes, sir!"

"Instead of that, investigate where that trailer came in from."

"Understood...!"

Kenneth, although he could not hear everything Hathaway had said, still had a sense that he talked about quite a few things and felt somewhat irritated.

"If these measures pass in Adelaide, it will snuff out any hope of Earth's nature returning. Then, the purpose of humanity overcoming hardships and moving to the space colonies will be lost. Think about it. If a bill for tens of thousands of privileged classes who want to return to Earth is passed, it's simply that the number of people returning to Earth will increase tenfold. Remember once more, humanity, which rapidly increased only in the last century of the old century, inflicted near-fatal wounds to Earth itself. Moreover, currently, not even a century after the start of space colonization, Earth's seas are still contaminated with residual chemicals. Even the rain is still mixed with chemical substances. Not to mention, the lives of plants and small creatures are far from fully recovered... What does that mean? That's right. Humanity must not return to Earth yet. Yet, the Federation government is beginning preparations for humanity to return to Earth, and before that, they are trying to secure their vested interests. That is the true nature of the conference being held in Adelaide."

Hathaway's eloquence was entirely understood by Kenneth.

"If what you say is true, then you are right."

"So, I declare that we will carry out the purge of the ministers here unless the Central Cabinet abandons these bills. It is possible that after hearing this broadcast, those involved will flee Adelaide. However, after this, anyone trying to escape from the area around Adelaide will be indiscriminately targeted for purge. However, we don't intend to involve the general public, so anyone unrelated has two hours to evacuate from Adelaide. After that, any vehicle or person trying to leave Adelaide will be considered our target."

"An announced attack..."

The four officers of the General Staff Headquarters all groaned in unison while standing.

"Really... If we do this, the ministers will run away, and Mafty won't be able to do anything, right?"

Kenneth glanced over at the staff officers, standing stiff as rods, and chuckled.

"There's no sign of an attack, and anyway, what's the point of using long-range missiles on an empty Adelaide?"

"That's true, but..."

A hiss of static signaled the end of Mafty's broadcast.

"I don't know. Does Mafty have a plan with this?"

"Isn't Mafty aiming to delay the Cabinet meeting?"

"Isn't that naive?"

The lieutenant of the General Staff retorted to the lieutenant junior grade.

"Commodore, the chairman of the Central Assembly is on the line."

While switching the receiver, the secretary informed him.

"Mmm... This is Commodore Kenneth Sleg."

The call came directly from the chairman in the preparatory meeting room. He wanted Kenneth to come to the meeting room immediately and explain Adelate's defense system.

"Depending on your opinion, we may have to consider suspending the conference..."

"I understand, but I doubt Mafty has the force to purge the cabinet ministers after the broadcast, do they?"

"What they're trying to do isn't purging. It's assassination!"

"Ahh... My apologies."

"Of course, we have no intention of canceling the Central Assembly over this child's trick. It's a matter of the Federation government's prestige. However, there is a need to convince the relevant parties."

"As the military, we don't have the capacity to prevent the general public from fleeing, do we?"

"Well, we can't help it, but if we don't show panic, the citizens won't up and vanish, would they?"

"That's true."

"Even if it's a preparatory meeting, it's still an official place, so no slip-ups in your answers, got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Kenneth, donning his jacket with the new epaulets, headed towards the Festival Center.



# Chapter 02

## Camouflage Aggressive

Kenneth testified that the deployment of the reconnaissance unit would make a long-range missile or other attacks unlikely. He insisted that Mafty's broadcast was merely a tool of information warfare, aiming to justify their actions and sow confusion among them.

However, there were nervous ones among them, like Honore Ballestreri, the representative for the Outer Space Ministry of Defense.

"What about the precautions against a possible invasion of Adelaide from the northern mountains stretching to the east? Will the mobile suits fly in or will there be a missile attack from that direction?" he asked, somewhat frantically, even now.

"We are intensively watching east of Highway 32. The transmission of that radio wave is near Uraidla to the east, so we can assure there won't be any attack from that direction," Kenneth assured.

"But who can guarantee they won't invade from the same direction? The radio wave might be a diversion, no?" Ballestreri retorted.

"Well, to be perfectly prepared for all possible issues is..." Kenneth trailed off, eventually losing his patience and deliberately making a faux pas to the representative.

"Commodore Sleg! In tomorrow's assembly, a motion will be adopted to arrest Mafty Navue Erin. Once that happens, it will be your responsibility to thoroughly eliminate the dissidents. You understand that, right?" The intensity of Representative Ballestreri's statement compelled the surrounding representatives to nod their heads solemnly, making Kenneth wish a missile would hit the place right then and there.

"Mr. Speaker? I have practical matters to attend to. May I be excused?" Kenneth found himself unable to come up with a more appropriate response.

"No, there's one last question. What about the barrier?" This came directly from the Speaker.

"It's being set up," Kenneth replied.

"When will it be ready?"

"Tonight or early tomorrow morning at the latest."

"So, we won't be able to respond to Mafty's recommendation then!" The representative seated to the left of the Speaker's view, Ballestreri, shouted

in frustration, a vein bulging on his forehead. He was seemingly oblivious to the contradiction in his own statement.

"Sir! I have an urgent duty to supervise the completion of that. Excuse me." Just as Kenneth was about to leave the second time, the Speaker was being whispered to by a clerk standing behind him.

"Wait a moment..."

Once the Speaker signaled Kenneth to wait, he announced, "Quiet, please! We just received new information..."

The Speaker's massive presence filled the room, and he ordered Kenneth, standing at the podium, to pick up the receiver from the secretary's desk.

"This is Kenneth?"

"Sir, it's Commander Mainzer. Sorry for the trouble at such a time."

"That's alright. What is it?"

"Sir, we observed an explosion that appears to be from a fusion engine about twenty-five kilometers inland from the Stonewall line. We're currently investigating, but it seems to be from a mobile suit not from our military."

"That's odd... It's not a military facility, is it?"

"Of course, it's nothing but the wilderness of the Sound Ridge, but there are also signs that Minovsky particles have been scattered in the surrounding airspace."

"It's not from a military mobile suit or even a Base Jabber?"

He pressed for confirmation.

"Of course."

"Are the specialized investigation staff on it?"

"They have just departed."

"Good... Can we consider this good news?"

"Probably. We have observed at least two large explosions, and it seems small explosions are continuing."

"Understood."

Kenneth ended the phone call, returned to the podium, and explained the situation.

"Based on speculation, it appears that an accident has occurred among one of Mafty's mobile suit units immediately after the broadcast. I believe this is a positive sign for us, and with that, I would like to excuse myself from this meeting."

Kenneth glanced at the Speaker, no longer feeling the need for restraint. The Speaker, feeling reassured that Mafty's attack wasn't imminent, allowed Kenneth to exit. By the time he had done so, Kenneth had already left the chamber.

Stone Wall was not an official place name, but it was commonly used as such. As the name suggested, it referred to a region where prominent stones continued in a wall-like formation amidst rocky, sandy terrain. It was located about 325 kilometers northwest of Adelaide.

"Is it Mafty?"

Upon Kenneth's exit from the chamber, a waiting officer from the Ministry of Justice inquired.

"If it's Mafty, the fact that this happened immediately after such a broadcast is interesting. However, the people in the assembly don't understand anything."

While Kenneth made sure not to give away any conjecture to the officer, he said to the man, who had the look of a stereotypical bureaucrat with rimless glasses.

"I can't help but sympathize, but the representatives are even more troublesome. We are babysitting them every day."

"That's what makes you a failure as a bureaucrat, doesn't it?"

"Maybe so. Even the article about Mafty's eradication, which will be approved tomorrow, is not yet finished. We are dealing with people whose moods change constantly..."

The rimless glasses man spoke these words with a completely serious expression, confident from his career as a model student.

"What's the matter?"

Kenneth felt irritated by the rimless glasses man who wouldn't leave him alone.

"Does your report mean that Mafty self-destructed?"

"Who knows?"

"That's not the case, right? We have to be afraid of missiles, but we also have to create articles."

"In that case, you should find Mafty."

"Huh?"

The rimless glasses man almost stopped in his tracks.

"Among the ministers, among the top bureaucrats, the one with the best mind and the shortest temper is the mastermind behind Mafty, Quack Salver."

"What does 'Quack Lawyer' mean?"

"It's an old term for a fraudster, and it's the codename for the mastermind behind Mafty. If you find that person, the Federation bureaucracy might get a little smarter, and you'll have plenty of time to create the articles."

"Well, that's an interesting suggestion."

Descending the stairs, the voice of the rimless glasses man remained calm.

This was a talent inherent to those who served the court - instinctively evading any subject that seemed to implicate oneself and retreating to ask another question. He too, did the same.

"What exactly is a 'barrier'?"

"It's military technology."

As Kenneth opened the limousine door himself, he cast a stern gaze at his rimless glasses, then took a seat in the back.

"You're having the Manhunter handle this in the suburbs of Adelaide, right?"

"No comment."

Closing the door with a decisive slam, Kenneth directed the limousine to depart.



It was a stark realization for Kenneth that the true threat of bureaucrats was the intelligent staff they kept. But at the same time, he also acknowledged that, after all, they were mere pawns in the hands of politicians.

They couldn't be an effective force.

To change the organization, an entity like Mafty, willing to play the fool from the outside, was necessary.

"It's infuriating that those ignorant of the real world get to make the laws..."

Kenneth had grown truly tired of the hereditary system of government ministers. Taking the riding whip he had left on the back seat, he struck it against his own palm.

"The Spacenoids choose candidates who will bring profit to their territory, leading to situations like this. They're not looking at the big picture..."

The hassles and dangers of the majority-rule system, the underpinning of absolute democratic politics, were laid bare in the current Federation government's system.

"Is Mafty going to be the one to change things?"

While he was uttering these words, the limousine arrived at the Adelaide airport.

And just after he entered his room in the General Security Headquarters, the next situation occurred.

"We've detected several unidentified aircraft off Spencer Gulf. They're from 306 Kessaria."

As the dispatched officers from the General Staff Headquarters inputted the discovery location into the large display, Kenneth thought, Oh?

"Aren't they moving too fast?"

"They seem to have self-destructed!"

An excited young officer was shouting from the monitor in the communication room.

"Why is that?" Kenneth asked.

"Well, sir... it's unclear whether they actually self-destructed, but there's a huge water spout. But the interference from Minovsky particles is strong here, so the reception is... please wait a moment."

Although no new situation arose afterward, a report arrived that a Gustav Karl launched from Adelaide had found numerous fragments of trailers and mobile suits at the explosion site of Stonewall.

"This establishes one conjecture."

"...!?"

Kenneth, without saying anything, waited for the next words of Commander Meinzar.

"Immediately after the broadcast, Mafty planned a full-scale attack on Adelaide. But during their preparations, an accident occurred within their mobile suit unit, and several suits escaped to sea. However, due to the aftermath of the explosion, the damaged mobile suits self-destructed about fifty kilometers off Kangaroo Island."

"Hmm... A good story, but why didn't they charge at Adelaide instead of Spencer Gulf? If they'd gone straight from Stonewall, they should've been picked up by the radar near Port Lincoln. There was no such report."

"I will investigate the distribution status of Minovsky particles."

"Do that."

As the commander was about to dart into the communication room, he turned back to Kenneth and asked,

"Are you suggesting that all these movements are a diversion by Mafty?"

"That's right. It's all too convenient."

Even during their time at Oenbelli, Mafty's mobile suits seemed to have invaded from the northwest. The similarity between that incident and the current one bothered Kenneth.

"Since Mafty is a hastily assembled unit, accidents are possible, but with this incident occurring right after the broadcast, it's either a far-fetched strategy or a real accident... Which is it?"

A far-fetched situation would have no middle ground, having either a right or left cause.

It was a conundrum.

"If they intended to disrupt the cabinet meeting and make a bloodbath of the ministers, they could do it with a missile attack from the east... but they're fixated on mobile suit warfare. They're aiming for the assassination of ministers only... In that case, is the intention to draw our eyes west for a mobile suit invasion from the east?"

However, that line of thinking seemed all too obvious.

Kenneth was in doubt, feeling that he had been outwitted by Hathaway for the first time.

"I thought that the unfolding situation after the events since the Haunzen and Oenbelli would have put some strain on him, leading him to abandon his previous assassination methods and hurry to gain some results..."

Thinking it over,

"It seems that's not the case... Is it mobile suit warfare, after all?"

Kenneth contemplated Hathaway since the Haunzen incident.

The mild and gentle young man being Mafty, considering his proficiency during the hijacking on the Haunzen, was to be expected. That proficiency couldn't be explained simply by past battle experience.

It was something done by a man in the midst of actual combat or by someone extremely proficient in martial arts.

Furthermore, considering the timing of the descent of the new type mobile suits to Earth, it made sense that Hathaway had used the Haunzen to his advantage.

"And then there's Gigi..."

In conversations with her, there were parts of Hathaway's actions that hadn't quite made sense to him that he could recall.

"He really stepped up."

Kenneth secretly felt a sense of joy, realizing that the smooth young man had come forward with considerable resolve to oppose them.

Having friends who excelled only made them more valuable treasures to boast about.

Kenneth was beginning to harbor such complex feelings toward Hathaway.

And the difference in their real-life positions was leading them to pit their wits against each other. This stimulated the romantic side of Kenneth, making him feel that the time had come for him to shine as a man.

This must be what it felt like to regain one's youthful vigor.

"Concerning Quack Salver, it would be normal to suspect someone who fled Adelaide first or who was not in a place that could be bombed... But, no, that's not it either. They attacked the hotel where Hathaway was staying. It seems they're skilled in dummy operations..."

If so, the explosions at Stonewall and the flying objects off Kangaroo Island, all could be considered as camouflage.

From Lieutenant Lane Aim and his team, who had entered Stonewall, they had received reports of debris from several mobile suits.

"Has Mafty disappeared?"

The officers dispatched from the General Staff Headquarters tried to conclude as such.

What needed to be verified was whether the objects that exploded off Spencer Bay were dummies or not. But there was no Navy here, so they had to find scuba divers to conduct an investigation, which would be time-consuming.

"Yes... We must await the formal investigation report, but for now, we can confirm that something resembling mobile suits, not under our jurisdiction, has exploded."

Kenneth relayed this to the Speaker of the Central Assembly.

"Excellent. With this, the immediate crisis has been averted. The series of phenomena occurring an hour after the end of the broadcast can be confirmed as an explosion accident of Mafty's mobile suit unit. No, it's amusing."

The Speaker laughed as he said this.

"But, there's still the possibility that it's camouflage."

"Indeed. It's your job to uncover that and, if so, to defend against it."

"Understood."

"In any case, the cabinet meetings will continue tomorrow in Adelaide."

"Yes... Well..."

"Are you dissatisfied?"

"No, I wouldn't want to evacuate from this scenic Adelaide."

"Indeed. The unanimous opinion of all ministers is the same."

Kenneth managed to resist the urge to throw the phone, realizing he had fallen for Hathaway's scheme and lost track of when and from where he would strike next.

# Chapter 03

## Different Place

"Why are you in my way! Quess!" Hathaway's eyes beheld the scene of Quess Paraya, her innocent girl-like expression disintegrating before him. Even knowing this was but a dream, it was terrifying.

"Weren't you supposed to come with me?"

Her lips remained still, voice unheard, yet her message was clear. The words, unspoken, surged towards him like silent storm waves.

"Quess, you demanded too much... and then, you ran away from me, didn't you? You don't have such a right, Quess!"

"Hahahaha, you're jealous, Hathaway!" Quess taunted, face shifting and distorting like an image reflected in turbulent waters. "Your error caused my death! How cruel of you! Had you meant to end my life, I could've accepted that. But to die by accident... it's insufferable! Come on, Hathaway!"

Her voice echoed deep and loud, compelling Hathaway to cover his ears, but his hands were as absent as if they'd never existed.

"You're the vilest murderer, Hathaway!" Every single word gouged out his heart, flaying him down to the bone. The desolation of perceiving the "nothingness" resulting from this disintegration.

"The sad remnant of the woman who loved Char Aznable dares to judge me!"

That scream of Hathaway originated from where he might have existed until a moment ago—a place now devoid of any physical form—and Hathaway heard it.

"Where are my ears that are hearing my voice? Is this nothingness or void... There's no sadness... no loneliness... just nothingness..."

Even this realization began to fade.

An emptiness hung before his eyes, and before long, it cascaded towards a single point of warmth.

"So... warmth is the origin of existence..."

This realization was a joy. Comfort, too.

His eyes opened of their own accord, revealing hands that emerged from an unseen source. The warmth radiated from his wrists, filling him from the inside.

"It's okay... you're okay..."

Hathaway shrank away from the warmth as he couldn't imagine what was producing it. Feeling more heat on his wrists, he looked at his hands.

A woman's hand was entwined there.

"Hathaway... are you okay?" Beyond his hand, Gigi Andalusia's face appeared.

"Gigi..."

"You were having a nightmare..."

"Oh..."

Feeling Gigi's hand opening the zipper of the sleeping bag at the collar, Hathaway stretched his neck. Sweat was cooling the collar of his shirt.

"Well? Want to take some medicine?"

"What do you suggest?"

"A sedative, maybe... or, there are some cold meds..."

As Gigi sat up, Hathaway noticed the tent behind her fluttering violently.

"Because of the sound of this wind..."

They were two people using a four-person tent. It was meant for mountaineering and didn't have ample space.

With the light of the flashlight in Gigi's hand, she took out medicine and water from the first aid kit and handed them to Hathaway.

"Thanks."

"Hmph."

Gigi's disheveled blonde hair shimmered and sparkled in the light placed by her hip, amplifying the brightness.

The medicine and mineral water tasted incredibly bad in his mouth.

"You're pressing yourself too hard for one so young..." Gigi observed, an undercurrent of concern lacing her words.

"..."

Suddenly being told that Hathaway understand what Gigi was trying to say. But he didn't argue.

"There are various ways to live your life, don't you think?" Gigi handed him a towel, her gaze locked onto his wearied eyes. "A car, once set in motion, deserves to reach its destination."

He mopped the sheen of sweat from his neck and chest with the towel. That alone seemed to make him feel a lot more relaxed.

"I don't intend to... But am I getting in your way?" Gigi asked, seemingly unable to fully grasp the weight of the towel now soaked with Hathaway's sweat and warmth.

"It's fine. If I'm suspected of being a spy, someone has to keep an eye on me. I'm grateful to your comrades who have allowed this arrangement."

"That's true..."

Hathaway agreed, settling back down into his sleeping bag.

"It's strange... Everyone in Mafty is so kind, even though they're terrorists."

Gigi observed Hathaway from a distance, her figure only faintly illuminated by the flashlight's glow.

"Is that what society says?"

"Society is on Mafty's side. But they don't appreciate terrorism."

"There's a pistol there, you know," Hathaway pointed to an aluminum case where the flashlight was placed.

"Hard pass!" Gigi flipped off the flashlight, her rustling movements signaling her retreat into her sleeping bag.

A glance at his glowing watch dial told Hathaway he had but two more hours of sleep.

He began, "I've met people called Newtype in the past. Regardless of their age, they were immersed in adult society, but success eluded them. And I don't have the talent of a Newtype... This is my only way to combat the Earth-centric system's poison and force humanity to acknowledge the crux of the problem," His voice trailed off, tinged with a hint of melancholy.

"All your actions have resulted in is bloodshed," Gigi's whispered response brushed against Hathaway's cheek, a sudden annoyance flaring within him.

"You're painfully narrow-minded for someone so insightful."

"Is it wrong to...to find myself drawn to you, Hathaway?"

"Thank you... But not everyone excels at love. That's our world. That's why we must resort to such measures..."

Her soft sigh skimmed his cheek again, the meaning clear to him. Fortunately, the swaying of the tent spared him from reacting to Gigi's subtle cues.

"You're the one being narrow-minded... I hoped for your luck to shift when I was assigned to accompany Captain Kenneth to Ayers Rock."

While not the entire truth, it held a certain truth for Gigi in that moment.

"That just demonstrates your personal sentimentality, Gigi. Aboard the Haunzen, you maintained neutrality. Neither for Kenneth nor me. That's the perspective you need to adopt to comprehend Mafty's actions."

"Personally, that's both challenging and tedious," Gigi huffed and turned away.

"During the so-called age of modern individualism, human consumerism soared, leading Earth towards her demise... As long as we continue endorsing individual freedoms, we risk exhausting Earth, even with the existence of space colonies."

"So you dispute even the modicum of tranquillity afforded by familial bonds?"

"We've entered an epoch where our survival is contingent upon collective action. You need to remember that..."

"Liberalization of all humans culminating in a harmonious collective... It sounds reminiscent of a Newtype utopia."

"Exactly."

"Then sex would become irrelevant."

"Would it? I've always thought of the act as a pathway to attaining clarity..."

"Are you kidding?"

"No, I'm not. I believe that even orgasms allow us to recognize something beyond the act... Otherwise, it's embarrassing for intelligent humans to have sex."

"That's an ideal. The dichotomy between intellect and primal instincts makes us human, and the diversity in sexual--"



"Sex fuels desire. To view sex as a part of desire is human."

"I try to understand, but..." Gigi's movements betrayed her change of position towards Hathaway. "You're embarking on this path to escape from the memory of Quess Paraya, aren't you? That's just human, isn't it? Isn't it endearing?"

Hathaway's muttered sleep-talk of Quess seemed to testify to his weakness.

"The era of being that kind of human has ended," Hathaway said after a pause, his voice tinged with anger.

"That's too radical."

"Yes. But it's the harsh truth, Gigi. I'm using you to flee from the past."

"And isn't that quintessentially human? That's the Hathaway I admire."

"...That's what makes it so damn unbearable...!" The cave wind assaulted their tent, almost overbearingly so. Hathaway decided it was time to halt the linguistic dance.

"Also, about Quess... it's not like that... When I get close to you, Hathaway, I feel danger. You're using your past lover as a shield. But that's because you have a sense of duty to Mafty."

Hathaway was in no mood to hear more explanations.

"Gigi... At dawn, vanish from my sight."

His words struck Gigi like a bolt through the darkness.

Gigi was taken aback; she never pegged Hathaway as someone who would react so harshly. She held her breath, waited, and finally spoke, "Have faith. You hold the potential to be a Newtype..."

Hathaway remained silent.

Gigi's hand gently traced Hathaway's sleeping bag, met with no reaction.

"If I could see through people like a god, I could predict their path... I sold my body because I couldn't do that!"

he wanted to shout those words, but her current predicament offered no convincing arguments to Hathaway.

"So I should vanish, huh..." Hathaway seemed to have forgotten his role in her induction into Mafty.

But that was indeed what he desired.

How long had she been listening to the wind and the rustle of the tent? Gigi sat up and unzipped her sleeping bag. The biting chill in the air left her no choice but to keep her Mafty-issued windbreaker on. She clutched the single bag she had brought from her Hong Kong apartment and truly exited the tent.

The towering silhouette of the Xi Gundam loomed beside her. Further off near the cave's entrance, a lone Base Jabber Galcezon perched.

The two mechanics' tents, hidden underneath, trembled in the strong wind. The dark ocean beyond was rippling with white crests.

Due to the Gundam's large size, it alone could be sheltered in this narrow cave. There were twelve scattered Messer Me-2R units and nine Galcezon units, each concealed in similar-sized caves, lying dormant in anticipation of a full-scale attack.

When Kenneth and his team learned about the machine incident, they detonated the Galcezons and Messers one by one. But by this morning, Mafty had managed to prepare this many machines. Gigi carefully picked her way over the wind-swept rocky terrain, slowly moving eastward.

"Who goes there!" The voice of a sentry echoed, and a shadowy figure appeared before Gigi.

"I'm Gigi Andalusia. Hathaway has cast me out."

As she answered, Gigi felt a pang of envy at the Asian shadow's confident attitude.

"Really? You're not fleeing to betray us to the enemy?"

The sentry's question didn't unnerve Gigi. Despite being introduced by Hathaway as a collaborator, her credibility was only half-accepted by the group. Some even saw her as a potential traitor, just like the sentry did.

"I'll confirm with Hathaway. Betchie! Watch Gigi." The shadow called towards the cave next to the Gundam.

"Gigi, really!? Seriously? Chang!" Another shadow bounded over the rocks towards Gigi.

Looking up, Gigi noticed the sky above the coastline cliff starting to lighten. A lone hawk cut across the sky, swiftly carried away by the wind, disappearing beyond the cliff.

"I don't want to wake Hathaway!"

"There's no helping it, is there?" Instead of Betchie, Chang Hei, who had rushed under the Gundam, snapped back.

"..."

A few meters ahead, the waves of the Indian Ocean crashed violently, occasionally sending a spray of water in their direction.

Gigi was overwhelmed by everything and felt an irrational urge to jump into the sea. But she realized that in her current state, she would be thrown back by the waves, gaining nothing but scratches.

"Why were you kicked out?" Betchie inquired.

"I'm troublesome and selfish. I admit it. With the way I behave, it's strange not to be suspected," Gigi said.

"But, since Hathaway brought you here, our operations have been going suspiciously well. Fabio and his crew, who transported the trailer for the radio hijacking, successfully escaped and headed for the next resupply point. Even the explosion at the Stonewall went smoothly, with the dummy mobile suits shot down."

"That's because you guys in the Oenbelli Army are strong," Gigi said, appreciating the young man who hadn't forgotten her presence.

"Well, we didn't have Athena during the Oenbelli operation."

"I'm no war goddess. It's Mafty who holds power." Gigi was taken aback that the young man had referenced Greek mythology and was about to speak of Hathaway's achievements.

"Hey! Betchie! Leave Gigi with Raymond," Chang Hei instructed, lithely darting over the rocks to stand before Gigi.

"You two had a petty squabble, didn't you? The operation will be over by the end of today. Until then, just stay put." Chang's words were laced with a light-hearted smile.

Gigi felt a wave of gratitude towards those who had joined Mafty later and didn't harbor resentment towards her.

"Maybe it's because they're not aware of Hathaway and Keria..." Gigi mused as she trailed Chang and Betchie toward the cave housing the Galcezon.

"Hathaway, huh? Hmm..." Emeralda Zubin, who was with Raymond, looked down at Gigi with a mix of disdain and disinterest, "Well, let Hathaway enjoy a peaceful morning at least."

"I apologize. It was a misunderstanding..." Gigi was at a loss for words.

"Damn it...! Why didn't you just leave him be? What will you do if our luck runs dry?"

"Again, I apologize..." Gigi found herself drawn to this forthright woman.

"Gigi! You wouldn't like to be with Kimberly and the others, would you?" Raymond Cain, who had slowly emerged from the tent, asked Gigi, trying to provoke her.

"So, what, I'm a prisoner?"

"C'mon, the bridge of the Galcezon is warmer."

"Uh...?!" Gigi was too caught off guard to register why Raymond and Emeralda were sharing an outdoor tent.

The clouds moved swiftly, revealing a gap.

The sunlight broke through in several lines, piercing the surface of the sea.

# Chapter 04

## In the Morning

The antiquated freeways still bristled with telephone lines, vestiges of human habitation on this continent, tolerated by the Federation government. Now, these lines served as a critical communication link for Mafty.

Ring... ring... ring...

The phone booth, a relic on the freeway, rang out four times before falling silent at seven in the morning. The box's door, propped open by a young man puffing on his cigarette, stirred slightly as the ringing ceased. Casually, he scanned the freeway before sauntering towards his off-road bike.

Pulling back his windbreaker hood, he listened to the ambient noise, only then kickstarting the gasoline engine. In this era dominated by electric vehicles, this engine had the power to threaten people's hearing, but for him, that sound seemed irreplaceable.

Vroom!

With a throaty growl, the bike hurtled through the landscape, stirring up bushes, zipping between jutting rocks on sandy grounds, and descending steep hills, tracing the crude road that was hewn out of a cliff, as if precariously close to plummeting into the sea. His bike reached the sea-sprayed edge.

"Four rings!" The scruffy young man's voice, enraged, boomed out, and from the cave shadows, men and women sprung into action.

"Alright!"

"Quack Salver confirmed that the cabinet meeting is on schedule!"

"Mafty! As planned, a full-scale attack!"

"Hathaway!"

They each dashed back into their respective caves to relay the information to their teams.

"Gawman! As planned!" Emeraldalda reported to Gawman Nobile and his team waiting in a cave a few kilometers away through a landline phone.

"Mafty." Emeraldalda caught sight of Hathaway following the last of the Xi Gundam crew, who came for breakfast and beckoned him.

"Don't tell me. I already know... Fabio's team has been deployed for Minovsky particle dispersal, right?"

"They already left long ago." To avoid any fuss from Emeraldalda about Gigi, Hathaway swiftly slipped in with the mechanic crew to grab a cup of soup.

They used one of the tents as a windbreak, sharing a simple breakfast and ingesting their vitamins and anxiolytics.

"To honor the souls of Captain Wedge and the crew of the Valiant, we must ensure the success of today's operation. Not only the Circe Unit but also the government officials of Adelaide don't expect us to attack, thanks to the diversionary operation yesterday. Those few who may suspect will have no clue about our line of assault. The success of this operation is inevitable. Our target for attack is only the white building in the central park of the city, the Festival Center. If we can attack within thirty minutes from the start of the meeting, our purging operation will be completely accomplished. My only concern is--"

Hathaway's speech was interrupted by a fit of coughing.

"Are you okay?" Emerald's concern was palpable.

"Thanks... The uncertainty is the barrier, but we have received no information about it from Quack Salver. I hear a barrier has been set up along the outskirts, but its capabilities and whether it's fully operational remains unknown."

"It must be a beam barrier," Civet Anhern chimed in, voice filled with certainty. It was a logical deduction, but no barrier of such kind had ever been erected on land before, thus fueling their apprehensions.

"Yeah... Output and deployment status wasn't conveyed to the ministers, as usual with the Circe Unit," he lamented.

"Do we have any information beyond the deployment diagram we examined last night?" Raymond Cain and the other Galcezon Captains were most concerned about this, as they were tasked with the duty of retrieving the Messer after the attack.

"I'm afraid not. Apart from staying clear of the outskirts of Adelaide airspace, where Galcezon might face resistance, there's not much we can do."

"So, we march forward regardless?" It was the only comforting sentiment they could offer the anxious Galcezon pilots.

"Masam... I want you to reconfirm with Kaussaria, Gresshend, Hamilton, and Rayo on that point."

"Understood."

"Now, let's sync our time. Get me the phone!" At Hathaway's behest, Masam placed the wired telephone receiver in front of him, a connection to the squad members unable to attend the meeting.

"Time synchronization for Operation Adelaide, code A... All combat clocks, sync time!"

The procedure's manual nature served as a safeguard against potential radio disturbances while serving as a morale booster. They were united in purpose, an essential ritual transcending time. This marked the start of their choreographed operation. Depending on the situation, several stages of operational actions have been set. Zero hour for combat was eight in the morning. Thirty minutes later, each machine would launch.

"You sure about this?" Raymond asked, nodding at the 1 Galcezon in the cave's depths immediately after the synchronization.

"It's fine..."

"Depending on how this plays out, you'd release Kimberly Heyman, too, right? And what about Gigi? I heard she's been imprisoned as well. Is that okay?"

"If that's your understanding, proceed as such." Raymond, a man of simple ways, might interpret Hathaway's cold demeanor as harsh.

"As you say!"

Raymond clapped a hand on Hathaway's shoulder,

"I understand the resolve for this mission is deathly serious, but unlike the others, I don't consider Gigi suspicious. I don't think of her as a prisoner, you know?"

"Your sentiment is appreciated."

Raymond seemed nettled by Hathaway's formal retort. Before the situation could further escalate, Hathaway shrugged off Raymond's hand and turned away.

"What's gotten into you, Hatha?"

"I'm fine... really..."

Raymond could tell from Hathaway's slumped shoulders that he wanted to be left alone.

"Ray..."

Emeralda's voice reeled Raymond in, bringing him closer to her. He answered the invisible tug, placing his hand with a lover's familiarity on the curve of her waist.

"He's prepared to die, isn't he..."

"It's not that simple. Despite how he looks, Hathaway is strong. He's focused."

As he spoke, Emeralda teasingly nudged her hips against his.

"God, I want to believe that..."

"Mmm... don't worry. That's why Hathaway released Gigi. Hatha is duty-bound."

"I get that, Emer..." Raymond replied, his hands mirroring her earlier gesture by applying an equal amount of force to his own waist.

"This morning was good. Tonight, I'll show you again how much I love you."

"Hehe... If not, there's no point in living..."

The last part didn't quite come out in words. Emeralda's lips had pressed against his, her tongue intertwining with Raymond's in his mouth.

"..."

This moment, heavy with a mix of anguish and sweetness, seemed to symbolize the mission's dance with death. A poignant silence was disrupted by the harsh bark of orders.

"Alright, lovebirds! Gear up, we're moving out!"

The voice was unmistakably Iram Masam's.

"...!"



Neither of them said anything more. Their farewell was silent and swift, their lips parting, eyes breaking away from each other. Emeraldal, with a determined swing of her legs, ascended the ladder to the Galcezon. Raymond stepped into the ship's bridge, no longer seeking her with his gaze. Once on the Galcezon's deck, Emeraldal effortlessly clambered up her Messer's rope, slipping back into her familiar role as a mobile suit pilot.

"Miss Gigi," Raymond's voice was clear and firm, "Whatever was said, forgive him, okay?"

"About Hathaway?" Gigi Andalusia, huddled in the corner of Raymond's bridge, blinked in surprise at his words.

"Yeah, it's a mission that requires a lot of concentration. So, he probably didn't want any complicated conversations."

Raymond's forthrightness and insensitivity were his defining traits.

"Thank you. I've been... a strange source of worry," she confessed. "Once we engage, even though I'm a potential spy here, I won't cause any issues, right?"

Raymond's reply was firm, "That's why we aren't entertaining any notions of leaving you behind. You're our good luck charm. We can't afford to lose that."

"..."

Raymond, amid his checks for anomalies on the console panel with his crew, hoped his words wouldn't be misinterpreted by his colleagues.

"Besides, you should also experience the terror of combat. It's a good experience to have."

"Fair enough. I suppose I must face some form of punishment..." Gigi offered a small, resigned smile to Raymond, the good-natured, rugged man.

"Unit 1, taking off!"

"Copy that!"

With his co-pilot's acknowledgment, Raymond's voice filled the cabin, the roar of a proper captain ready for battle. Masam and the rest of the operation staff and mechanics who were waiting in front of the Galcezon confirmed the launch state with the machines in the left and right tunnels and reported back. Red flashlights were swung widely from left to right, signaling Raymond's machine to take off.

The mechanics remained with the Galcezon, prepping for the next rendezvous point. The hum of Raymond's engine reverberated through the frame. He picked up the microphone,

"To Captain Kimberly Heyman and the rest in the rear cabin! We are heading to Adelaide. Depending on the situation, we might release you nearby. However, if we're shot down before then... well, my apologies. Be ready."

The only machine carrying anything other than weapons and ammunition was Raymond's.

Gigi and Heyman, and the other four prisoners...

They, too, were still confined, seemingly on the verge of being crushed by spare missile warheads and bombs.

"Captain... Did Kenneth Sleg take any action to rescue us?"

His adjutant's words were the last grumble of discontent.

Kimberly Heyman, weary from lamenting their inability to return to space, merely dropped his gaze to the floor in the dim darkness, his breath hitching.

After Raymond finished speaking, the body of the Xi Gundam slowly drifted from right to left off the coast in front of them.

The launch had begun.

# Chapter 05

## Touch and Go

Emerging from a cavern facing Anxious Bay, six Galcezon machines ascend in a syncopated ballet, each trio carrying a pair of Messers, while two are individually loaded with weapons and ammunition for the second wave of assault.

At the vanguard of this mechanized phalanx, the Xi Gundam commanded a presence.

Adelaide is four hundred kilometers due east. A slightly circuitous route, it would take them a solid thirty minutes.

The inability of the Galcezon to reach supersonic speeds due to carrying mobile suits was their fatal flaw, a weakness expected to be offset by the dispersal of Minovsky particles by the Oenbelli ground crew along the projected flight path.

This morning, cryptic codes echoed over civilian telephone lines, cloaked conversations of Mafty's agents orchestrating the operation as unobtrusively as a call from a freeway telephone booth.

As Hathaway Noa approached the 4 Galcezon on his far left, the Gundam's manipulator made contact with its shoulder, establishing a direct line of communication with Gawman Nobile.

"Sorry for the trouble. I owe you one for the fresh Messer and a competent pilot."

"The supply from the Ceelack was seamless. We owe our thanks to those in the rear lines,"

"You've really driven the newbies hard, haven't you? The Galcezon formation is impressive."

Hathaway's praise hid a concern. Among the Galcezon convoy on his right was a rookie pilot. Aboard the same Galcezon were Fencer Mayne's Messer and another untested pilot about to enter the fray. Each detail was a potential stress point.

Yet, what was gnawing at Hathaway had Gawman curious. The visual feed from his cockpit projected the Gundam as a formidable figure, its pilot, however, seemed to be battling an internal war.

"You're not still hung up on Gigi, are you?"

"No way... that chapter's closed," Hathaway denied with an unexpected vigor.

"Planning to shun her?"

"Can't overlook her possible link to Kenneth. She's suspect."

"But wouldn't it be wise to apply some pressure before giving her the cold shoulder? Unless... you've fallen for her..."

Gawman's laughter, teasing and annoying in equal measure, was met with a stern "Gawman!"

"What's the fuss? Most of the crew already believe you're playing the distrusting part to cover your infatuation. That's even more amusing."

"Generous interpretation."

"No. You should cut her off once this operation concludes."

Hathaway fell into a contemplative silence, and it felt like the Gundam above swayed with his emotions.

"Move on! Concentrate on what you need to do with Gigi! The rest will fall into place."

"Copy that! Your team is heading inland, right, Gawman?"

"Affirmative."

With the communication line severed, and as the Gundam withdrew, light flooded into Gawman's cockpit.

"What's up?"

Kaussaria Geese of the Galcezon below asked.

"I'm surprised. Hathaway spent the night with Gigi and didn't make a move!"

"Hehehehe! He probably didn't want to waste his energy. That's so Hathaway."

"That's an interesting comment coming from a woman."

"Sorry."

Observing the Gundam escorting the three Galcezons in a straight line across the sea, Gawman left them with,

"Leave the ground support to me."

Gawman, the seasoned veteran, stood ready to lend a hand to the fledglings, remembering the help Hathaway had once extended to him. This reciprocal spirit was his *modus operandi*. Feeling the bonds of camaraderie tighten, Hathaway took the lead in the formation of their maritime trajectory.

Despite the operations consuming their last two days, a quick back-and-forth with Gawman now gave Hathaway a moment of comfort. "If I've got a girl like Gigi at my side and I don't make a move, am I the laughing stock?" It was a simplistic line of thought but resonated as raw truth.

"Should I... become intimate with Gigi?"

Hathaway tested Gawman's casual adult phraseology. It lacked any semblance of obscenity, making it feel all the more authentic.

"Kenneth... I'll make sure to win Gigi over, you hear me?"

This phrase became Hathaway's mantra on his approach to Adelaide, whispered into the airspace scattered with Minovsky particles.

Until now, the enemy at Ayers Rock was a known quantity. Charging into battle had been straightforward. But from the day before yesterday, when

the outline of Adelaide's defenses became clear, it seemed Kenneth was also wrestling with a formidable defensive line.

The presence of a barrier stirred an undercurrent of apprehension. Even if a beam barrier system was at play, it shouldn't be gargantuan. Its operational status would elude an amateur's scrutiny unless under testing.

Yet, Hathaway's unease wasn't rooted in such physicalities.

"I tried to be too righteous..."

He pushed the Gundam's throttle to full as the critical moment approached.

The video aired during the radio hijacking was filmed right after they arrived at Stonewall. Looking back, the operation might have been spurred by his inflated self-assurance. Gigi hadn't needed to point out that Mafty's actions were tantamount to terrorism. There was a yearning... to rationalize it somehow, to don a façade of righteousness.

Even if it wasn't raised as a query by Quack Salver, the worry was about whether it was a self-centered action that forgot its place.

However, the frontline staff was all on board with this advance notice. Everyone loathed assassinations, and if the tactics smelled of terrorism, even under a lofty cause, the warriors' instinct was to toe the line of justice as closely as possible. Hence, Hathaway had stood before the camera.

Gigi's reaction to this news was a cold smile. "Good, right? Will you do it?" she had asked.

Her nonchalance had rankled Hathaway, who sought some form of definitive assurance. She had no other option but to watch, as she wasn't part of Mafty.

His encounter had marked the commencement of the rift between them, culminating in the tense exchange that morning.

When Chang Hei, who had interrogated Gigi, said that it was risky to alienate her, Hathaway, considering the overall situation of Mafty, left it to Raymond as a problem to be put on hold.

However, Gawman's words now injected a renewed vigor in Hathaway.

"It was good to have Gigi around..." He echoed the sentiment, a spark of happiness flickering within him. The seascape blurred past at a dizzying speed, the formation of Galcezons dwindling in the distance.

"Everyone's a friend, aren't they?" Checking the flight's progress against the chart, Hathaway pushed the Gundam to greater speeds.

"Fabio! Be at the designated point on time!"

Whether Fabio Rivera had readied the second wave of unique Gundam missile ammunition in the mountains east of Adelaide was yet to be verified. But Fabio was a man of his word, so Hathaway dismissed his worry.

If the Circe Unit intercepted the phone, they would be able to estimate Mafty's forces deployed around Adelaide by comprehensively examining Mafty's communication and the distribution of Minovsky particles.

To mitigate such concerns, they staged distractions, anything to keep the Circe Unit on its toes.

They had done all they could do.

The Xi Gundam broke the sound barrier.

The regular cabinet meeting of the Central Assembly convened with all ministers in attendance. Yet, a tense air prevailed among the ground security forces under the direct command of the Circe Unit. Ten minutes later, the start of the meeting signaled their most taxing hour.

If there was a problem with air defense, it was that the barrier Kenneth Sleg had been fretting over was still not fully functional.

"An all-nighter!? Of course! Despite promises of overtime pay, they still can't even run a test!... By noon!? That's ridiculous! What if Mafty arrives by then? The explosion yesterday was a decoy!"

Commander Mainzer had not been not slacking off, yet his anger spilling over onto his desk in the form of a riding whip had little effect on the reality of the situation.

The news that Mafty's mobile suits seemed to have self-destructed caused a wave of demoralization to sweep through the force.

As Kenneth contemplated ending the phone call, the air defense forces reported a widespread scatter of Minovsky particles, and this was input into the display.

"Invading from all sides?"

The officers dispatched from the General Staff Headquarters blanched at the suggestion.

Casting a wide Minovsky particle net around Adelaide to obscure the direction of the invasion was a fundamental tactic. The officers promptly ordered the launch of the Kessaria, armed with mobile suits. The pilots scrambled to their machines.

"They're here!"

The shout from the air defense force's monitor made Kenneth realize his miscalculation.

"It's a new model...!"

The assumption that it would take about ten minutes post the Minovsky particle scatter for mobile suits to breach the airspace had been grossly miscalculated.

The Gundam, flying at a speed close to Mach 2, appeared over the York Peninsula, just 80 kilometers west of Adelaide Airport. It defied the common notion that a mobile suit in standard form could not exceed the speed of sound in the atmosphere, even with Minovsky Craft. Anti-aircraft missiles were launched in haste, but the homing feature malfunctioned and failed to create an adequate barrage.

"Raise the barrier!" Kenneth ordered, his eyes fixated on the approaching threat from the sea.

The Gundam, seemingly unbothered by atmospheric interference, soared into the range of Adelaide Airport. It decelerated abruptly, pounded all of its onboard missiles at the airport, re-accelerated, and zipped past.

"Gaah!"



The explosion's shockwave, a sonic boom, tore through the air.

"Ah! Get down!"

Kenneth saw a flash of missile fire and the shadow of the object that had caused it.

*Thud! Bagoom! Whadoom!*

The resulting shockwave and tremor forced everyone to the floor.

"Ahh!"

Secretary Francine Baxter's scream trailed off.

*Fwoom! Crack!*

With the blast pressure from the area where the Base Jabbers were standing by, the windows of the building shattered one after another, and the fragments flew over Kenneth and scattered in the back of the room.

*Choom!*

The large display gave off an eerie glow, then the transparent plastic plate cracked and disappeared.

The warehouse group that had been hit directly was the machine maintenance area, and the warehouse group storing support supplies for mobile suits sparked an instant conflagration. Secondary explosions followed as the ammunition missiles stored there detonated.

"Commodore!"

"Secure the communication lines! Prepare to move to the shelter!"

Chiding the frightened voices of the officers, Kenneth pulled himself upright, watching the destructive spectacle through the broken window.

Amid the explosions, Gustav Karls began to move, some taking direct hits and toppling over.

Next to that, a Kessaria was popping off missiles.

"Evacuate! There might be a nuclear fusion reactor explosion!"

Kenneth yanked his secretary with her butt sticking out from under the desk, almost not believing that the main engine of the mobile suit hadn't been directly hit.

"Did Hathaway go easy on us?" He couldn't help but wonder.

A secondary explosion erupted near the armory, the vibrations causing the building of Kenneth's integrated security headquarters to shudder.

Thankfully, the warheads of the missiles were not large.

Seeing his secretary to safety with the young officers, he tried to pick up several of the desk phones, but all were dead.

"Damn...!"

Kenneth was about to leave the room after slamming the receiver down, but he saw several Gustav Karls taking off from the ground to avoid the secondary explosions beyond the broken glass.

"What about the Penelope?"

The stench of oil and gunpowder began to permeate the room. Kenneth darted through the chaotic hallway, his mind filled with the image of the unlucky Penelope and Lane. No matter the success achieved here, the initial stroke of bad luck wouldn't easily fade.

# Chapter 06

## Pinpoint Defense

When Lieutenant Lane Aim activated the console panel to launch the Penelope, their hangar suffered a direct hit. The miscalculation stemmed from the fact that his suit, anticipating close-quarter combat, stood erect in its mobile suit form.

As the weapons depot succumbed to catastrophic detonations, the hulking unit lost balance and toppled over.

"Damn!"

The inert shock absorbers offered no mercy to Lane, who was flung with jarring force against the visual display, fracturing its crystalline surface.

In the absence of battlefield chaos, such an event vexed Lane, making him wonder if the Penelope was an unlucky piece of machinery.

Yet, the maneuverability the Penelope demonstrated when sinking the Valiant mirrored every motion they'd planned during the space tests.

"I won't let that Mafty do as he pleases!"

Despite lacking any personal encounter with the shadowy figure known as Hathaway, Lane found himself nursing a bitter resentment toward the young man.

"Talking all high and mighty."

That's just it.

A mere civilian, blissfully ignorant of the tribulations faced by military structures, a misguided youth warping the noble tenets of liberalism. Such was his assessment. The carefree demeanor the figure showcased added to the mounting irritation Lane felt.

The mere thought of being bested by the youthful pilot of a faux-Gundam was enough to trigger a resurgent wave of humiliation. Yet, the conventions of combat dictated that a pilot would seldom, if ever, voice such audacious declarations to an adversary, which allowed Lane a sliver of composure.

"If everyone lived as they pleased, the world would plunge into chaos."

While it would be appropriate to raise the issue of the excessive freedom exercised by the massive federal government organization, Lane, as a soldier, didn't entertain such thoughts.

A young man himself, moreover a mobile suit pilot, Lane found enough fulfillment merely carrying out his duties. His heightened abilities as a pilot left little room for him to view the concept of the organization as an enemy or let his thoughts wander too far.

Hence, his foes took human form, sometimes manifesting as Kenneth and Gigi.

With the manipulator still functional, Lane's first course of action was to right the suit's precarious tilt and fire up the main engine.

Despite Penelope's sturdy construction designed to withstand her own colossal weight, the mechanisms governing the transformation to flight form hinted at potential malfunctions.

No matter. With no immediate plan to switch forms, Lane dismissed it as the engine roared to life.

"Moving out!"

Lane's instinctive call to the deck crew echoed in the empty hangar.

BOOM!

The monstrous explosion from the besieged weapons depot closed in from behind, violently jolting the suit.

"Damn it!"

Boosting the output of the Minovsky Craft and main nozzle, Lane deployed the exhaust gases to dispel the billowing smoke enveloping the suit, widening his field of view.

WHAM!

The detonation of the right depot launched a cluster of missiles into the air; their flashes seemed to skewer his own suit.

VROOM! WHIRR!

The Penelope streaked along the runway, narrowly avoiding the airport structure, escaping the destructive reach of their own missiles' blast.

"Damn! There's turbulence?!"

Identifying the unpleasant shudder convulsing the cockpit as unrelated to flight, Lane compelled the Penelope to break free from the ground, hot on the tail of the leading Gustav Karl. The rest of the mobile suits dispatched earlier began scattering to their designated positions.

That was the combat procedure for Gustav Karl's jump flight.

"...!"

Although Lane's Penelope had taken flight later than planned, hardly a minute had elapsed since the airport bore the brunt of a direct assault.

Yet, the wannabe Gundam remained conspicuously absent.

"It's him! Why?!"

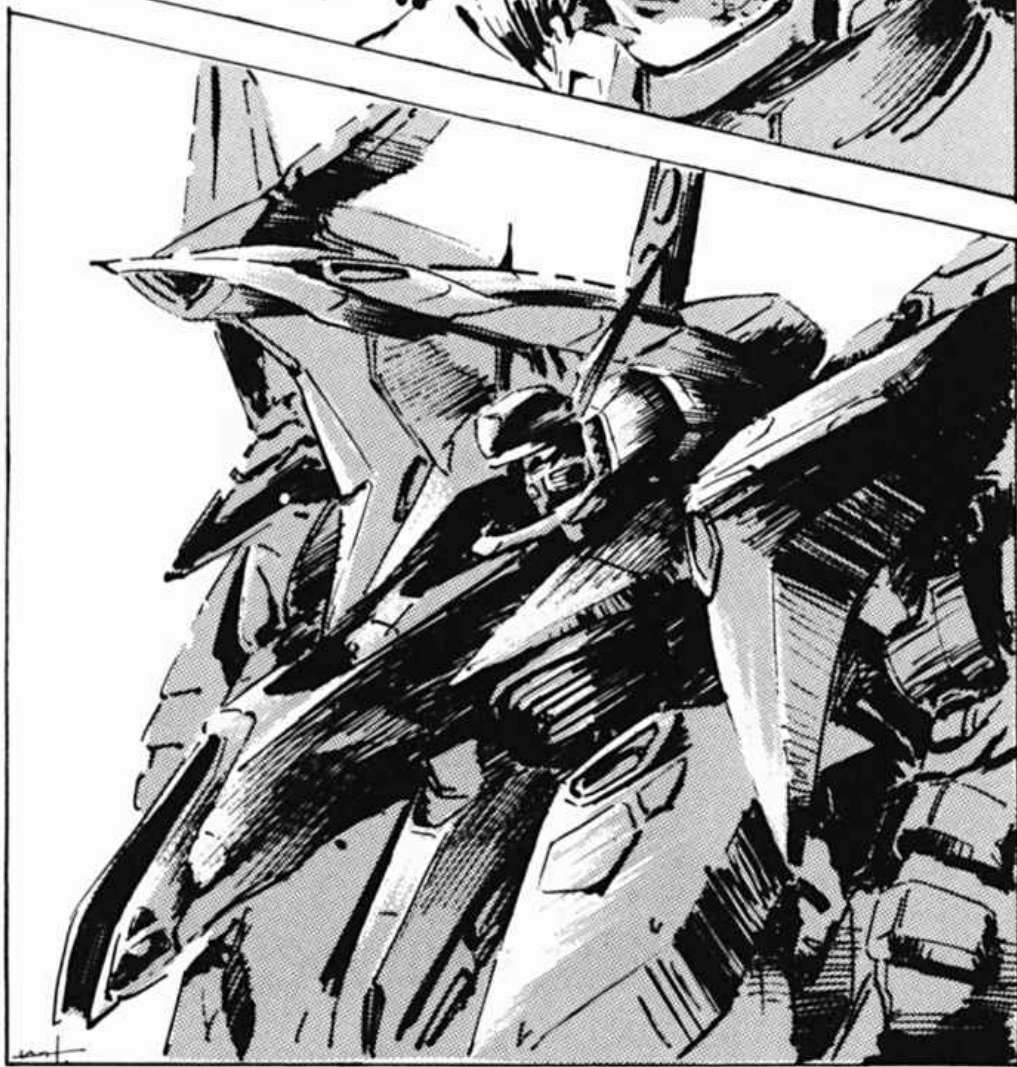
Lane pondered over the possibility of an object with a mobile suit form capable of flying at sonic speeds.

"The whole suit seemed engulfed in light, didn't it?"

His mind flashed back to the silhouette of the Xi Gundam, streaking past the airport, the fiery battle where the Gundam had shot him down, and the discussions during Penelope's painstaking development.

A beam barrier.

This innovation involved the emission of a beam altering waveforms in the suit's path, scattering atmospheric resistance, and allowing it to breach the speed of sound. In Penelope's case, the technology had yet to be perfected, yet it could already break the sound barrier.



"He's perfected what we've only begun..."

The threat lay in the organizational problems underlying technological development. However, it was the sense of being outpaced technologically that left Lane cursing his circumstances.

"The second wave... Which way will the mobile suit team targeting the ministers come from?"

Aiming the Penelope toward the sea, Lane primed all the weapons on the suit for instantaneous launch. If he could engage in close-quarters combat, the speed difference would be negligible.

*"Why was the invasion so easy?"*

That was now of the utmost importance. The crux of the matter revolved around tactical response.

Yet, as he pondered this, the name Gigi Andalusia surfaced in his thoughts.

"Did our fortune change when she was captured by Mafty at Ayers Rock?"

He attempted to dismiss the idle rumors circulating about Gigi being a harbinger of fortune with a shake of his head.

"That's pure fiction."

Nevertheless, since Gigi's disappearance, an unsettling feeling of turmoil had swept through the entire Circe Unit. Lane was quick to pin this on the inept Federation government bureaucrats, burdening the unit with an endless list of responsibilities.

They were disrupting the natural flow of luck.

However, upon their arrival in Adelaide, Kenneth, to Lane's surprise, was swiftly promoted, and he seemed to exercise a fitting level of command.

"Kenneth didn't seem like he was being controlled by Gigi..."

Yet, he couldn't ignore the growing sentiment that things were headed for the worse. Lane questioned whether what he had experienced at Ayers Rock was an influence exerted by Gigi. However, he swiftly dismissed it,

"That's right. Only hard facts shape reality."

In defiance of his own intuition, Lane drew this conclusion.

"Could a solitary wannabe Gundam have brought the mighty Federation government to its knees with a single air raid?"

Lane's gaze drifted back toward the city.

"Damn!"

He realized he had taken a hit.

Beyond the thick veil of black smoke rising from the airport, Lane discerned another shadow darting forward.

"Has the tide of fortune turned in Mafty's favor?"

He was aghast.

He had naively anticipated the second wave to emerge from the direction of the imitation Gundam.

Multiple mobile suit silhouettes were conducting a pivot in the city center, raining down destruction near the Festival Center. The faint glimmer and illumination of the explosions, insignificant in the vastness of the ensuing chaos, served as a stinging reminder of Lane's oversight.

Gawman Nobile's squadron was orchestrating the assault on the Festival Center.

"Damn it!"

The four leading Gustav Karls, while mindful of the sea, spread out, oblivious to the turmoil unfolding within the city.

"The city! It's under attack! Behind us!"

As Lane screamed, he maneuvered his unit ahead of the Gustav Karls.

Although they were within communication range, the dense static of Minovsky particles, a byproduct of the fierce combat, muffled Lane's cries.

Due to the Penelope's movement, which was advancing on the enemy shadows while ascending to a 500-meter altitude, two of the Gustav Karls began to alter their course toward the city.

"Will I make it?"

Lane cried out as he beheld the whitewashed, smoke-covered edifice of the Festival Center, now reduced to a pile of rubble amidst the explosions and smoke.

Lane fired a missile in a desperate attempt to draw the four Mafty mobile suits hovering above the city out of his attack range. While Federation Forces' mobile suits were forbidden from engaging in combat within the city center airspace, Lane was in no position to heed such constraints.

The flare of his missile prompted two of Mafty's mobile suits to initiate evasive maneuvers.

"You impudent--"

Lane managed to annihilate one of the Messers with his initial volley.

*Bagoom!*

The shockwave enveloped the city, with buildings directly below the explosion vaporizing and melting away.

Despite the Penelope's Minovsky Craft capabilities not being inferior to the Gundam's, the shockwave propelled it too far east, causing its turn to take longer than expected.

"Kuh..."

Lane regretted pushing the throttle too much. The suit was still vibrating intensely, frustrating him. His inexperience was glaringly evident when he failed to lure the enemy units out of the suburbs to take them down.

"Domest's been hit! Pull back!"

While maneuvering his own unit buffeted by the reactor's pressure wave, Gawman Nobile bellowed a retreat order, calling off the attack on the Festival Center.

"There!"

However, to buy time for his comrades to disengage and deal with the new threat, Gawman aimed his Messer eastward.

Simultaneously, the other three Messers concealed themselves amidst the cityscape left in ruins by the explosion and commenced aerial dogfights with the pursuing Gustav Karls. The Messers and Karls engaged in a unique combat style, launching themselves from building shadows to trade beam rifle shots.



"Wha--!?"

Gawman spotted the unwieldy Penelope charging towards him against the backdrop of the distant, low-lying mountain ridgeline.

"Go down!"

He unleashed a hail of beam rifle shots.

"I won't let you retreat!"

Outpacing the incoming beams, Lane launched a fan-shaped barrage of funnel missiles at Gawman's suit.

"Tch!"

Undeterred by the colossal Penelope, Gawman activated his suit's beam saber and charged, seemingly making the missiles swerve around him.

"Gah!"

At that moment, Lane couldn't concentrate on the funnel controls.

"What the hell?!"

Evading the funnels, Gawman's suit swooped up from below, resulting in a jarring thud! The damage indicator lit up – the armor on the right leg was compromised.

Distracted by a new explosion at Adelaide Airport, Lane had failed to keep his focus on the funnels.

*BOOM! CRASH!*

The explosion wasn't due to chain reaction explosives but rather a mobile suit's main engine failing to fully evade and detonating. Caught in the blast wave, the Penelope's speed significantly dropped with a lurch.

Predictably, the enemy unit which bore the blast at its rear had pulled back to the outskirts.

Mafty's mobile suit units, having launched the initial assault on the Festival Center, had also strategically withdrawn at the opportune moment.

"Dammit!"

A massive mushroom cloud bloomed, seemingly engulfing the Adelaide Airport.

There it was, just in front of that cloud!

Lane spotted another Mafty mobile suit unit. These were Emeraldal's mobile suits, readying the second wave of attacks on the airport and the Festival Center.

"Damn!"

The Penelope unleashed all its remaining funnel missiles in a frenzy.

Due to his recent error, Lane had zeroed in on the leading machine.

"I can do this!"

*KABOOM!*

The unit was Emeraldal's, but that detail barely registered for Lane. Upon spotting an enemy shadow directly ahead, every fiber of Emeraldal's being seemed to dissipate in fear.

"!"

Adelaide was once again engulfed by a nuclear fusion engine explosion. Amid the explosive chaos, three Messer units charged headlong toward the Penelope.

"Nngh!"

Pushing the Penelope to its maximum capacity, Lane felt the triple shock absorbers of his seat strain against the sheer vibration coursing through his body. Some part of his suit malfunctioned, buckling under the atmospheric pressure.

Despite this, his beam rifle functioned without a hitch.

*PSSSSHEW!*

Light rings bloomed in the air, the result of colliding beam rifle shots detonating.

"You're good!"

As he reduced speed to counter the enemy mobile suit whizzing past, Lane squeezed off a shot from the Penelope's beam rifle.

*BANG!*

The Messer spun in mid-air, trailing off.

One Messer spiraled mid-air, losing control. But there was no respite. He had to fend off the remaining two Messer units.

"...!?"

As he angled for a strike against the retreating Messer, he felt it.

The presence of that familiar nemesis—the wannabe Gundam—was again palpable in Adelaide's battle airspace.

"...!?"

At the same time, Mafty's Base Jabber units—Galcezons—darted underneath the retreating Messers, infiltrating the battlefield in succession. Coordinated teamwork was evident in these suits' maneuvers.

"...!?"

In response, Penelope rapidly retreated, seeking refuge in the mushroom cloud looming over Adelaide Airport.

Despite his youth, Lane was proving to be an exemplary pilot.

The same could be said of Hathaway, operating the Xi Gundam.

Instead of pursuing the Penelope—a formidable adversary—Hathaway directed his assault towards the Gustav Karl, who was hot on the trail of the retreating Galcezons. His patience in not chasing after Penelope underscored his understanding of being Mafty, transcending his role as a pilot.

Partially emerging from the swirling cloud over the airport, the Penelope watched as the Gundam held the Gustav Karls at bay, facilitating its allies' retreat. Lane found himself contemplating the pilot behind the wannabe Gundam.

Frustration trembled within him.

Yet, it wasn't the sight of the wannabe Gundam that conquered Lane Aim. His judgment not to recklessly plunge into the fray amidst the overall defensive operation was sound.

Had he let youthful bravado dictate his actions, hurling the Penelope—whose maintenance was compromised due to the blast—into a face-off with the Gundam, it would have been easy prey.

Especially if Penelope had gotten entangled in close combat with the mobile suits even momentarily, the nearby Gustav Karls would have joined the fray. The Circe Unit's mobile suits could have been wiped out.

"Damn it!"

Realizing Penelope's missile stock was exhausted, Lane descended towards the charred runway of the airport.

"Has Gigi become the guardian deity of Mafty?"

He found himself musing on this, pondering whether even a middle-aged man like Kenneth's piety held some weight.

"Otherwise, even with Mafty's three-wave assault plan, they wouldn't have bombed the assembly hall hosting all the cabinet ministers so easily..."

Standing before the airport building—scarred by numerous bomb blasts—Lane Aim harbored a humble realization. Encased in his words was the wisdom of those compelled to confront reality, even amidst uncertainty.

Superstitions or a touch of faith?

He mused that there might be moments when such elements could shape reality.

# Chapter 07

## Get Ahead

His voice infused with approval, Kenneth commended Lane for his swift, adept maneuvering.

"If you truly mean that, then I am indeed honored, but...?" Lane ventured, uncertainty lacing his tone.

Kenneth cut him short. "Young man, you fail to grasp the stark nature of war. It's not always about eliminating enemy mobile suits. Escape can be the superior tactic at times. And you seem to have an affinity for this strategy. Moreover, you neutralized four enemy suits with the Penelope."

Lane protested, "No, I... I only eliminated three."

"From the debris that plummeted to the ground, it's evident you downed four." Kenneth persisted, soot smudging his face as he continued to fix Lane with a penetrating stare.

"Your modesty puzzles me. Why?"

Lane's heart thudded with surprise at this sudden scrutiny. Kenneth appeared to gaze into the inner workings of his mind.

"You appear profoundly sincere. A stark contrast from when I was with Gigi."

Maintaining eye contact with Kenneth became an escalating struggle for Lane. A chilling realization washed over him - Kenneth seemed to possess an uncanny ability to decipher the emotional undercurrents of his subordinates, no matter his location.

"Well... How do I put this... I suspect I'm starting to comprehend why Gigi Andalusia holds such significance to you, Captain, or should I say, Commodore..."

Kenneth challenged him, "Are you sure it's not a product of your imagination? It might be a mere coincidence."

"Perhaps. I'd like to believe that. But the dynamics, the variance when Gigi's present and when she's absent... It seems too ideal." Lane confessed.

"Is it, though? For all we know, she could be aligned with Mafty's side now."

"Ah... Yes, that's plausible."

Meanwhile, Francine, his secretary, was busy on the phone, reporting Director Hundley Yeoksan's narrow escape.

"Hmm... Did you arrange for his pick-up and inquire about his injuries?"

"Certainly, sir," Francine confirmed as she resumed her call.

Kenneth issued an order to Lane, "Be prepared to leave at a moment's notice."

"Sir!" Lane replied with a crisp salute and an infusion of determination before leaving the command center.

Francine's voice echoed behind him, "The Director is next to the second aid station in the reception room."

Armed with this information, Kenneth descended into the dank underground corridor, his footsteps reverberating along the stone-cold walls. A riding crop swung in his hand, crackling as it cut through the air, an ineffective remedy for his simmering irritation.

"I can't remain confined here indefinitely!" Kenneth muttered to himself, the crop slicing through the stale air again.

Upon reaching the reception room, Kenneth greeted Hundley Yeoksan, the Director of the Criminal Police Organization. His left arm, swathed in bandages, stood as a silent testament to his recent ordeal.

"How are you holding up?"

"I was trapped under concrete, crushed my fingers." Yeoksan grimaced at Kenneth's inquiry.

"We'll reassess your injuries later this afternoon." The medical officer informed him before exiting the room.

"So you were asleep until the bombing commenced?" Yeoksan couldn't resist adding a dash of sarcasm to his comment directed at Kenneth.

"I am deeply sorry. I won't make excuses. If there's room for it, I am prepared to be dismissed." Kenneth offered solemnly.

Hundley Yeoksan, unsurprisingly, remained composed. "Now's not the time for such thoughts. Half the cabinet is dead. We can only speculate about the survival chances of the injured..."

"That's an unfortunate truth. I could dismiss you anytime. Currently, our focus should be on our air defense system. If the barrier remains ineffective and we lose the entire cabinet, it's a disgrace to the Federation government." Yeoksan remarked.

"Can't I vent a little frustration?" Kenneth protested lightly.

"One complaint is fine. Fetch me a coffee." Yeoksan requested, his tone nonchalant.

At his behest, Kenneth used the intercom to request coffee before he added, "We simply ran out of time."

"I presume the Cabinet members would hold the view that if they could stay on Earth, they shouldn't gripe."

"Yes... We've secured the barrier lines. We can fend off the second wave."

"Hmm... So that's the state of affairs? But the Circe Unit's mobile suits are dwindling in numbers, correct?"

"Mafty is approaching its limits as well. We may only have five operational mobile suits left."

"So, no evacuation of the city then?"

"That's the plan..."

Just then, Francine entered with the requested coffee.

The echo of death had hollowed out their ranks, snuffing out most of the military-related cabinet. A hush swept over the two men, now holding the reins of Adelaide's defense.

"Gigi Andalusia," Kenneth said, breaking the silence, "You're familiar with the name, I presume?"

"Hmm?" Just as he was savoring the first sip of his coffee, the Director pinned Kenneth with a questioning look. The girl's name hovered in the air, seemingly familiar yet elusive.

"When she was around the Circe Unit, things... they seemed to unfold rather favorably."

"The Haunzen landing in Davao?"

"Not merely then, but in the ensuing aftermath too... However, upon her arrival here, Mafty abducted her."

"The Ayers Rock skirmish? Yes, they did take her away on a Base Jabber."

"As a talisman of sorts?"

"Hmm... So... Are you insinuating that Gigi aligned with Mafty?"

"Finding amusement in this, are we?"

"Hardly amusing." Despite his words, mirth was conspicuously absent from Yeoksan's gaze. He had borne witness to the unsettling incident of the Haunzen hijacking and could empathize with the emotional toll levied on a commander of Kenneth's ilk.

Astute leaders, while not omniscient, possess a keen grasp of the overarching patterns within their ranks. More often than not, it isn't pure logic at play; even trivial matters can incite a flutter of imagination, hinting at potential ramifications.

"But, that's overly romantic."

Kenneth registered the unspoken weight of the director's "but." As an adult, it was incumbent upon him not to elaborate on this contentious point. His role now was to surrender to the ebb and flow of events, confined to his chair—a fitting symbol of adulthood and the Federation government's hallmark philosophy of "waiting." Such conditions paved the way for agitators like Mafty. Yet, Kenneth held his peace on this matter. His current desire, raw and fervent, was to retaliate against Mafty.

The sting of defeat, the indignity of a retreat, the humiliation from the high command—it gnawed at his self-worth. Perhaps it was this strong sense of pride that had spelled the end of his marriage to his first wife, Julie.

"If Mafty were to strike again, where do you reckon they'd target?"

"Unlikely the Festival Center. They'd probably endeavor to wipe out the remnants stationed at the airport."

"Hmm... Is this location optimal?"

The director glanced upwards at the ceiling, musing,

"Even a nuclear onslaught wouldn't breach our defenses here."

"Is that so? I want to believe that."

The director polished off his coffee, the final dregs echoing his sentiments.

"What's your prediction? Will the nascent cabinet, conceived in the wake of this incident, fare any better?"

In response to Kenneth's query, the director, grimacing against the gnawing pain in his arm, retorted, "That question borders on being pro-Mafty."

"It's a universal sentiment."

"Are you privy to the recent passing of the bill?"

"When?"

"Just prior to the bombing, earlier today."

"You're kidding."

"The advent of communication technologies enables the dissemination of such bills across all Federation government branches. The bureaucrats and government will dictate Earth migration."

"Why not dissolve it? Isn't that tantamount to endorsing Mafty's actions?"

"Our livelihood hinges on such undertakings. Consider it from that perspective."

"Our very lives hang in the balance."

"Well, me too. I barely escaped death."

"Is that so?"

Kenneth forged ahead, ignoring Hundley Yeoksan's unspoken request for a refill, "Have there been any arrests of journalists suspected of Mafty affiliations?"

"Man Hunter isn't a military outfit. Besides, I've yet to receive any reports of such individuals loitering. The Adelaide bombing doesn't play into Mafty's hands, unlike Oenbelli."

"I'm referring to the scouts, the couriers, the like."

"Hmm... A few have been apprehended for dubious activities. Should we parade them amidst the Festival Center ruins?"

"That seems apt. It would serve as a psychological barricade, far more potent than any physical one."

"Shall we proceed?"

"The responsibility to render such efforts futile falls on the mobile suit squad, led by the Penelope."

"Oh... Well, we could formalize the minutes of our meeting right here. Bureaucrats value honesty, don't they?"

"Hearing such tales makes one inclined towards Mafty."

"Utter that again, and I'll have you arrested for treason and subject you to a clandestine trial."

"Well... that's after Adelaide..."

Kenneth bared his gleaming teeth in a tight smile for the first time, punctuating the air with a sharp rap of his riding crop against the table's edge.

At that moment, the 13th Autonomous Fleet, including the Ra Cailum and two other vessels that had entered Earth's artificial satellite orbit, plotted their descent. Each vessel, equipped with Minovsky Crafts, boasted the capability to navigate even in gravity-bound atmospheres.

Captain Bright Noa, ensconced on the bridge of the Ra Cailum, cast his gaze on the Earth, resplendent in radiant blue and cloaked in a swath of cloud cover.

"Captain! All vessels are primed!"

"Hmm..."

Hearing this, Bright hurriedly pulled himself away from his concern about whether his unacquainted son Hathaway was catching a cold on some southern island.

"Alright! Initiate atmospheric entry! Secure yourselves, everyone!"

The trio of vessels, each swathed in a dense shroud of beam barriers to safeguard their crews, gradually steepened their descent. The azure expanse of the Pacific Ocean beckoned them from below. They were scheduled to infiltrate Earth's southern hemisphere via an indirect route.

"Well, perhaps a woman should warrant more concern than a common cold?"

Bright couldn't help but indulge in paternal speculation despite the violent tremors triggered by the atmospheric entry.



# Chapter 08

## Under the Forest

As Kenneth and Director Yeoksan engaged in their clandestine conversation, Hathaway and his squad nestled in a valley roughly fifty kilometers southeast of Adelaide. Once they crossed the mountain range of fifteen, sixteen hundred meters, they would reach Adelaide. An unlikely meeting place, it was so close yet strategically hidden enough to divert suspicion.

Here, even the colossal shape of a Gundam could vanish within the dense, verdant cloak of the slopes.

"Fabio, you've handled this well," said Hathaway, "Perhaps, when the time is right, we'll head downstream to Lake Alexandrina or Encounter Bay. We could also retreat inland, lay low until it's safe, and then escape the continent."

The laughter in Fabio's voice betrayed his grim words. "We'll handle this, I promise. But the loss of two Galcezons and six Messers... It's a severe blow, no?"

Hathaway shook his head. "No, this is as expected."

"Once we've concluded this assault, you'll retreat to Lodoicea?"

"Yes, we will disengage one by one."

Fabio's question carried a hint of hope. "So, we're bound for the southern sea next?"

A faint smile touched Hathaway's lips. "Send my best to Chang and the others," he answered.

His duties called him, a final bombing of Adelaide to ensure a safe retreat for Fabio's team and the undercover operatives in the city.

Hathaway scaled the rope to the Gundam's cockpit, offering a final, reassuring smile to Fabio and his team as they vanished beneath the forest canopy. Their presence here signified a crucial detail - the Gundam could be resupplied for further strikes on Adelaide.

By the time Hathaway accessed the Gundam's console panel, the hum of an engine from the trailer below filled his ears. They were set to blend in as harmless vegetable transporters, their escape plan in full motion.

With a push of a button, Hathaway released a balloon from the Gundam's head, its attached camera scanning for the Galcezons and Messers that lay in wait. The Messers were refueling the reserve missiles mounted on the

Galcezon, preparing for another attack. The camera of the Gundam captured the heads of two Messers and a flock of rose-breasted cockatoos.

"We're certain to succeed," he murmured to himself.

"Our success is certain. I'm glad we didn't have to drive Gigi away," roared Gawman Nobile over the contact line to the bridge after he landed onto the 4 Galcezon under Kaussaria Geese to replace his missile pods.

"I'd like to think it's because we're lucky, but..." Kaussaria retorted a bit.

"That's jealousy speaking, Kaussaria. The Festival Center is nearly demolished. It doesn't always go our way," he retorted, not hiding the ire in his voice.

"Half our mobile suits are down. Emeraldal's taken out too!" Tension rose in the air as Kaussaria's fury spilled out, her crew wary of her wrath.

"Captain, please remain composed," pleaded the copilot, but Caussaria wasn't to be silenced. "We all knew what we were getting into when we signed up. If we don't boost Rey's morale, we'll lose hope. We can't let Emeraldal's fate befall us all!"

Gawman's stern voice filled the receiver, and silence fell upon the scene. The time for mourning was yet to come - it was a luxury they couldn't afford now.

Once Kaussaria processed Gawman's words, she found another target for her fury. "That woman, Gigi, I bet she reported to Circe. This mess is her doing!"

Gawman, understanding her anger yet knowing it was misplaced, suggested, "If you're so sure, why not execute her after we finish this operation?"

As their tense exchange filled the air, the Gundam moved, looming over the scene. A moment of silence was broken by the rustling of the trees, swaying violently under the Gundam's wake.

"It's about time. Let's move!" cried Gawman.

Kaussaria's voice crackled in his receiver one last time, laden with a sob. "You're too nosy..."

Hathaway's gaze locked onto the Messer affixed to Raymond's unit. Its mere presence, a grim reminder of the now absent Emeraldal, sent a pang coursing through his heart.

"Golf! Request Raymond to release the prisoners!"

"Huh? Got it."

When Hathaway conveyed this to Golf's unit, which had finished replacing the missile pod, by touching the Gundam's manipulator, Golf passed it on to Raymond.

"It's happening now."

"I see..."

As they awaited Golf's response, Hathaway maneuvered his unit upwards, the Gundam's monstrous form shadowing over the dense eucalyptus forest below. The vegetation trembled under its might, revealing a flurry of figures between its branches.

The liberated prisoners, led by Kimberly Heyman, gradually emerged from the confines of the Galcezon. Amid the chaos, the slight figure of Gigi slipped through, a phantom amongst the trees. The sight of her stirred a torrent of emotions within Hathaway, compelling him to soar higher.

He yearned for the warmth of a final farewell, but he swallowed that impulse. The need for pragmatism over sentimentality took hold. An optimistic whisper within him murmured, "We'll meet again, Gigi."

That's what he wanted to say.

In the twilight gloom beneath the eucalyptus, Gigi exchanged hushed words with Heyman before vanishing into the verdant maze. Her indifference was a stark, chilling blow. Yet Hathaway clung to his optimism and steered westward, his thoughts running parallel with the clouds.

The foreboding uncertainty cast a long shadow, but leaving a trace, he reasoned, was the grim art of war survival. It might be a somber trait of humanity, but it was a poignant testament to endurance.

Amidst the looming Galcezons, Hathaway sought comfort in the realization of his shared human predicament. His attention darted between the airborne giants—five machines equipped with a single Messer, two operating solo. Their remaining firepower was a stark reminder of their dwindling resources.

As the Xi Gundam gently traced the mountain slope, Gawman's craft leaped off the deck of the 4 Galcezon and approached from behind.

A slight vibration managed to shake off Hathaway's sentimentality.

"What's this?"

One of the advantages of a Minovsky Craft was its ability to support a weight equivalent to one Messer.

"Don't you reckon Kimberly and Gigi are still worth something?" Gawman purposefully instigated this conversation.

"I'm open to a suicide mission, but the prisoners—particularly Gigi—aren't superfluous. Shedding their weight could buy the Galcezons some time," Gawman argued, his pragmatism echoing Hathaway's.

"But isn't that a touch fatalistic?"

"Worried, are you?"

At that moment, Hathaway was just contemplating the advantage of having something left behind. He wondered if Gawman was being more pessimistic.

"Just a bit..."

"No worries. Leaving Kimberly behind will showcase Mafty's mercy. As for Gigi, she serves as a reminder for Kenneth. It'll keep him vigilant."

Hathaway's retort had a teasing edge to it.

"Planning for the aftermath of Adelaide?"

"Of course. Kimberly becomes our living proof, illustrating our humanity. Even if they lie, their survival in itself will surely spark public outrage, a victory for Mafty. We'll be returning soon, you know?"

"Well, I understand, but reconsider the suicide mission, will you?"

"I apologize. I'll rephrase. I vow to make a strategic withdrawal from the battlefield."

Upon hearing this, Gawman exhaled a sigh of relief. Hathaway didn't seem as crushed by the loss of their comrades as he'd anticipated. A leader, he realized, needed to uphold a certain emotional aloofness.

Now, Gawman's gaze shifted to a lone Galcezon. Its flight was steady.

It would spell trouble if Raymond, having lost Emeraldaa, gave in to despair. Yet, observing the Galcezons soaring low over the mountain in formation, he could gauge the pilot's frame of mind.

"He's likely thirsting for Emeraldal's vengeance..."

"Here we go!"

Following Hathaway's declaration, a flash of light erupted from the main nozzle of the Gundam, now at full thrust.

"Hathaway?!"

Gawman, having lost his foothold, began to fall. Adjusting his verniers, he quickly approached a lone advancing Galcezon and touched down on the deck.

Golf's suit took a step back and offered its support.

"How's Ray faring?"

"He's holding up."

"I see..."

Even as he listened to Golf's voice, Gawman focused the multi-monitor of his visual display on the bridge skylight of Raymond's craft. He could just make out Raymond's shoulders.

"Well, he appears stable..."

With that, Gawman shelved his worries for his comrades.

"In a few moments, I might be the one shedding tears..."

It was then that he tasted the sour reality of being an unattached middle-aged man since his initiation into Mafty. The harsh reality of having no one to truly mourn his death made the prospect all the more terrifying.

"I can't die before I've found a good woman or had children!"

Voicing the phrase aloud, he plunged deeper into contemplation.

"If not, then what's the point of all this? What have I been living for?"

This determination stirred up a resolve within him, a resolve that declared, regardless of the opposition, he would survive.

The Galcezons crossed over a grand ridgeline, their sights set on the peak beyond.

Adelaide awaited them.

But by then, the silhouette of the speeding Gundam had vanished from their view.

"Miss, wait up!"

Their voices, sugary and insidious as a feline's purr, left her with little option but to increase the gap between them. Gigi had intended to dawdle, to watch the silhouette of the machine, less daunting than the Gundam, fade

into the tree line. Alas, time was a luxury she didn't possess. In her desperation, she wormed her way through the rich, verdant ivy, ascending ever higher up the gradient.

"You've got the keys, haven't you!"

"That's what the Base Jabber pilot said!"

The four soldiers, led by Kimberly Heyman, were hot on Gigi's trail. But they were hampered, their hands cuffed behind their backs, running awkwardly and struggling with the uphill climb.

Gigi, ensuring a reasonable distance from her pursuers, unfastened the leather bag bestowed upon her by Raymond Cain.

Inside, sure enough, were five keys. However, Gigi resented the instruction she received when Raymond gave her the bag.

"Perhaps there's some merit in aiding them," he'd hinted.

A swarm of vibrant, roseate parrots took flight overhead, their raucous squawks echoing through the clearing.

Unbeknownst to her, the forest was alive with the calls of countless birds.

"You're here to keep an eye on us, aren't you! You've got the keys! Miss!"

The sight of a stocky middle-aged man floundering through the dense woods in her pursuit was something she cared little for.

"Oh, please. I was taken captive by Mafty, too. I'm hardly the type to be trusted with keys."

Gigi, telling a lie, continued to climb the slope.

"You were on the bridge of the Galcezon. You're not a prisoner of war."

"But looking at how I'm dressed, you can tell I'm not part of Mafty's crew!"

Gigi stumbled on a pebble, nearly falling.

The crunching noise of the men blundering their way up through the rustling ivy fueled her fear.

"Ugh...!" Her hand slipped on some slick moss, and her foot, shod in an insect-crushed shoe, skidded.

"I... I want to get away from both Mafty and you guys," Gigi declared, crying out as she made her way through a few more trees to an old paved road.

The path was blanketed in asphalt, yet it was so overrun with grass and tree sprouts pushing through the cracks that it was hardly discernible as a path at all.

"Huff... Huff...!"

Despite this, it bore evidence of past vehicular journeys. Gigi sprinted, aiming to stay on the remnants of asphalt still bearing resemblance to a road.

"Hey! Young lady!"

The men's voices were faint and distant. To Gigi, their tone was one of forced compassion. She took several turns on the asphalt road before daring to peek towards the right, from where the voices emanated. She spotted the captives' heads bobbing amidst the foliage.

"Hey, you lot! Does this look like a key to you?!" Gigi brandished the leather bag, hollering.

"So, you did have the keys!"

"Mafty instructed me to do this! If you think there are keys in here... find them yourselves! Then your hands will be free!" With that, Gigi flung the cluster of keys into the forest with all her might.

*Thwoomp!*

There was a dull sound in the distance, but it didn't echo.

"You!"

"Oh, spare me! I was instructed to do this!" Gigi fabricated yet another tale. She saw three of the younger captives dart in the direction of the sound. Gigi, now devoid of any reason to look back, commenced a desperate sprint. She had to get closer to Adelaide. That was her conviction.

"Huff... Huff..."

Gigi questioned her frenzied escape. Hathaway had bid his farewell. There was no rationale for rushing towards the place where a man like that met his demise. Yet, Gigi found herself running, undeterred.

"Ah!" Her foot got caught in a crack in the asphalt, resulting in a painful fall. Her hand protested with the raw sting of a scrape. The sun's rays stabbed the cracked asphalt road, drawing heat from the depths. Steam began to curl from the underbrush.

Looking at the black tire tracks on the asphalt, Gigi picked herself up. They seemed to point, like signposts, to Adelaide. If she could get over this small range of hills, she'd be okay. However, if Adelaide lay beyond this hill and if vehicles were to come from that direction, they were likely to be Federation military vehicles. If that were the case, she might be captured by them.

"What should I do?"

The dense undergrowth of the woods on either side looked treacherously thick; confidence waned in her ability to navigate through it.

"Comb the area! The keys must be here!"

Faint voices echoed like ghostly residues, creeping closer to Gigi.

"If it's not a military vehicle, maybe they'll give me a lift..."

Gigi, reduced to a weary walk, braced herself, all while deliberating her next move. Even in these dire straits, she must persist, she decided. Perhaps she could hitch a ride to Adelaide in the car coming up from below, if it weren't military, she thought. But by that time, that car would likely have already been seized by Kimberly and the others.

Nonetheless, she decided to navigate the tumultuous asphalt road at a brisk pace. Gigi realized that without verifying Hathaway's circumstances, she wouldn't be able to decide how to proceed, even if she was left to fend for herself. For this purpose, she had forsaken her supposed life of ease in Hong Kong.

Gigi ran on.

Her chest constricted painfully; it was sweltering.

And then, her worst fear materialized. The growling hum of several vehicles, a sound like a descending titan. Gigi hid in the thickets by the road. The engine noise, though suggesting a few cars, was a gross underestimation. It was exponentially larger. More than twenty cars

maneuvered the precipitously uneven slope in a convoy, the majority being electric, Elec-car, making minimal noise.

"Soldiers?!"

Although they were civilian vehicles, most of the people in them were dressed in military uniforms. Moreover, they appeared as a group of defeated people, clothes torn and sooty; they were the ones beaten in the first Mafty attack. There would likely be more vehicles of this sort. Gigi reasoned this road was now off-limits. Before that realization fully sunk in, another hit her: Kimberly Hayman and his lot would halt this vehicle convoy, unlock their shackles, and begin their search for her.

Despair seized Gigi.

"I'm always just hiding..."

Despite such thoughts, Gigi was ultimately saddened by her fate, which seemed doomed to end in the hands of someone else.

# Chapter 09

## Again

"Looks like the vehicles are ready," announced Chief Gass H. Huguest of the Investigation Bureau, his coat smeared with oil and soot, as he came to greet Director Hundley Yeoksan.

"Nngh!"

"Director, how's the pain?"

Chief Huguest carefully regarded the Director's bandaged appearance.

"The remaining ministers are evacuating from Adelaide as a precaution."

"I don't think it's that serious."

The Director flashed a weak smile at Kenneth and accompanied Chief Huguest towards the elevator.

Kenneth sent the two of them to the elevator, thinking that being close to the Director at a time like this might help Chief Gass advance in his career.

"Well then, I'll leave the defense to you."

Perhaps feeling a promising future, Gass tipped his soot-coated cap in salute to Kenneth.

"Oh, no need for that."

The day was growing hot, the soft cap providing both shade and protection.

Kenneth's emotions were mixed as he observed the earnest nature of a man who had once crawled through regional investigation missions.

"Now, is it about time, Hathaway?"

He entered the command center, his thigh a rhythmic target for his riding whip.

"Commodore, your efforts are appreciated."

"No trouble at all..."

Suppressing his inner agitation, Kenneth saluted Generals Medinum Guggenheim and Richard Creshendow of the Joint Headquarters and a few staff members from Staff Headquarters.

"Your injury?"

"Just broken glass at the Staff Headquarters' hotel, but all the airport-facing windows shattered."

General Guggenheim, one of the older officers, pointed to his bandaged cheek and laughed.

"I'll leave the command to you. We'll watch the battle here."

"That would be best."



The top staff members, unaccustomed to observing actual combat command, looked as anxious as civilians.

The central tactical display depicted ten Gustav Karls and Kessaria's positions, but the arrangement tilted southward.

South of Adelaide lay a gentle slope where the Flinders Ranges met the sea. Green patches unfolded, and old urban areas were only discernible by tree shadows.

Kenneth had a feeling that if Mafty attacked Adelaide again, this was the only direction, so he arranged his forces accordingly.

Even the delayed Penelope was to be deployed, though it remained at the airport.

"You removed the flying form parts of Penelope, right?"

"Yes, sir. We're adjusting after removal. No mechanics were on hand, so it's taken time, but we're near completion," a young crewman replied, munching on a sandwich.

"Lieutenant Aim."

Another crewman displayed Penelope's cockpit on a monitor. Lane Aim, helmetless, came into view.

"Lane! Can you hear me? We'll be making it look like our Kessaria is being deployed north, so you should hide in the south and intercept the wannabe Gundam."

"Yes, sir."

Lane looked at the camera, donning his helmet.

"Only two Gustav Karls will support you. Manageable?"

"Yes, sir. I know Penelope well from space tests, but part removal leaves me feeling exposed."

"That's natural, but we're unsure if Mafty will strike again. Stay calm."

"True, but. I'd like to have a proper fight against the Gundam at least once."

Lane smiled from beneath his helmet.

Kenneth finally felt that Lane had matured as a pilot.

"Let's run it again, shall we? The timing for the retreat should be the same as before, but don't forget to use the barrier."

"Yes, I'll be careful in a one-on-one fight."

"That's the spirit."

Praising for ego's sake was futile, but praise that motivated and spurred survival was valuable.

With Lane's current attitude, all should go well.

"Command Center! Penelope, heading out."

The call came from Lane.

The next communication came from the two Gustav Karls accompanying the Penelope. On the display showing the left runway, three mobile suits began their takeoff.

As they roared down the runway, sending up clouds of soot piled on the runway, the Penelope and the two Gustav Karls took off, scattering the debris thrown by the explosions.

The spectacle was cinematic in its grandeur, painting a picturesque scene.

Having removed the parts that disseminate Minovsky particles when in flying form, the Penelope appeared to be light on its feet, seemingly showcasing its potential for hand-to-hand combat.

Despite the satisfying spectacle, Kenneth, positioned in the central chair of the command center, found his emotions tangled and complex. His thoughts were consumed by the conversation with Director Yeoksan; intercepting and annihilating Mafty's potential decisive attack on Adelaide seemed simple enough.

Even if it fell short of annihilation, a significant blow to Mafty could cripple their recovery.

The problem lay in the possibility that Mafty could withdraw and prepare for a new phase of the conflict. If that happened, Mafty's surprise attack today would be publicized as a complete victory among the dissidents, further bolstering their base of support.

The difficulty would then spread long-term across Earth.

"The Director has good foresight." Kenneth mused, halting urges to prepare an interception. He wanted to bait Mafty with a first strike on Adelaide, leaving a weakness to lure them into a second attack. Then, strike down the wannabe Gundam with Penelope and the barrier. More than mere military gains through brute force, this was a strategy that sought true victory.

"What's the power situation for the barrier?" Kenneth queried Commander Mainzer, who was managing the barrier installation.

"Proceeding as planned..." the Commander responded, still engaged in inputting test reports from the barrier generators and calculating outputs, his jacket stained and worn from recent fieldwork.

Until recently, he ran around the site supervising the barrier generators.

They had enough power to down a single mobile suit, but Kenneth's instructions had been to secure double that to neutralize the wannabe Gundam.

"Alert!"

Lane's formation had barely crossed Adelaide's defense line when the call rang through the command center.

"Good! Commander, forget the search. Concentrate power on the S18 line!" Kenneth commanded, his eyes on the tactical display's alert. Mafty's signature was approaching as planned. Kenneth's delight was palpable. The worst fear was dispelled.

"Sir! Once it resonates, the resonator will burn out due to the concentrated output. That's okay, right?!"

"It doesn't matter! That means our victory."

Nearly a hundred displays were arrayed before him, the upper tier portraying the southern sky.

"That one?"

"Sir! Number three, zoom in!"

A hum resonated as the image zoomed, enlarging the shadows of several airborne objects: the Penelope and Gustav Karls and the wannabe Gundam charging at them.

"Two Gustav Karl units of the first vanguard shot down."

"Already!?"

Disbelief permeated the crew, but no display or monitor captured the scene.

"Redirect the northern Kessaria's!" Kenneth's order was crisp.

Tension permeated the underground center.

"It's the Gundam!" bellowed out the checkerman; it and the staff supporting it were blessed with sharp eyes, reacting faster than Kenneth.

"The Gundam, it's amazing!"

"A Gustav Karl has been shot down!"

The checkerman's unemotional voice resonated, its declaration underscoring the unfolding drama.

Kenneth's gaze was fixed on the tactical display that formed the centerpiece amidst a constellation of monitors. The southern battlefield showed a predictive line of how the fight was approaching the barrier line set up south of Adelaide.

"Where will the reinforcements for the Gundam come from?"

"South-southeast! Unknowns at four degrees!"

"That's it!"

"Unknowns at six degrees too!"

The term 'unknown' denoted unidentified units, which were, in fact, Mafty.

"How many Mafty suits?!"

"Six, eight! At least!"

"Checking type... Mobile suits, four! No, three!"

"One unknown shot down!"

"Well done! Prepare the barrier."

"Understood. S18 personnel, pull out!"

Commander Mainizer was rapidly deploying instructions to the barrier setup team.

"Enemy Base Jabber, one down!"

"Six-degree line! Defense line breached! Kessaria's intercept was too late!"

Battle updates and pilot instructions were beginning to blur into a cacophonous symphony.

"Fine. Let it unfold."

With Kenneth's declaration, a subtle tremor coursed through the command center.

"They're fast and skilled..."

Kenneth couldn't hide his admiration. If the airport endured another bombing, the Festival Center and its vicinity would undoubtedly face the brunt of the impact.

"Isn't it premature?"

"Hmm?"

A voice sounding disinterested in the unfolding crisis prompted Kenneth to swivel around.

General Richard Creshendow, appearing younger than General Guggenheim, was discussing the ongoing battle with detached curiosity.

"In other words, they launched an attack before the Gundam did."

The General hadn't anticipated units other than the Gundam to carry out ground assaults.

"Ah, the Base Jabber previously only provided support for mobile suits and didn't partake in ground attacks, but this time the Base Jabber did it, correct?"

"Oh, the Galcezon?"

The generals appeared to reach a consensus.

"There aren't any suits nearby, right?"

"That's the assumption."

They discussed this out of fear of a nuclear fusion reactor explosion, but Kenneth didn't indulge them.

Battle situations aren't long-drawn dramas, yet they can pivot on a singular instant, with that moment potentially altering the course of conflict. It's akin to drawing cards in a gamble, where drawing the Ace of Hearts can redefine one's fate, if one is to believe the symbolism.

The transition in the unfolding events, where a seemingly irrelevant situation can determine the outcome, steering destinies and dispensing life or death verdicts.

In such a time, entertaining novice-like generals and drawing a joker was simply not feasible.

"Use the cameras to capture enemy movements! Don't dawdle, or Mafty's mobile suits will attack this shelter!"

Kenneth's admonition was a clear lesson for the generals behind him that no place was utterly safe.

They should hold this degree of alertness, even as generals.

Kenneth thought this as he frantically focused on the monitors and displays, which were now less than half their original number.

# Chapter 10

## Be Defeated

The Hathaway contingent intended a decisive blow against Adelaide Airport and the Festival Center before their planned withdrawal.

That had always been the plan.

Yet the remnants of the Galcezon and Messer units had struggled to rendezvous in the mountains to the east of the Flinders Ranges.

This delay inadvertently granted Kimberly and Gigi their freedom. If the rendezvous had been timely, 1 Galcezon would've patrolled around Adelaide, focusing purely on metro containment.

The only scenario for aborting Adelaide's second wave of attack was when the remaining forces dwindled to a single Galcezon and two Messers, and in such an event, the downing of the Gundam was anticipated.

This was because the Gundam faced the daunting task of inflicting two hits on the airport during the second wave.

And as for this second assault, it was pre-agreed: no negotiations en route. They acted according to their multi-phase plan.

However, after crossing the Flinders Range and checking the Adelaide direction, Hathaway found the Circe Unit's Kessaria deployed to the north. He immediately went on the offensive.

Kenneth might not have left a deliberate weak spot, but Hathaway, the strategist, spotted an opportunity.

The operation felt as if it was progressing smoothly.

It was assumed that the so-called "barrier" wouldn't activate. They could only conclude that.

But despite the absence of the Kessaria, Hathaway eyed the green expanse warily, knowing it wasn't devoid of threats.

His suspicions were confirmed when three Gustav Karl units were taken out. Then, missiles, directed at the airport from Hathaway, streaked through the sky. Explosions erupted before reaching Adelaide.

Before those missiles could hit the heart of Adelaide, they erupted into multiple fiery spheres, casting dark plumes against the azure backdrop.

"Here they come."

The Gundam's missile attack was thwarted by Lane's Penelope on its way southward, but in that interlude, Raymond's Galcezon, invading from the east, breached the airspace of the airport and Festival Center, unnerving the generals in the underground bunkers.

Hathaway gained altitude, baiting the Penelope.

The adjacent Gustav Karls noticed the Gundam's trailing Messers too late, and their reaction was delayed.

Penelope, now stripped of excess armor, was more agile than before. Hathaway released another missile, positioning the airport right behind him, both as a threat to Penelope and to blow up the airport.

Though Penelope's beam rifle took aim and shot down a missile, the rest found their target at the airport.

Around the same time as Raymond's unit passed by, the Gundam's missiles struck the airport's building—a forbidden act.

"Gah!"

Funnel beams were deployed, all focusing on the Gundam.

Dispelling the funnels with rapid-fire beam rifles and diffusing a beam saber, Hathaway exclaimed, "He's done it!"

Indeed, the Penelope's attacks had evolved, yet the Gundam seemed to have the edge in agility.

The Penelope's attitude control verniers weren't optimal.

"Damn!"

Lane grappled with this issue as damage received from Gawman's unit in a previous battle lingered on his right leg.

Wielding a beam saber, the Penelope maneuvered above the Gundam, accelerating and pivoting as both sabers clashed, producing resonating waves and intense flashes.

*SWISH!*

Their aerial duel had escalated into a whirlwind battle.

"He's powerful!?"

Although Hathaway felt like a mere human against a titan, he was certain that the latent strength was either equal or in the Gundam's favor.

"Lane Aim!"

Calling out his adversary's name, Hathaway unleashed a volley from the Gundam's funnel.

His concentration was singular, aimed right at the heart of the Penelope, at Lane Aim.

Yet, the Penelope, too, possessed funnels guided by the same brainwave control.

Matching the Gundam's response, Penelope's funnels fired back at the Gundam's funnels.

*PING! PING!*

In the sky, top-like flashes darted about, interspersed with beams.

Amidst the myriad flashes of beam sabers and rifle beams, funnels were mutually obliterated.

*BOOM! BOOM!*

Amid the explosions, the two mobile suits clashed in close combat.

*ZING!*

In that momentary scorching flash, the sizzle of Gundam's shield echoed, followed by sparks and another flash, sending the Penelope's waist armor soaring.

"Hah...!"

With the verdant backdrop streaming past, Hathaway locked onto Penelope in his sights.

The tension, perhaps palpable to Lane, was disrupted as the Penelope's close-range missile shrapnel erupted.

*BANG!*

Dozens of shrapnels impacted the shield, but the jolt was fleeting.

*ZOOM!*

The beam rifle seemed damaged.

"Tch!"

Recharging the beam rifle's energy pack from the main engine, Hathaway released it.

*BAGOOM!*

The overcharged energy pack exploded, blinding everything in the vicinity.

*ZAPSSSSSH!*

In an instantaneous flare, the Gundam's saber shot forward, its incandescent arc just missing the chest of the backpedaling Penelope.

It wasn't a fatal blow.

"...!?"

Shock rippled through Lane, his senses reeling, the looming barrier battle consuming his thoughts.

Suddenly, as the two massive entities danced in the sky, Gawman's squadron—a fleet of four Messer units—saw an opening. But as they turned to unleash their remaining missiles, a barrage from three Kessaria units struck the rear Messer, sending it spiraling downwards.





*FAHDOOM!*

The searing explosion boiled the waters beneath, sending a towering white plume skyward. In the midst of this chaos, Gawman directed a hail of missiles toward the Festival Center, seeking refuge from the explosion's aftermath.

The Fencer and Golf units seemed to have a similar idea, but their flight was curtailed by a lethal onslaught from the Kessaria and two Gustav Karl units.

"You think this is mere child's play? You've misjudged," Gawman taunted, veering left in a quick retort, but the opposition anticipated him.

As Fencer doggedly launched its missiles toward the Festival Center, the thickening smoke provided the Gustav Karl a perfect cover.

*ZAGOOOOOW!*

Fencer's unit plummeted, crashing into the earth and ricocheting multiple times, culminating in an explosion at the base of a building.

The explosion, amplified by its fusion engine, wreaked havoc in the vicinity of the Festival Center. In mere moments, half of Adelaide was blanketed in searing heat. The subsequent blast razed the nearby forests.

"Ugh...!"

His companion, Golf's unit, was thrown about by the blast and collided with a building. After a significant bounce, it regained control several hundred meters in the air. The pilot, Golf, seemingly unscathed, grunted, "Fencer...!"

Spotting a Kessaria unit in close proximity, he took aim, muttering, "You bastard!"

*WHIZZ! BOOM!*

Whether this Kessaria was responsible for downing the Fencer was uncertain, but the satisfaction was palpable for Golf.

Feeling momentarily at ease, Golf contemplated using his ground missiles.

"Just watch!"

Golf turned his suit sideways, attempting to retreat towards the Adelaide Airport. Beyond the post-blast flames and smoke, the airport seemed void of viable targets.

*ZOOM! WHACK!*

"Ugh!"

Multiple beams struck Golf's unit. Its descent, accelerated by the impact, culminated in a monumental detonation among the airport edifices.

Another fusion reactor went rogue.

*DOHGOOM!*

Adelaide now seemed devoid of any towering structures.

"Damned fool!"

From an underground bunker, Commodore Kenneth Sleg screamed in fury, enraged at the friendly fire.

*THUD!*

A dislodged ceiling panel rained debris, and a pungent scent filled the air.

"Is everyone accounted for?"

Generals behind Kenneth were in a frenzy.

"The barrier!"

Kenneth, disregarding the superiors, turned to Commander Mainzer, "Is it functional?"

"It is."

"How?"

"The oscillator is compact, and power lines are buried underground."

"Perfect! Now, locate that wannabe Gundam!"

"Onscreen now!"

"Monitor number?"

"Thirty-four! Barrier S-eighteen!"

With the crew's frantic calls, Kenneth could finally pinpoint the Gundam on the screen. But with most city surveillance cameras obliterated, the room felt more claustrophobic.

"Tell Lane! Direct the Gundam!"

"Yes, sir! Lane! Lane!"

Kenneth's orders, tinged with urgency, resonated.

"Ready!"

As the Penelope and the Gundam shifted from monitor forty-one to thirty-nine, the former seemed to be pushing the latter towards the southern defensive line using missiles and beam rifles alternately.

"Prepare the barrier!"

The staff in charge of the southern barrier echoed Commander Mainzer's orders.

"Don't panic..."

Kenneth intoned.

Hathaway, witnessing the Penelope's armor in tatters, was taken aback by its astonishing agility. He sensed an intense aura from its pilot, the golden-haired Lane Aim.

Attack, then counter!

He thought.

"Argh...!"

Hathaway executed a roll, shifting the Gundam's position and adjusting its altitude.

*BRRRRRRRT!*

Sand barrels hit the Gundam's right manipulator. The blow also struck its side, but Hathaway, at that moment, swung down his beam saber.

*PSHEW!*

It severed Penelope's beam rifle, triggering an explosion. The Penelope, recoiling from the blow, retreated over Adelaide, rapidly losing altitude.

"Pursue!"

Hathaway spotted an opening.

Descending with the Gundam's blade poised, the prospect of victory hovered tantalizingly close.

But events took a dire turn for Hathaway.

In a cruel twist of fate, victory eluded him.

"Guh-!"

An involuntary scream escaped his lips. Blinding white overwhelmed his vision, feeling as though every nerve was electrified.

*GYAAAAAN!*

The sensation was that of an internal rupture—of consciousness fragmenting.

For Hathaway, sensation ended there.

The ground-based beam barrier enveloped the Gundam's frame just as the Penelope was but a few hundred meters away.

"He's..."

Incredulity played on Lane's features as he witnessed the paralyzed Gundam. Rendered immobilized, all functions halted, and it plummeted toward the surface.

The Gundam, amidst a blast, angled towards the trees as if seeking a cushion for its fall. Upon contact with the ground, the luminescence in its eyes faded rapidly.

"Yes!"

In haste, Lane descended above the Gundam, scorching its hand-held energy tube with a beam saber, rendering its beam capabilities useless.

Further crippling it, he melted multiple thrusters.

The once-potent Gundam now lay inert, its arms outstretched, awaiting further fate.

All that stood between Lane and his quarry was the cockpit's seal.

*ZZZT!*

The Penelope's feet gripped the ground, angling its body to observe the fallen Gundam.

Lane approached the cockpit. Using a rope, he descended to the Gundam's hatch, pressed its emergency release lever, and pulled.

*BOOM!*

From deep within the armor, a sound reminiscent of an explosive cough bellowed, revealing a triple-hatch.

Guided by procedure, Lane trained his weapon on the cockpit's interior. As the hatch slid open, a burnt aroma tainted the air.

"...!?"

The pilot, dressed in a flight suit, slouched with the helmet concealing the face.

Lane cautiously lifted the helmet.

Beneath it lay a face- a young man's skin scorched, dry and cracked.

"...?"

Although this face reminded him of one he had seen in a broadcast, a more overwhelming sentiment was the familiarity as if they'd met before.

"Is this him? Ah, it's him..."

Realization dawned on Lane that this was the face he had seen in the Circe Unit, leading to confusion.

"Could he be... Mafty...?"

The words to follow caught in his throat.



The notion of Kenneth Sleg being an accomplice of Mafty's was inconceivable.

The pilot's suit, which seemed designed for space, had no signs of burn damage. It did, however, bear faintly electrified dust, presumably from a powerful electric shock.

Yet, the sight of the lifeless form, still distinctly human, evoked feelings of pity and sorrow.

Holstering his pistol, Lane emerged from the Gundam's cockpit core.

He removed his helmet.

Reflecting on the situation, with a sense of looming caution, Lane felt burdened and overwhelmed.

Above, a semblance of normalcy returned—punctuated by the oppressive heat and a symphony of avian calls.

# Chapter 11

## Willy Willy

Hathaway came to due to a pervasive itch, a curtain of discomfort wrought from pain that enveloped him. Yet, this irritation didn't thrust his consciousness into the forefront. There still was no sense that his body would heed his will.

In his vision, a serene white light shimmered.

A silence like this he had once known, long ago... and with that fleeting thought, his mind slid once more into sleep.

Of course, this wasn't Adelaide.

He had been secluded in a room at a hospital managed by the Federation Forces, a renovated cottage located a dozen kilometers southeast in the suburbs of Goolwa. Time and again, in this way, Hathaway's consciousness gradually returned. He faintly recalled a young girl's visit, but it felt half-remembered, perhaps a dream. It might have been Gigi, but even that wasn't certain. For Hathaway, who had believed he would no longer meet Gigi in the realm of reality, it could have only been a dream.

"Are the burns severe?"

"Not as you'd imagine, but they're everywhere. And there's damage to his heart."

The voices of Kenneth and Gigi...

Were they in a dream, or...?

Upon truly regaining consciousness, Hathaway found himself gazing upon Kenneth Sleg.

"Looking... better, aren't we?"

"Captain?"

Moving his lips, he found comfort in their gritty sensation, a sign that his own mind was at the helm.

"You really gave us a run for our money. I'll give you that."

"Hmph..."

It wasn't a scoff. It was just the only sound he could muster.

"Are my limbs intact?"

"They're all there. Battered and burned, but minor. The Xi Gundam, huh? Impressive machinery. It should've concentrated all of the barrier's output in Adelaide, but I couldn't bring myself to kill the pilot. Good defensive system."

"Took my time researching that."

"I bet. Which factory at Anaheim Electronics built it?"

"Can I have... some water?"

Kenneth peeked into the neighboring room, inquiring about water from a nurse.

"They say you can drink some..."

Receiving a straw from the nurse, Kenneth settled into a chair beside the bed and held it to Hathaway's lips.

His eyelids felt heavy, and it seemed bothersome to signal with his eyes, but Kenneth, cautious not to miss Hathaway's reaction, carefully poured water into his mouth.

"Thank you..."

The cool rush of water, gradually warming as it flowed down his throat, was deeply comforting.

"A beam barrier?"

"Yes. Had no time to set it up. Your decoy got our ground troops feeling safe. Clever move... Uh, I mean!"

"Look, I had fewer cards to play. What happened to the Gundam with the barrier?"

"It's at Adelaide airport. Repair's gonna take time."

"Did the cockpit's barrier activate?"

"Yes, but the cockpit core was too close to the armor. The pilot ended up getting paralyzed."

"Would it have been different without the barrier's direct hit?"

"Lane admitted defeat. Grateful for the valuable experience."

"I see. So I'm being groomed as a pilot trainee?"

Hathaway felt at ease, realizing the gaps in his memory.

"How long has it been since I was shot down?"

"Four days."

"..."

He figured as much.

"Tell me, Hathaway. Who is Quack Salver?"

"Wasn't he in Adelaide?"

"Don't know... I had orders to monitor those taking the lead in evacuations, but we couldn't spot him. Who is he?"

"I haven't met him either."

"Well, once you're up, we'll have a formal interrogation, okay?"

Though Kenneth said this, Hathaway sensed he wasn't telling the whole truth.

The interrogation of Mafty was never meant to take place.

It had been resolved in the emergency cabinet meeting the day prior, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff had accepted this decision.

When Kenneth learned of this, he was genuinely incensed, promptly submitting his resignation to the Integrated Command.

Throughout this operation, Kenneth had grown increasingly disillusioned with the Federation's organizational structure. The lack of an interrogation for Mafty implicitly signaled his execution.

To remain a part of such an institution was unbearable.

Therefore, his resignation, though on paper due to his failure in defending Adelaide, was essentially guaranteed acceptance.

Federation bureaucrats, ever eager to clearly place blame, would welcome someone like Kenneth willingly assuming responsibility.

In Kenneth's rank, it was common practice to deflect blame onto subordinates, and this had become a perverse norm in their world.

"It's inevitable," Hathaway remarked.

With a wry smile, Kenneth stood, "Gigi did visit you, but you didn't notice?"

"Is that so..."

"Yes, but it seems a future visit won't be possible."

"Why?"

"Too much noise around. I sent her back to Hong Kong using what remains of my authority."

But this was a lie.

Gigi was still here, but after submitting his resignation, he couldn't just bring her to such a place.

Though they were granted a cottage, this place was a military hospital, and it was unlikely that just anyone could visit someone as crucial as Mafty.

"That's good... they took her in," Hathaway nodded.

"Yes, they took in Kimberly as well. That fool is too spirited, seemingly unaware of the concept of shame."

"Won't he be punished?"

"He's not so noble-minded. If left unchecked, he intends to rejoin the Circe Unit."

Hathaway, now aware of all matters outside of his companions, seemed reassured.

A deep weariness enveloped him.

"Need rest?"

"Yes... I'd like that."

"Very well."

With a wink in response to Hathaway's answer, Kenneth called a nurse from the adjacent room to take over.

"Kenneth..." Hathaway mused. A worthy adversary indeed. But what of his allies? How many had survived? He'd need to inquire next time. With that thought, he drifted into sleep.

Commodore Kenneth Sleg was feeling depressed.

The activities of Mafty had come to an end with the shooting down of the Gundam, and thereafter, there were no signs of the insurgents' activities around Adelaide. They had disappeared without a trace. Even though their



remaining forces had been largely eradicated, the events were still vivid. Those who had sided with Mafty Navue Erin went into hiding underground. Some of the concerns the director had were left as real, lingering issues. This search was going to be troublesome.

Moreover, the same difficulties had occurred repeatedly within the Federation government. The surviving government ministers, who were responsible for running the government, had appointed replacements and gathered their credentials. They had formed a central parliament and begun consultations with the military regarding the post-Mafty campaign to suppress the insurgents. Their shameless expediency was very much in line with the Federation Assembly's *modus operandi*. They never seem to learn.

And last night, at a special meeting in Gourwa, it was decided to execute Mafty Navue Erin. Mafty that is, Hathaway Noa, was to be executed as soon as he was well enough to stand. Before that, he was supposed to face a military trial, but even that had become uncertain this morning, as it seemed the trial might not proceed beyond a mere formality.

Even if one acknowledges that those who witnessed the Adelaide tragedy have a right to demand retribution against Mafty, this decision seemed almost childishly petulant. However, the ministers felt constrained by the paranoid notion that they must set an example for the other underground dissenters. Given their temperament, this was expected. In this sense, Kenneth's failure to completely eliminate the Mafty group was a significant blunder.

"When can I retire?"

Kenneth pondered, stepping into the intense afternoon sun, crossed the road from the cottage serving as a hospital, following the shade of a lush tree-lined street, and returned to the mansion that was the command post of the Circe Unit.

"Commodore, Captain Bright Noa has arrived," Francine Baxter, who occupied the desk at the entrance hall, informed him.

Kenneth's heart skipped a beat. He was aware of the relationship between Hathaway and Bright. However, Bright did not know that Mafty was Hathaway.

"Ah... right..."

Standing in front of the door near the staircase, Kenneth took a deep breath.

"Meeting the son, then the father..."

Kenneth wished for Gigi's luck in moments like these, but he still hadn't truly grasped the relationship between the two.

Yet, opening the door felt unbearably heavy.

Standing with a dignified expression by the fireplace was Bright Noa and his deputy, Raegen Hamsett, awaiting Kenneth.

"My apologies for keeping you waiting. I just heard that Mafty has regained consciousness."

"Oh, really? Any useful intel?"

"Unexpectedly mature for his age..."

Kenneth paused, realizing he had been separating Hathaway, Mafty, and Bright in his mind. What he was about to say concerned the son of the man before him. Kenneth felt a weight settling upon him, struggling to find the words. A dizziness overwhelmed him.

Bright had arrived in Adelaide the day after the Gundam was shot down. His fleet had not arrived in time to defend against Mafty. But over the past four days, Kenneth had requested Bright's mobile suit units to help hunt down the remnants of Mafty and take care of the rescued Gigi. He hadn't given much thought to the relationship between the two.

Now, this relationship stood before Kenneth as a tangible barrier.

*"I shouldn't have met with this man..."* Kenneth thought.

Dispelling Kenneth's doubts, Bright asked, "I heard you submitted your resignation. Is it true?"

"I did. I inadvertently eliminated most of the ministers, didn't I? It's only natural. If you were to take over, the remaining ministers would be satisfied, isn't that right, Captain Bright?"

"How do you figure? In your case, Commodore Kenneth, you managed to shoot down Mafty's main mobile suit even with limited time. They won't accept your resignation. Just like mine has been ignored for three years."

"That might be true under normal circumstances. But this time is different. The higher-ups make quick decisions."

Kenneth felt compelled to be verbose as he had to keep the conversation going to avoid dwelling on his own sentiments.

"Do you know why your resignation was not accepted, Captain Noa?"

"No, why?"

"There's a rumor. Since you were in charge of the Newtype unit, you were, in a way, held hostage by the Federation Forces."

"Hostage? Myself, you mean?"

"Well, it's a harsh way to put it. But Amuro Ray, Kamille Bidan? You've had such outstanding pilots, these so-called Newtypes, under your command. The idea was to keep them close, to use them as shields should a Newtype uprising occur within the Federation Forces. It's what I've heard."

"Using them as a shield, huh..." Bright glanced towards his deputy.

"Do I truly possess the capacity for such manipulation?" He said with a wry smile.

"You do. This idea seems to have a strong hold on the bureaucrats, and the military followed suit. Besides, wouldn't politicians and military leaders alike be most inconvenienced if Bright Noa, of all people, began making Newtype-centric statements? Hence, your detainment."

Kenneth pondered this, drawing parallels with Hathaway and his father, struggling to shake off these thoughts.

But they persisted.

After ensuring Bright's fleet would continue its operations against the insurgents, Kenneth escorted them out of the command center.

The weariness he felt, more intense than after any battle command, nearly overwhelmed him. Taking a seat on a sofa in the spacious lounge where his

secretary Francine could be seen, Kenneth sipped tea, downed a nutrient supplement, and caught his breath.

"I'm at a loss..."

His thoughts were interrupted just as he was ascending the stairs by the arrival of General Medinum Guggenheim, Chief of Staff at the military headquarters. His face was etched with grave concern.

"General?"

"No need for concern. Let's head to your office."

Guggenheim followed Kenneth up the stairs, close behind.

"Please, have a seat. Is there a matter you wish to discuss?"

"Yes, well... We at the General Headquarters have decided to accept your request for retirement. I am here to convey that decision."

"I am humbled by your acknowledgment of my request..."

While motioning for the general to take a seat in front of the desk, Kenneth showed a sense of deference.

"What need is there for such formality? We have deliberated extensively in today's council meeting and decided to accept your honorable request to step down. We are deeply impressed by your integrity. Under normal circumstances, your achievements – the downing of the Xi Gundam and the eradication of Mafty – should have balanced out any fault on your part. But casualties included cabinet members, didn't they? The military couldn't possibly absolve all responsibilities."

Kenneth appreciated the consideration. It reassured him that there were still some in the highest echelons of the organization with a shred of humanity.

But the conversation soon took a darker turn.

"Retirement is immediate?"

"Well, there's a stipulation... it's about the reduction in your retirement pay as a part of your exoneration."

"Huh...?"

"The pension after retirement won't remain at your current rank. It will be reduced down a level, equivalent to the rank of Captain."

"Ah, that's fine. So, when does this take effect?"

Kenneth quickly redirected the conversation, sensing a disconnect in the General's sympathy.

"Well, it will take effect after everything is settled, and that includes the execution of Mafty."

"Execution? Will I be in charge of that?"

"If not, then how will Operation Adelaide be wrapped up?"

Kenneth swiveled his chair to face the window behind him.

The outside's glaring red hurt his eyes. On the south-facing slope outside the window, plants with reddish stems and even redder flowers basked in the sunlight.

After a long pause, he asked, "Who's my successor?"

"Captain Bright Noa."

"He requested retirement before I did."

Kenneth turned back to the aging General Guggenheim.

"I'm aware. We'll accommodate Captain Noa's wishes. He'll stay here for three months, after which we'll assign a replacement."

"And the date of Mafty's execution?"

"I visited the hospital with Richard—he's quite the energetic young man." Richard referred to another general stationed here.

"Early tomorrow morning. If the insurgents learn Mafty's alive, they might retaliate. We must act swiftly."

"A military trial?"

"As decided yesterday. Military trials aren't for executing foes. They're for internal breaches of military conduct. Rebels, on the other hand, require a more... adaptable approach."

"But—"

Kenneth, now increasingly agitated, hurried his next question.

"If the Cabinet decided on Mafty's execution, then the execution order will be in the name of the Cabinet, right?"

"That won't be the case. They won't sully their name."

"Pardon?"

"It will be in the name of the Pacific region's military district commander – you. Surely not Captain Bright Noa, your successor?"

Kenneth sat in silence, looking at the ceiling, resigned to the fact that executing one's own child might be more merciful.

# Chapter 12

## Before the Day

Kenneth Sleg ceased his gaze at the ceiling, and when he looked at Medinum Guggenheim, he noticed the old man's eye mucus for the first time.

".....?"

"Do you know who the current Mafty really is, General? He might be one of Mafty, but he isn't the Mafty itself."

"I'm aware. Mafty is an organization, and another Mafty will eventually emerge. I'm not concerned with the current Mafty's identity. However, the fact that the Federation government hasn't retaliated after Mafty's audacious assassination of ministers means there will be significant public backlash."

"Indeed... This matter is too heavy for me to keep to myself. I need your discretion, General."

With a hint of faltering courage, Kenneth felt compelled to share this, although he contemplated remaining silent.

"Why? Did you make him talk?"

"Of course not... He wouldn't talk. But, by chance, I found out the current Mafty's identity. His name is Hathaway Noa."

"Noa?"

"Yes. *That* Noa."

"Does his father know?"

The General, appearing genuinely troubled, glanced around the room as if reflecting on the vagaries of life.

"It's a good thing. We might have seen a father execute his son if we had discharged you immediately. It's a divine intervention."

"What becomes of me?"

"You see to your duties, Commodore."

Kenneth couldn't resist the old man's words. If he dared to resist here, executing Hathaway would be easy, and it would be done by Bright.

"Is the transition of duties going smoothly?"

"With Captain Noa?"

"Yes."

The old man stood.

"Just a matter concerning the Adelaide region. It seems almost resolved. I take it I may leave this place once the mission is over?"

"Do so. You seem to have your own concerns. If you wish to reside on Earth, I'll grant you that."

Kenneth couldn't believe the surprisingly lenient words from the General. By saying this, the General should perceive Kenneth as a potential agitator.

However, the following day proved otherwise. Due to an oversight or a deliberate move in the bureaucratic system, both Kenneth and Gigi were granted a legitimate Earth residency permit by the Federation government.

But that was a concern for another time.

"A rather unusual decision, isn't it? I was under the impression my resignation had been approved?"

Bright Noa mused, seated in the captain's quarters of the Ra Cailum, even as he acknowledged General Richard Crescendo while clarifying his own position.

"It's only for three months... a commitment on behalf of the headquarters. If you have reservations, I can fetch the President's signature for reassurance."

"The new president hasn't arrived here yet, have they?"

"All in due time. And tell me, Captain, if Mafty's resistance had been more tenacious, wouldn't we be in the thick of combat right now? Surely, you were prepared for an operation spanning at least three months?"

"I'll give you that."

"Now that the uncertainties in this region are largely quelled and once Captain Kenneth concludes Mafty's execution tomorrow, there'd be little left to oversee. Perhaps you'd simply be mobilized for Adelaide's reconstruction."

"While that's a fair point, if you put it that way, I might consider it a bit of a vacation..."

"Think of it as a much-deserved break. Isn't your son studying as a botanical observer nearby? Pay him a visit. Oh, and I almost forgot – in light of the circumstances, permission can be arranged if you wish to call your family down to Earth."

"Thank you, that's generous. I could visit Hathaway, but my family..."

"Why?"

"I owe it to my subordinates as well."

The General chuckled heartily, "Being so principled, you make it hard for your crew to relax! Rotate them out periodically for some leisure. They'll hardly feel incentivized if you don't set the example and rest."

General Crescendo was visibly pleased. "Prepare a Launch for me. I'm off to survey the Murray River with General Guggenheim."

"Surveying the river?"

"For fishing spots, naturally."

"Ah, of course!" Bright stood up, exchanging a firm handshake with the General. "Well, even if there's some activity related to Mafty, it would be

somewhere else, and restructuring Mafty would take time. You should relish your final military days on this red continent."

"Thank you."

As Bright observed the departing launch carrying the General towards the coastline, he mused about how it evoked old navy scenes. The spaceship Ra Cailum gleamed in the unique summer sunlight of this continent as it floated in the vast bay and seemed like a relic of another time.

"The tides..."

Bright murmured, feeling a sudden envelopment of everyday grandeur. The absence of combat had an uncanny ability to unburden the soul. Apart from the Ra Cailum, the other two vessels should have landed in St. Vincent Bay facing Adelaide, deploying their mobile suit squads for the restoration tasks.

"What's the plan?"

"Hmm. Just as the general suggested, it might be good to relax. The ship will return to Adelaide, and I plan to return here by midnight. The execution of Mafty is scheduled for early dawn, and I intend to witness it."

"There's no need for that. Given the General's stance, it's best to leave it to Commodore Sleg."

Executive Officer Raegen seemed exasperated by Bright's meticulous nature.

"True, but I've been appointed his successor. I think it's best to at least meet the Commodore."

"That's excessively considerate of you."

Bright, amused by Raegen's words, waved dismissively and ordered, "Prepare us for takeoff."

As the day descended into evening, the sky painted a deep red over Adelaide Airport. Bright Noa, having landed, stood in front of the Xi Gundam, now situated at the less-damaged southern end of the airstrip. He had observed this machine from a distance upon his arrival yet had never taken the opportunity to approach it this closely.

Silence.

The form, worthy of the Gundam title, was evident. Yet, in comparison to the Gundams of yore, it seemed somewhat more formidable.

"Where was this one manufactured?" Bright inquired of the lone mechanic he had brought along.

"According to the reports from the Circe Unit, the origin remains unknown," the mechanic said, referencing the data on his handheld tablet.

"There's no tangible evidence or any trace of its manufacturing plant."

"Hmm... It bears the craftsmanship of Anaheim Electronics," deduced Bright from his impression of the suit. "There have been suspicions leaning toward that, yet neither Circe nor Headquarters have confirmed anything, right?"

"That is correct, sir," the mechanic replied.

"That's the world of adults for you," mused Bright.

Though appearing lightly scorched, the armor seemed to retain its fundamental integrity. The outstretched manipulators, however, gave the Gundam a crucifix-like silhouette. Their ends, charred and mangled, conveyed a painful sight. Ascending the maintenance platform and lifting the protective sheet, Bright could peer into the partially opened cockpit.

Inside, save for the cracked surface of the visual display, it appeared ready for operation.

"It's very much a Gundam," Bright mused again, "but there's an added complexity to this machine that doesn't sit well with me."

The thought of his son, Hathaway, piloting this cockpit never crossed Bright's mind.

"But Captain," began the mechanic while on the maintenance platform, "isn't it unsettling that these insurgents are using a mobile suit bearing the name 'Gundam'?"

Bright stepped back, looking up at the soot-covered face of the Gundam, "Not particularly. Historically, Gundams, even those within the Federation, were piloted by individuals with a rebellious spirit. And the end for a Gundam has always been somewhat tragic – decapitated, scorched, or torn apart. But that rebellious spirit? It always persisted, even long after the Gundam was gone."

"Is that how it is?"

The mechanic, following Bright down from the platform, cast one last upward glance at the Gundam, lingering on its imposing figure.



# Chapter 13

## Shooting

"Early tomorrow morning, by firing squad..."

Hathaway lay on the bed, looking at the two men.

"Yes, it is abrupt, but we were waiting for your condition to stabilize," one of the men replied.

"Waiting?"

"Yes. Until today, we've been holding off the top brass' demands for your immediate execution. Of course, there have been movements within the military and the Federation government to prevent your execution, but it was officially decided this evening."

Hathaway listened and knew all those words were lies.

"We express respect for your valiant efforts as a warrior. This is a message from Commodore Kenneth Sleg and his Circe Unit."

These were the only words the Commander, who had been listening silently to his colleague's clerical report, spoke.

"Wasn't he a Captain?" Hathaway asked, confused.

"Yes. He was recognized for valor against your attacks and promoted to Commodore."

"I see. That's good."

"As you say."

"We will pick you up at 4:50 a.m. tomorrow."

"Ah... I have one concern."

The two officers, about to leave Hathaway's room with a salute, paused.

"Was hanging also considered for my execution?"

At Hathaway's question, the officers exchanged a fleeting glance at one another. Then the Commander spoke.

"Some damn fool in the cabinet thought so. Three days ago, he said even if you're unconscious, it should be done..."

The Lieutenant Commander pulled at the Commander's arm, cutting him off.

"Rest easy, then."

And they left.

Hathaway closed his eyes. He was not shaken.

From the moment he joined Mafty, he was prepared for this outcome if he were captured. It was a year and some months, considering all that had

happened until today. Instead, he felt a lightness, as if some self-imposed pressure had dissipated.

Perhaps he had sensed this coming.

It may explain why he acted the way he did towards Gigi.

"I'll never see Keria Dace again..."

He regretted not meeting her, even at Darwin Point.

There was a light knock at the door, and Chief Nurse Helena McGovern peeked in.

"Do you need a word processor?"

Her demeanor was filled with kindness and care, unmistakably stemming from her knowledge of Hathaway's fate.

"Why would I?"

"If you wish to write a will..."

He had forgotten entirely.

Helena stood calmly beside his bed, noticing Hathaway's peaceful expression.

Although her bust was noticeably larger, she looked about the same age as Hathaway's mother, Mirai.

"I didn't intend to write, but I might. Leave it here."

"Anything else you'd like?"

Her smile was forced, but it was brimming with compassion.

"Well... How about an apple? Can I get a yellow apple? I want to eat one."

"I think we can find one somewhere if that's what you want. Despite this being the military, Commodore Sleg seems to have some goodwill towards you."

She was the epitome of magnanimity.

Hathaway was grateful to meet such a nurse on his final night.

"I'm sorry for what we did to Adelaide... We owe the civilians a huge apology."

"Yes... But thanks to your suggestion to evacuate, most citizens were saved. There's no fault in how you attacked."

"Thank you, Helena."

"Shall I? I'll have Margarita bring it..."

"Thanks. I might also need an envelope."

"Yes, of course..."

Helena made a circle with her right hand's thumb and index finger, then left.

"So Kenneth Sleg is in charge? Fate has a funny way of circling back," Hathaway mused. His body was no longer unbearably sore, and his limbs had regained some semblance of motion. As a result, he couldn't bring himself to resent the decisions made for the night.

"If they could've, I would've wished for them to kill me while I was unconscious. But that would hardly qualify as an execution, would it?" A weary chuckle escaped him, and he drifted into a brief reprieve of slumber.

When he awoke next, it was to find the nurse Margarita attempting to leave, a word processor discreetly placed on his bedside table. Their eyes met, her deep blue irises locking onto his.

"Oh... I'm sorry."

"No need," he smiled.

Suddenly, tears spilled from her eyes.

"Margarita..."

"I just—it's so sudden."

Still searching for a handkerchief, Margarita muttered an apology and vanished behind the door.

Adjacent to the word processor lay an assortment of papers and envelopes thoughtfully arranged. A brown lacquered fountain pen had been set aside as a paperweight. Touched by the nurses' care, Hathaway forced himself to focus on the ceiling, reminding himself to maintain his composure for what little time he had left.

"Dying is something everyone has done; I should be able to do it just as well," he muttered, almost like a mantra.

Dinner was still a liquid meal. Head Nurse Helena McGovern was the one to assist him.

But when no apple appeared, he acted like he'd forgotten about it.

"How about a regular meal tomorrow morning? What would you prefer?"

"Given the early hour and the execution, something easy on the stomach would be nice."

"Oatmeal?"

"Do you know what porridge is?"

"Of course. Chinese-style, Japanese-style, Thai? There are options."

"Japanese-style, and make it simple."

"Understood, Mafty."

As time passed, Hathaway stared at the word processor. The only recipients he could think of for a letter were his parents and his sister, Cheimin. But writing a letter would mean using his real name, a fact that prevented him from taking up pen and paper. "I could ask Kenneth, but that would be pitiful," he thought.

It was late into the night when a knock came at the door.

"Come in."

Nurse Helena peeked her head in, "A gift of an apple has arrived from the Commodore. Would you like to eat it?"

"Yes, I'd like that."

"Alright."

"Helena."

"Yes?"

"I want to practice standing. Can you assist me?"

"Certainly, although..."

Helena seemed reluctant.

"I have to stand by morning. I want to practice."

"Alright."

She cleared the bedside table and lifted the blanket for him.

As Hathaway slowly maneuvered himself, his feet touched the ground. His tightened skin seemed to crackle.

The strain showed on his forehead, and he could feel sweat breaking out.

"You shouldn't force yourself," Helena cautioned, attempting to lift his legs back onto the bed.

"No, I have to stand!"

"Very well."

Reluctantly, Helena lowered his legs and supported his upper body.

The smell of middle-aged womanhood seemed to pull Hathaway towards the abyss of defeat, perhaps because it forever linked him to thoughts of his mother.

"..."

Hathaway tried to put his feet on the floor while leaning on Helena. But then, a dull pain surged through his body, starting from the soles of his feet. He gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on Helena's shoulder, even as piercing pain ran up his bandaged fingers. But still, he tried to stand.

"Are you alright?"

"Go ahead..."

Sensing her patient's psychological state, Helena applied her own strength to aid him. She timed it perfectly, allowing Hathaway to rise.

"..."

A thud. The weight of his body sank from his sides down to his thighs. It felt like his bones and skin were crying out.

"You okay?"

"I'm standing, aren't I? If it's a firing squad, I don't need to stand for long, do I?"

"I wouldn't know about that..."

Helena hesitated, fumbling, as she released her arms from around him.

"Tell the Commodore to stop with the ceremonial stuff and not make it any more painful..."

"I will relay that. After the apple, certainly..."

Hathaway eased himself back onto the bed and took a deep breath. He felt ready. Margarita peeled an apple for him, and he ate it. It was harder and lacked the crunch he had expected, a disappointment.

"..."

Watching Hathaway's cracked and parched face, Margarita shed tears again.

"Your skin was just starting to look better..."

"It was good. You should eat it..."

"I can't."

Staring at the apple on her fork, Margarita made the sign of the cross over her chest with her left hand and left without a word.

"Mom, Dad."

Facing death before his parents and doing so by his own principles seemed overly individualistic.

"It's because I encountered Newtypes and aspired to be one, without reflecting on my own capabilities. It wasn't about Quess Paraya or the war..."

Past midnight, such thoughts lined up in Hathaway's mind. But even then, they lacked solid logic.

"Even Gigi seemed to be saying something like that... it was a dream. I must have been dreaming...all this time..."

Gigi Andalusia had been staying in a house next to the mansion used by Kenneth Sleg. She was, in essence, a prisoner until Kenneth chose to leave the area. Bandages covered her cheeks—a result of long wanderings in the forest to evade detection by Kimberly and the others.

She decided to wait for the rescue team sent by Kenneth, grateful that among them was Lieutenant Minecche Kestalgino, who had been kind to her in Alice Springs. The team was pleased to see her return; their victory was made possible by her, and so they escorted her to Kenneth.

At dinner time, Kenneth called her. She promptly showered and changed. She was fortunate to receive military attire, so her appearance was somewhat respectable. Her room, devoid of even a single CD, was filled only with the distant sounds of birds and beasts. The clamor of machinery was nowhere to be heard, save for the distant landing sound of a Base Jabber just once.

Lake Alexandrina reflected the shadows of stars and adorned a window without curtains. She lay there, sleep eluding her, yet not dwelling on Hathaway. Ever since Kenneth had told her that Hathaway's execution would be carried out just two hundred meters from her lodging in the garden of a commandeered mansion, she had steeled herself for it.

"I can't believe he'll be gone," were the only words that escaped her lips in the course of several hours.

The clock had now struck four times near the front door, having chimed every hour. The following half-hour felt much longer. At 4:30 a.m., she put on the jacket she had been wearing since Hong Kong and left the house.

"Where to?" a guard inquired.

"To the mansion where Mafty will be executed," she replied.

"You won't be allowed to watch."

"That's fine. I'm just going to see the Commodore."

"Please return promptly. I'd be the one to catch hell from the Commodore."

"Yes, I intend to."

The morning air was sorrowfully fresh. Tire tracks left by military vehicles were imprinted on the gravel road, a grim reminder that even here, peace was elusive. Just as Gigi arrived at the mansion where the execution was to be held, a military vehicle pulled up with the rumbling of a gasoline engine.

Gigi hesitated to enter the front yard when a guard stationed in front of the mansion sprinted toward her. Her eyes caught the officer emerging from

the vehicle, and for a moment, she mistook him for Hathaway. A soundless gasp vibrated through her.

The eyes, the cheeks, the aura emanating from the officer—it was Hathaway. Or so it seemed to her, still under the guard's forceful escort.

"Captain Noa! A pleasure to have you," saluted the guard, giving Gigi a moment of clarity.

"Then why... why is he here?!" she wanted to scream.

"The Commodore is waiting for you inside the mansion," the officer—Captain Noa—simply saluted back and entered the mansion.

The officer's voice, presence, even his breathing patterns—they were all Hathaway.

"What is happening...?" Confused and weakened, Gigi dropped onto a low stone wall that separated the front yard from the sidewalk. And as she sat there, trembling, Captain Noa entered the mansion.

"Who was that girl?" his voice echoed, and it was Hathaway's voice.

"Was Hathaway yearning to see his father?" she wondered vacantly. However, the demeanor of the Captain didn't suggest a man going to meet his son, who was about to be executed.

"What's going on... Kenneth, tell me..."

Feeling she shouldn't be here anymore, but paralyzed, unable to muster the strength to leave, she finally sat down on one of the low stone walls dividing the front yard and the sidewalk.

"Gigi?!" Kenneth's voice vaulted from the mansion, "I suspected you'd come, but cross this line, and I'll have you removed."

Grasping Gigi's arms tightly, Kenneth whispered, "You'd really kill Hathaway? In front of his own father?"

Exploding with emotion, Gigi was instantly silenced by Kenneth's hand over her mouth. "Captain Noa doesn't know that Mafty is Hathaway. I'm doing everything to avoid a public execution. Keep silent!"

Kenneth's grip was unyielding, like a vice.

"Is such a thing even possible?"

"I took on Hathaway's execution precisely to keep this from Captain Noa. What other reason could there be?"

"Hathaway... Didn't he want to meet his father?"

"You know damn well he's not that sort of man!" Kenneth thrust Gigi aside, "Let him have some peace in the end."

His visage, bathed in the dawn light, looked demonic.

"I want to see him," Gigi muttered.

"It's a man's job. Hathaway is prepared. Go away!"

"Captain..." a familiar term Gigi used for Kenneth.

"This is no place for a woman right now," he declared. Gigi broke into tears, turned her back, and bolted.

An unmarked military vehicle from the opposite direction transported Hathaway on a movable bed. Gigi, passing it, had no inkling he was inside.

"What man's job! What military!" Words raged inside her head as she ran.

The transport carrying Hathaway circled around the side of the front yard where Gigi had collapsed, then entered the backyard directly.

This garden was enclosed by ivy-covered brick walls on the left and right, and on the eastern side, the hazy colors of Lake Alexandrina under the dawn light stretched out.

At the center, with the lake at its back, stood a single pillar, lit by a spotlight from the mansion, awaiting Hathaway.

He was lifted from the wagon while still on the bed, and the bed was placed next to the pillar.

He could see nothing but light. Behind the focused light, there seemed to be a dark building, like a shadowy mansion.

Amidst the backlight, Kenneth Sleg's face emerged, hovering above his.

"Mafty Navue Erin, is that correct?"

"Yes..."

"In accordance with the Earth Federation government's General Staff Headquarters' orders, you will hereby be executed," Kenneth announced.

With those words, Kenneth instructed his officers on both sides to make Hathaway stand.

"...!!"

Once again, the struggle against pain began. The men's hands were no gentler than the nurse's, but Hathaway tried to convince himself that this was a mission, enduring the pain.

Behind Kenneth were a dozen officers and a clergyman, all with pale, rigid faces.

The absence of Bright in that courtyard was at Kenneth's discretion.

Bright had been confined within the mansion, instructed to wait until Kenneth's task was complete.

He stood with his back against the pillar.

Hathaway wondered if Helena, the head nurse, had conveyed her message to Kenneth. He wanted to know.

His wrists, still wrapped in bandages, were secured with handcuffs around the pillar, and the soldiers led him toward the illuminated area.

"Is there anything you'd like to say in your final moments?"

"As Mafty, I've said what I needed to. I believe that someday, the sound mind of humanity will protect this Earth. Until then, the mistakes made by people will continue to be corrected by Mafty."

Amidst the backlight of the spotlight, Kenneth's face seemed contorted.

"Any last confessions?" the young priest stepped forward.

"I'm sincerely grateful to everyone who has been involved with me and provided me with a fulfilling life."

Kenneth, now holding a black blindfold, stepped forward.

"Does your wrist hurt?"

"It's fine."

"Hath, you know I care about you, right?"

"Thank you."

Kenneth put on the blindfold. "We'll always be friends. Don't forget that."





"I won't, Captain."

Hathaway was glad to hear Kenneth's voice close by.

But then, the sound of Kenneth's footsteps on the lawn grew distant.

Hathaway clenched his teeth, fighting the urge to scream out with every fiber of his being.

*"Kenneth! Just get it done, dammit!"*

Perhaps Kenneth had intuitively sensed the tremor of urgency in Hathaway's internal plea. Without a moment's hesitation, the lash of a riding crop sounded.

"Fire!"

Gigi didn't hear the gunshot. Whether it was the wind or her distance, she couldn't tell. But her tears, she knew, would not cease as she continued running down the road as dawn broke, despairing.

# Chapter 14

## After That

The lights illuminating the garden had been extinguished, leaving the sky—a sky that hinted at warmth—to paint the lake below. Not just seagulls but a variety of waterfowl began to sketch arcs across the lake's surface, heralding the morning's bustle.

The body of Hathaway, known as Mafty, lay in a coffin. The soldier handling the lid wore a face of stoic solemnity as he sealed it shut. Kenneth turned away. Everything had unfolded with startling abruptness, and the chaos both he and Hathaway had feared never materialized; all was carried out with an eerie tranquility.

With a mind tinged by unease, Kenneth made for the mansion. He noticed Captain Bright Noa approaching a window that faced the lake, causing his heart to flutter momentarily.

Was it possible that Bright had seen Hathaway's face? No, the expression reflected on Bright's visage through the glass suggested he was merely observing a colleague's work.

Kenneth had arranged for Bright to wait in the entrance's reception room, where breakfast and pastries were laid out, until the execution was done. If he had recognized Hathaway, Bright wouldn't have this nonchalant demeanor. He was at ease.

Having heard the gunshots, and judging the execution to be complete, Bright must have decided to meet Kenneth in the living room. Such forthrightness was disorienting for someone in Kenneth's position.

"Well done," Bright's voice, though businesslike, was tinged with genuine concern, as he stood by the living room door that Kenneth opened.

"I—"

"How did it go?"

"What do you mean?"

"Mafty Erin."

"He faced his end with dignity and composure."

Kenneth cast a fleeting glance at the coffin, its lid now securely fastened. At this point, even if Bright were to approach, it was safe.

"Are you sure it was right to delegate the entire task to me? You didn't even supervise, instead opting to stay comfortably in the house."

"Don't misunderstand. This part was a junior officer's duty. What comes next is your job, Captain."

"Still, it must not be a pleasant feeling, right?"

Bright settled onto the sofa in front of Kenneth after watching the coffin being loaded onto a vehicle.

"I would have preferred him dying in battle," Kenneth confessed, realizing he had forgotten to bring a secretary, and therefore, could not offer any coffee.

"So, you're saying Mafty was resilient?"

"Yes. His death isn't the end of this. It leaves a lingering trail."

Kenneth couldn't muster the courage to continue the conversation.

"What do you mean?"

As Bright asked the question, Kenneth stood up and walked toward the entrance, saying, "The Federation will regret executing Mafty here."

"To incite public opinion?"

"Yes. The Spacenoids won't remain silent."

"Commodore!"

At the entrance, a doctor and a priest stopped Kenneth.

"What is it?"

"We require your signature on the examination report."

"Apologies. I'm not accustomed to this sort of work."

Kenneth borrowed a pen from the doctor and signed the document on a small table by the entrance, flashing Bright a rueful smile. Hathaway's name was nowhere on it.

*"So what becomes of Hathaway?"* Kenneth mused as he handed the document back to the doctor, who promptly slid it between files held by the execution officers. Everything was now in order.

"What about the cremation?" Bright inquired, standing by the entrance door.

"What will you do with them?" Kenneth asked the officers.

"Well, we'll take the papers to headquarters, but after that..." The two officers shrugged.

"Damn it. Adelaide ought to have a military cemetery. Even the enemy fought honorably. Request proper burials, will you?"

"Sir!"

"Convey it to headquarters from the Captain as well. Do it for me, will you?" Kenneth spoke, looking Bright in the eye.

"If a Commodore who fought them directly says so, then absolutely."

"It wouldn't be necessary for worthless enemies," Kenneth mused.

Eventually, they walked alongside to the cars lined up on the road.

"Once the mission in Adelaide is complete, you'll be retiring, Captain? What will you do?" Kenneth broke the silence.

"I'll run a restaurant with my wife at Londenion on Side 1."

"I envy you. Being single is tough at times like this," Kenneth said as he opened the car door himself and turned to Bright, "The transition of responsibilities will proceed as planned at my command center?"

"Yes, unless you have any objections to do it now, Commodore?"

"Right now?"

"If you're up for it. I'm not tired, and starting at nine doesn't leave much time in between."

"Let's say seven, I'd like to have breakfast."

"Very well."

With an unburdened smile, Bright apologized for the inconvenience and disappeared into the car.

So Hathaway had inherited such meticulousness, Kenneth realized as he entered his car.

Arriving at the command center, a mere three-minute drive away, he had Francine prepare morning tea and called Gigi. She had returned to her room.

"We can leave by noon. Is that alright?"

"Sure."

Gigi seemed like she wanted to say more but left it at that. She had little choice, being almost a prisoner, and perhaps sensed something in Kenneth's assertive demeanor. Kenneth didn't forget to order the guards at Gigi's residence to keep her from going outside.

He then proceeded with the scheduled transition meeting with Captain Bright Noa and others. Since Commander Mainzer was staying under Bright's command with the local Circe Unit, the briefing was largely a formality.

"So, we'll say our goodbyes at Staff Headquarters and I'll leave via Adelaide."

"Best of luck!"

Bright and Kenneth exchanged one final handshake.

*"Those eyes, so similar to Hathaway's..."* Kenneth stared into eyes that looked just like Hathaway's, and suddenly, tears blurred his vision.

"Regrets about the Earth Federation Forces' methods?"

"No, I'll forget it. I'm setting off on a free wandering journey. I have been granted an Earth residency permit, after all."

Exerting the last of his energy on a jest, Kenneth placed a farewell kiss on Francine, the secretary at the entrance, and left the headquarters. His journey across the mountains from Goolwa to Adelaide was made in a military limousine, with Gigi sitting beside him.

"Is this where they found you?" Kenneth finally broke the silence as they drove through the dark and winding mountain road, streaked with erratic shafts of light weaving like dark veins.

"Maybe. I can't be sure," Gigi replied, sounding vaguely displeased. Kenneth sensed her anger, presuming she was upset over his recent decision to execute Hathaway, unmindful of the risks he'd taken.

By the time they reached the deserted Adelaide Airport, its runways partially repaired to accommodate the Big Carrier from Davao, the late afternoon sun cast long shadows over piles of rubble. Kenneth mused that the rapid advances in asphalt technology from the Space Colony era made such repairs fairly straightforward.

After ushering Gigi into the carrier's cabin, Kenneth moved in front of the surviving mobile suits, where pilots from the Circe Unit led by Lane Aim stood in formation waiting for him.

"All ranks, salute!"

A nearly hundred-strong contingent of officers and soldiers saluted at Lieutenant Lane Aim's command. In different circumstances, this would be accompanied by the ceremonial trumpet of a military band.

"We are honored to have had the opportunity to gain valuable combat experience under you, Commodore Kenneth Sleg. As a token of our gratitude, we present you this gift on behalf of all members of the Penelope squadron."

Lane handed Kenneth a small gift. Not expecting this, Kenneth allowed a rare smile to grace his face, and reciprocated by handing Lane his riding crop, before boarding the Big Carrier.

This carrier would transport vital materials from Davao to Adelaide and fly right back. Kenneth and Gigi would completely transition to civilians, free from military obligations.

As the carrier flew back to Davao, Gigi's face remained rigid, her time spent in distant thought. Kenneth, meanwhile, found himself in an almost endless sleep.

By the time they reached Davao, it was close to midnight. They were met by three stern-faced officers. Kenneth moved to the civilian lounge and chartered a limousine, feeling the officers' cold, wary eyes on him and Gigi.

Kenneth sensed it was not the usual contempt they had for Gigi but a different, harder kind, as if they were on guard against both of them.

The officers bid Kenneth a perfunctory farewell, and he tried making hotel reservations after the limousine departed. Due to Mafty's recent bombing of the largest hotel, finding a reservation this late was difficult. The limousine moved at high speed as ordered by Kenneth. After several wary glances over his shoulder, he finally secured a hotel.

"Mirab Hotel," he confirmed.

"Alright," the driver agreed, changing course back toward the city.

"You, I'll need you to make do with this, but could you drop us off around here?" Kenneth passed several bills through a small plastic window separating him from the driver.

"Huh? Oh, sure."

The driver accepted the money without another word.

Kenneth had rented two rooms under an alias at the hotel, a modest establishment on a backstreet near the airport.

"Why are you angry?" Kenneth finally asked after ushering Gigi into her room.

"I can't speak... when I think about the sacrifices you've made," she responded before closing the door.

Kenneth retreated to his room a couple of doors away, emotionally suffocated by her words. Entering his room, he felt as if the lid on the emotional box he'd kept deeply buried had been blown open.

Though the room was cramped, reaching the bed from the door required only a few steps. A realization hit him: how horrible his position was, having executed a friend.

Exhausted, he collapsed onto the bed and burst into tears, and a torrent of suppressed emotions broke free. His shoulders, his back, shook like ocean waves.

His anguished sobs filled the small room almost instantaneously and showed no sign of stopping.

# Chapter 15

## Murrumbidgee

The sound of a knock at the door jerked Kenneth awake.

Startled, he realized he had fallen asleep in a heap on the bed.

Rubbing his puffy eyes as if to dispel their fatigue, he opened the door to the urgent voice of Gigi.

"Captain! Look at this!"

In the dimly lit corridor, a pallid-faced Gigi thrust the morning paper toward him.

"It says Hathaway is Mafty!"

"What?!"

Kenneth felt his eyes clear in shock as he grabbed the newspaper and scanned the headline.

Suddenly, devoid of strength, he stumbled and sank onto the floor in front of the bed.

"Mafty Executed. Adelaide's Circe Unit Retaliates. The Fury of Mafty. Is the Earth Federation Government Collapsing?"

Beneath these headlines was an exposé detailing the identity of Mafty, delving into the behind-the-scenes intricacies of the Earth Federation's turmoil and exposing the figure as the son of a Federation Forces officer.

"What does this mean?"

Recognizing the name of Captain Bright Noa in the subheading, Kenneth realized there was no need to read further.

Kenneth stared blankly at Gigi. She was reading the paper spread out on the floor, but she hadn't actually read the article either.

Kenneth was fixated on Gigi's transparent profile, yet he wasn't seeing anything at all.

"Who leaked this? From where?"

This was the thought spiraling in his head.

All the articles related to Mafty were based solely on official releases from the Federation government and the General Staff Headquarters. Hence, there were no details about the execution process. The responsible party for the execution was listed as Captain Bright Noa, the newly appointed commander of the South Pacific District. The article only mentioned that Hathaway Noa, known as Mafty Navue Erin, was executed at the hands of the Captain, in other words, by his own father.

The headlines, however, were the newspaper's own spin.

"Who's quoted here?"

"Uh, General Me-Medinum Guggenheim..."

"I see..."

On hearing the general's name, Kenneth stood up, realizing his mistake of revealing information about Hathaway to the man.

"This is a farce, orchestrated..."

Yet the article framed Captain Bright Noa as the embodiment of loyalty to the Earth Federation government, highlighting his heroic actions as an unwavering soldier. It also depicted Hathaway, or Mafty Navue Erin, as having reflected upon the inhumane terrorism carried out as Mafty and accepting his execution with dignity.

But the overall impression was that the Earth Federation government was resorting to intimidation, trying to gain sympathy by showing how they were quelling subversive elements.

Kenneth was left speechless.

"Even if this is all fabricated, what will become of Hathaway's family?"

Gigi uttered this with a gasp, having skimmed through the article.

Kenneth was already on the phone.

"Is there a flight that goes as far away from Davao as possible? Yes, I arrived late last night."

"....?"

Gigi stared at Kenneth, bewildered by the dark timbre of his voice.

"What's wrong?"

"If we stay here, we can't complain if we're made to 'disappear.'"

Kenneth's dark, theatrical voice conveyed a painful decision.

"Ah..."

Gigi's reply caught in her throat.

"I see... Japan, huh? Japan? Expensive? How much? Oh, I've got two."

While gazing into Gigi's eyes, Kenneth responded.

Gigi finally grasped their situation from Kenneth's theatrically gloomy tone. Kenneth had turned Gigi into his lover.

Kenneth's next actions seemed choreographed to dupe onlookers — it was the best way to distract from their situation.

"Well? We depart in an hour? Fine. A car will be arranged? An unclean car from the hotel? That's fine."

An hour later, a jet took off from a private airport on the outskirts of Davao, launching a weather observation balloon. Kenneth and Gigi settled into the small seats in the cabin, where a draft was blowing in.

"The Earth Federation is trying to appeal to the public's sympathy by emphasizing how it was trampled upon by Mafty and other insurgents. But this might actually backfire..."

Kenneth mused, staring at the lush green landscape of Mindanao Island disappearing into the distance.

Gigi agreed, not fully comprehending but trusting Kenneth's words.

"Bright will never appear for a TV interview. Public opinion will not react as the government and the military expect..."





"True..."

Her thoughts strayed to the image of the stern Captain Bright Noa, filling her with sorrow.

"I wonder what will happen?"

"To the world?"

"No, to Captain Noa..."

"Bright will find out about his son being Mafty through that paper.

However, there will be no evidence, no proof. He will be perplexed and will retire."

"Why would that happen!?"

Gigi was astonished at Kenneth's grim prediction, more than she had ever been since meeting the Count.

"It's easy to say that this article was leaked by Mafty's side and dodge the issue."

Kenneth's words were a shock to Gigi.

"No way! But that article...!"

Gigi was on the verge of unraveling.

"The military only revealed factual information. Anyone can make up a story like that. Besides, Gigi, you can only verify facts when you're faced with them."

"But, Captain..."

Gigi started to speak but stopped. Kenneth was the man who had prevented Bright and Hathaway from meeting. Whether that was good or bad, she wasn't sure.

However, Kenneth could not have done anything more.

"I'm sorry, okay? I have to work for a bit..."

A young man from the cockpit began his task of releasing a weather balloon with meteorological instruments.

Through a small window, Kenneth and Gigi were baptized by a fierce gust of wind.

"Next one's in thirty minutes."

"That's quite a job, isn't it?"

While wrapping another scarf around Gigi, Kenneth smiled.

"Well then, take your time."

The jet seemed to be moving away from the islands of the Philippines.

"Having the father execute his son. Would public opinion forgive the Earth Federation Government and military? Rather, those who know Mafty's principles would support Mafty even more."

Kenneth enlightened Gigi.

"Really?"

"Yes."

When Kenneth and Gigi arrived at the airport in Taoyuan, Taiwan, another jet of the same type was waiting.

"You're the ones going to Japan, huh?"

"Yes, why?"

"Lunch and water aren't included; you'll have to pay extra. Are you okay with that?"

The pilot named a ludicrously high price.

Kenneth silently paid for it.

"That's the spirit. Oh, looks like something came up. Care to read a newspaper fax?"

"Which edition?"

"Today's evening edition. The printed version hasn't been released yet."

"How much?"

"It's on the house."

With that, the pilot handed Kenneth a sizable roll of fax paper and said, "Kyuushuu okay?"

Kenneth and Gigi didn't recognize the name of the place.

"If it's Japan, it's fine."

"You have a nice voice, you know?"

The pilot closed the cockpit door and took off. They were soon over the sea.

"Look here, Gigi. Rebuttals from Mafty's side have appeared."

Kenneth showed Gigi the fax paper.

"Hathaway Noa is a Newtype with a history of shooting down the mobile suits of Char's rebel army. That's why he, claiming to be Mafty Navue Erin, took action against the Earth Federation government's policy of disregarding Earth's restoration. Despite this, the Earth Federation government ignored such protests entirely and, as a means of retaliation against Hathaway Noa, forced his father to carry out the execution, an unbelievable act that ignored humanity."

Such arguments were posted in several articles, and in the form of reader's letters, there were those who represented Mafty's opinion. Above all, various media companies began to protest the hasty actions of the Earth Federation government, and the argument that 'Why was Adelaide bombed?' became stronger.

"Does this pilot think we are Mafty?"

"Probably. Many from Mafty escaped from Adelaide."

"Did you know that Japan is Hathaway's country?"

"It was his mother's birthplace..." Kenneth answered, taking a bite of a sandwich.

"Yes. That's why I'm happy... It's the first time I can go to a friend's country..."

Kenneth thought, 'Is that so.'

Perhaps it was due to Gigi's forlorn demeanor that he felt drawn to her—a metamorphosis of Kenneth himself. Initially smitten by power, he gradually discovered the allure of vulnerability and sought to become its protector. He thought, 'This is the role of a man.'

"Could it be a good place for you then, you think?" Kenneth mused.

"It's sparsely populated, and the climate is nice. That's where I'll die," Gigi responded.

Only the sound of jets stirred their hearts.

"What will you do, Captain?" she inquired.

"Well, even if the current Federation government falls and something new arises, the same organizational flaws will probably surface. Maybe prepare for the next Mafty?" Kenneth speculated.

"The next Mafty?"

"Yes, it could be a hundred years from now, but I'd like to create an organization that can revive someone like Char Aznable, Hathaway, or even Amuro."

"I see... You seem better now, Captain."

"Do I? Once the dust settles, I'll swing by Mace's place and apologize. 'Sorry for being deceived by a young woman'... and then move on to the next job."

"Heh heh heh... a young woman, huh?"

"Yeah, she was a real piece of work," Kenneth admitted.

As they spoke, a series of small islands came into view on the right.

"Is that Japan?"

"Not yet, I'd wager," Gigi answered.

She imagined that henceforth, the name Hathaway Noa would be known wherever humanity lives as Mafty Navue Erin, which signifies 'the Just King of Prophets.' It would be likened to the term Murrumbidgee, an Aboriginal word meaning 'a river that will never run dry.' That's how it would be—legendary, even mythical. But for now, the world was still littered with raw realities: a father's agony, a mother's sorrow, a sister's despair...

And Gigi felt sad. It was for the Count too, and Kenneth, sitting next to her, sipping on his expensive water.

For a while longer, until the memory of Hathaway's warmth faded, hard times lay ahead for Gigi.