

The cover art features a central character, a young woman with short blonde hair, wearing a grey and red flight suit and holding a large blue and red Gundam rifle. She is standing in front of a large blue Gundam mobile suit. In the foreground, the back of a person with long brown hair is visible. The background is a dark blue space with a bright yellow star and a yellow star-shaped object. The title 'MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM SEED' is at the top, with 'SEED' in a large, stylized blue font. The subtitle 'DESERT TIGER' is at the bottom in a large, stylized blue font.

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM ^{シード}SEED

DESERT TIGER

TRANSLATION BY ZEONIC|SCANLATIONS

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MOBILE SUIT
GUNDAM ^{シード} SEED

DESERT TIGER

MOBILE SUIT
GUNDAM SEED
ART GALLERY
Illustrated by
TOMOFUMI OGASAWARA
TM/FA-803
LAGOWE





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MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM SEED

MAIN CHARACTERS

EARTH ALLIANCE FORCES

Kira Yamato: A Coordinator boy who was thrust into the role of X-105 pilot when ZAFT launched its attack.

Flay Allster: A girl Kira has long admired. When ZAFT takes her father's life, she enlists in the military, driven by a hunger for revenge.

Tolle Koenig: A friend of Kira's. When ZAFT's assault upends their lives, he steps forward with his friends to volunteer as crew aboard the Archangel.

Miriallia Haw: Tolle's girlfriend. She joins her friends in volunteering to crew the Archangel.

Kuzzey Buskirk: A member of Kira's circle, though he quietly wrestles with whether volunteering for the Archangel was the right call.

Sai Argyle: A friend of Kira's. Swept up in ZAFT's attack, he volunteers for duty aboard the Archangel.

Mu La Flaga: A lieutenant commander with the Atlantic Federation. A celebrated ace pilot who earned the title "Hawk of Endymion."

Murrue Ramius: A lieutenant commander serving the Atlantic Federation. With the Archangel's captain lost in ZAFT's assault, she steps up to take command.

Kojiro Murdoch: Chief Petty Officer with the Atlantic Federation. A stubborn man with the soul of a craftsman, but his skills are beyond question.

Natarle Badgiruel: A lieutenant junior grade with the Atlantic Federation. Hailing from a long line of military officers, she is a cold and uncompromising woman who prioritizes mission success above all else.

Jackie Tonomura: Chief Petty Officer with the Atlantic Federation. Serves as a controller in the Archangel's CIC.

Arnold Neumann: Ensign with the Atlantic Federation. Takes the helm of the Archangel after ZAFT's assault leaves the ship critically short-staffed.

ZAFT

Athrun Zala: A young ace pilot assigned to the Creuset Team. He and Kira have been close friends since their days at preparatory school.

Yzak Joule: An ace pilot in the Creuset Team. A young man consumed by an extraordinary sense of pride and an obsessive hunger for glory.

Nicol Amalfi: The youngest ace pilot in the Creuset Team. His gentle disposition leaves him troubled by doubts about the war.

Dearka Elsman: An ace pilot in the Creuset Team. A young man who maintains a perpetually sardonic demeanor.

Rau Le Creuset: A ZAFT commander who conceals his true face behind a mask. He leads an elite unit with designs on capturing the "G" units.

Lacus Clyne: Beloved daughter of Siegel Clyne, Chairman of the PLANT Supreme Council, and Athrun's fiancée.

Andrew Waldfeld: The formidable commander at the head of ZAFT's ground forces across the North Africa theater. Known far and wide as the "Desert Tiger."

Aisha: Waldfeld's lover. A striking woman whose exotic beauty is matched only by the quiet mystery that surrounds her.

Martin DaCosta: Waldfeld's adjutant. A sharp and capable young officer, though his superior's eccentricities keep him on his toes more often than he'd like.

DESERT DAWN

Cagalli Yula: A fierce-tempered girl who fights as part of the Desert Dawn, a resistance movement standing against ZAFT.

Sahib Ashman: A shrewd man who leads the Desert Dawn, a resistance organization opposing ZAFT.

Kisaka: A member of the Desert Dawn. A quiet, towering man who supports Cagalli from the shadows and in the open alike.

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM SEED MECHANICS

GAT X-105 STRIKE GUNDAM

The most adaptable of the five X-Number machines. Through the use of three interchangeable equipment packs, it is capable of responding to virtually any battlefield scenario. The name "Gundam" is derived from the initials of the onboard OS, and has become the unit's standard designation aboard the Archangel.

Overall Height: 17.72m

Weight: 64.8t

Armament:

75mm anti-air automatic vulcan turret system *Igelstellung*
assault knife *Armor Schneider*

When Equipped with Aile Striker:

57mm high-energy beam rifle
beam saber

When Equipped with Launcher Striker:

320mm hyper impulse cannon *Agni*
120mm anti-ship vulcan gun
350mm gun launcher

When Equipped with Sword Striker:

15.78m anti-ship sword *Schwert Gewehr*
beam boomerang *Midas Messer*
rocket anchor *Panzer Eisen*

Aile Strike Gundam

A high-mobility armament pack built around a pair of main wings and four verniers. With this configuration, the Strike's agility is elevated to an entirely different level.

Launcher Strike Gundam

A long-range armament pack engineered with anti-ship warfare in mind. The Agni ultra-high impulse cannon, mounted across the left rear, packs enough destructive force to punch clean through a colony's outer wall.

Sword Strike Gundam

An armament pack purpose-built for close-range engagements. The Schwert Gewehr, a massive blade spanning over 15 meters, wields both a solid edge and a converged beam blade, granting it the power to carve through battleships.

CUSTOM-BUILT MOBILE ASSAULT SHIP *ARCHANGEL*

Armament:

- positron blaster cannon *Lohengrin* x 2
- 225cm dual high-energy focused beam cannon *Gottfried Mk.71* x 2
- 110cm linear cannon *Valiant Mk.8* x 2
- 75mm anti-air automatic vulcan turret system *Igelstellung* x 16
- anti-air defense missile *Helldart* x 16
- large stern-mounted missiles x 12

SKYGRASPER

An atmospheric combat aircraft fielded by the Earth Alliance, provided at the direction of Admiral Halberton to serve as dedicated support for the Strike following its descent to the surface. What sets the craft apart above all else is the mounting system built into the rear of the airframe, capable of carrying a full range of armament packs designed for the Strike. This gives the aircraft more than just access to those armaments in flight, it also allows for swift pack changes in the field, ensuring the Strike can be rapidly re-equipped when an engagement drags on longer than expected.

GAT X-102 DUEL GUNDAM

Considered to be the foundation upon which the entire X-Number line was built, this unit boasts the most well-rounded and balanced performance among its peers.

Overall Height: 17.5m

Weight: 61.9t

Armament:

- 57mm high-energy beam rifle with 175mm grenade launcher
- beam saber

Additional Equipment: Assault Shroud

A supplementary armament package for the Duel. While the armor-like plating may give an impression of sluggishness at first sight, verniers distributed across the frame ensure that mobility is actually enhanced rather than hindered.

GAT X-103 BUSTER GUNDAM

A fire-support mobile suit built entirely around medium- to long-range engagements. It forgoes any form of close-quarters weaponry in favor of an extensive arsenal of heavy ranged armaments.

Overall Height: 18.86m

Weight: 84.2t

Armament:

- 220mm 6-tube missile pod
- 350mm gun launcher
- 94mm high-energy focused beam rifle
- anti-armor shotgun
- hyper impulse long-range sniper rifle

TMF/A-802 BuCUE

A mass-produced mobile suit designed for ground combat by the ZAFT military. Despite its unusual four-legged silhouette, it boasts exceptional mobility on rough terrain such as deserts.

Overall Height: 11.07m (at base of turret)

Weight: 69.3 t

Armament:

450mm dual railgun

400mm 13-tube missile pod

dual beam saber (late model only)

TMF/A-803 LaGOWE

A ZAFT commander use mobile suit. Based on the BuCUE, this unit features significantly enhanced specifications. To fulfill its role as a command unit, it is equipped with a dual-cockpit design, with the gunner seated in the front and the pilot in the rear. It is Waldfeld's personal unit.

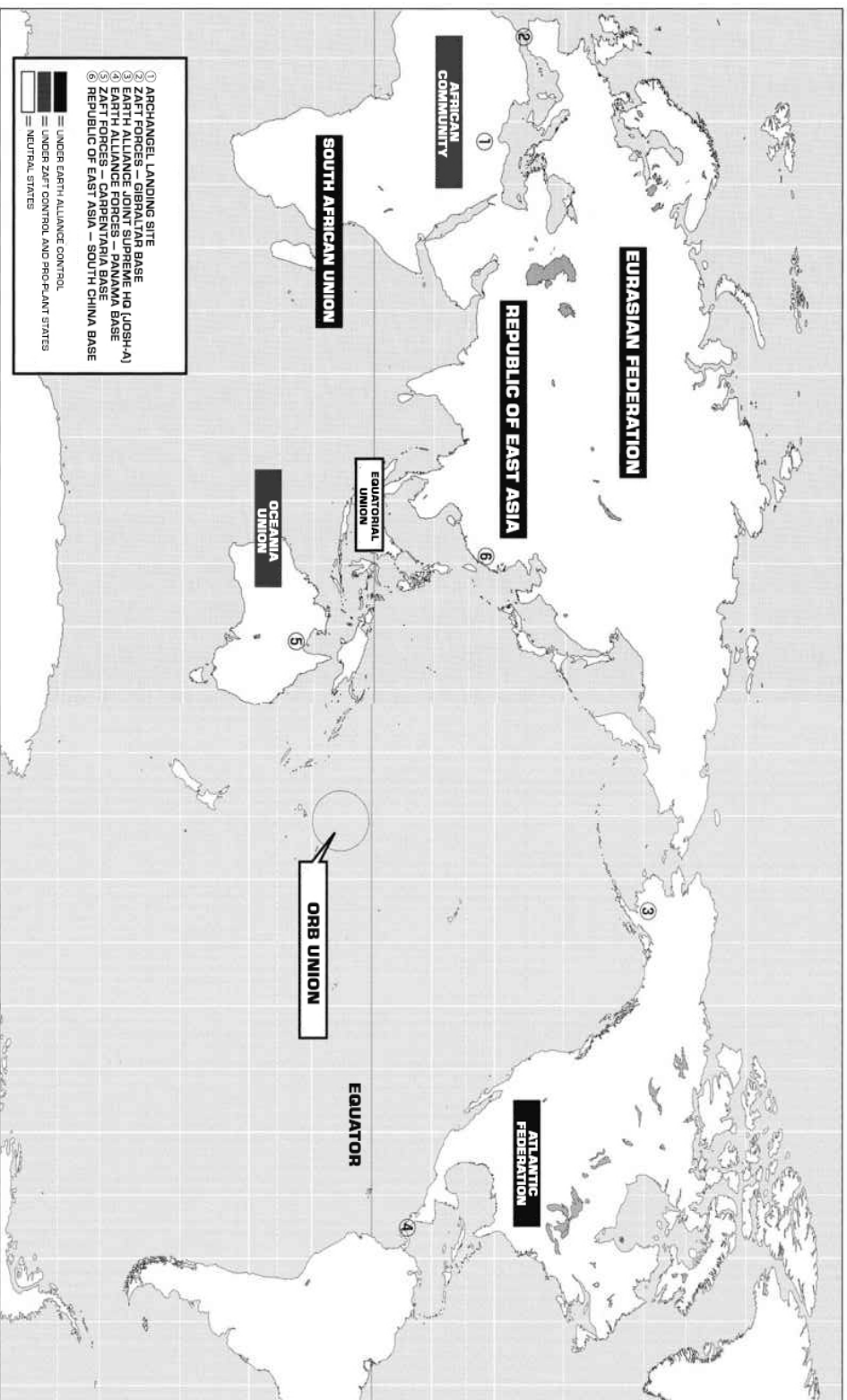
Overall Height: 11.49m (at base of turret)

Weight: 70.18t

Armament:

450mm dual beam cannon

dual beam saber



MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM SEED THE STORY THUS FAR

Cosmic Era 70. Eleven months have passed since the opening of hostilities between ZAFT, a military force organized by Coordinators, a new strain of humanity brought into being through genetic manipulation, and the Earth Alliance, whose ranks are drawn from the unaltered humans known as Naturals.

Kira Yamato, a student in the neutral colony of Heliopolis, finds his world torn apart when ZAFT launches an operation to seize five prototype mobile suits, the X-Numbers, on the eve of their transfer to the Earth forces aboard a newly constructed warship, the Archangel. Amid the chaos that consumes the colony, Kira comes face to face with a ZAFT pilot in the act of stealing one of the machines. To his disbelief, the pilot is Athrun Zala, a boy he once called his closest friend. Why would his best friend be fighting for ZAFT of all people?

The questions have no time to settle. With no other option before him, Kira climbs into the last unit still standing, the X-105 Strike. To shield the friends who mean the world to him from the ZAFT mobile suits now rampaging through Heliopolis, Kira takes the Strike into combat and beats the enemy back. He handles a mobile suit he has never touched before with a skill bordering on superhuman, and for good reason. Kira, too, is a Coordinator.

Stripped of much of its crew by the assault, the Archangel falls under the command of Lieutenant Murrue Ramius and sets a course for the moon, where Earth Alliance forces are stationed. As the only person who can pilot the Strike, Kira is all but forced to stay aboard, traveling alongside his friends whether he wishes to or not. But the Creuset Team, the same ZAFT squadron that failed to capture the Strike, lies directly in their path. A bold surprise attack conceived by Lieutenant Mu La Flaga shakes Creuset's forces for a time, but the moon remains impossibly far, and provisions are thinning to nothing. Desperate to break the deadlock, the Archangel pulls into a debris field to scavenge what supplies it can, and in the process, recovers a lone escape pod. The person who emerges from it defies all expectation: Lacus Clyne, beloved songstress of the PLANTs and the voice of ZAFT. When Kira learns she is Athrun's fiancée and sees the crew treat her as little better than a hostage, something in him refuses to accept it. Acting on his own, he places Lacus in the Strike's cockpit and delivers her into Athrun's hands himself.

Lacus safe beside him, Athrun turns to Kira with an outstretched voice.

"Kira, come with me!"

For a moment, Kira's heart pulls toward his old friend. But then the faces of his Natural companions rise unbidden in his mind, the people waiting for him back on that ship. To keep them safe, he turns his best friend down. And with that, the two of them part ways, no longer friends, but enemies.

Through wave after wave of the Creuset Team's relentless pursuit, the Archangel presses on until at last it reaches the Atlantic Federation's 8th Fleet. Surrounded by dozens of warships, it seems as though the worst may finally be over, until the Creuset Team descends on them once more. The four stolen X-Number machines tear through the Earth fleet with devastating speed, plunging the allied forces into crisis. Murrue takes in the situation and makes her decision: the Archangel will break away alone and descend to Earth, making for Alaska and the Atlantic Federation's supreme command. Kira launches in the Strike to buy her the time she needs, fighting to the very edge of atmospheric entry. But the enemy will not relent, and their assault drives him past the point of return. Unable to reach the Archangel, Kira and the Strike are seized by the pull of Earth's gravity, and fall.

Phase.00

What follows is the account of a single man.

George Glenn came into the world an orphan, in the closing years of that old era when humanity still measured its time by the calendar of Anno Domini. Before his seventeenth birthday he had completed a doctoral program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; he distinguished himself as an American football player, displayed extraordinary ability in the four-hundred-meter dash, and claimed an Olympic silver medal. Yet even that dazzling record did not exhaust the catalogue of his gifts. He served simultaneously as a decorated fighter pilot in the Air Force and as a researcher of the first order. His contributions to aerospace engineering were of such caliber that by C.E.4 his name circulated freely among Nobel candidates, and he had taken part in the foundational design of the Jupiter exploration vessel then under construction.

He was the hero among heroes, the beloved figure of his generation, and it was not his talents alone but his remarkable physical beauty that won him the adoration of women across the globe.

Then, in C.E.15, when he boarded the Tsiolkovsky, the exploration ship born from his own designs, as its captain and embarked on a seven-year, one-way voyage to Jupiter, his renown seemed to crest at its absolute zenith.

And yet, at precisely that moment, awash in the world's fervor and veneration, speaking through a broadcast transmitted from Earth orbit, the confession he delivered struck humanity with a force sufficient to upend civilization itself.

"Let me share my secret now. I was not born into this world as a human being in the natural sense..."

What he spoke of then was the truth concealed behind every one of his achievements.

He was a new category of human, engineered through artificial genetic manipulation at the embryonic stage.

A human being who exceeded humanity, one endowed before birth with a body capable of surpassing ordinary human strength, and a mind capable of absorbing knowledge far beyond the normal range.

"The person who made me this way once told me: 'We humans still harbor untapped possibilities beyond anything we can imagine. If we can bring those possibilities to their fullest expression, the road ahead of us will open without limit.'"

With that, he released across every network on Earth the complete data on the genetic engineering techniques responsible for his creation.

"He also told me this: 'Be a mediator, someone who brings harmony between person and person, and between humanity and the cosmos.' That was his wish. It's mine as well. My hope is that others will come after me."

And so, George Glenn departed on his long passage toward Jupiter.

His message swept the world like a gale.

Humanity had been shown the fruit of the forbidden tree, and the one who had tasted it.

The data George Glenn had disclosed propagated at a staggering pace.

So too did the upheaval it unleashed.

No nation moved to openly legalize genetic modification, yet there was no shortage of those who sought the procedure in secret for their own children. They wished to reshape the inheritors of their genes into a second George Glenn.

As those children matured, the gulf between them and ordinary children grew impossible to dismiss.

In time they would come to be called Coordinators, the first generation of a new humanity.

And just as those children were beginning to flower into their extraordinary capabilities, George Glenn returned from his fourteen-year round-trip voyage, carrying with him yet another shock for the world.

From Jupiter he brought back a single stone.

Evidence 01, proof of extraterrestrial life, borne home from beyond Earth's skies.

Controversy erupted across the world once more, as it had fourteen years before, no, with a violence that surpassed even that earlier storm. Some denounced George Glenn as a fraud; others were seized by euphoria; still others withheld judgment; others abandoned God entirely. What is certain is that many, as though some unseen hand had pressed against their backs, began reaching for something higher still.

All of it because of that single stone.

What came afterward makes this plain enough: genetic modification achieved worldwide recognition and ignited a boom so fevered it could only be called fanatical.

We can press further yet.

The road ahead stretches on without end.

Further... further still...

Toward ever greater heights...

Further on yet...

Toward the day when we set sail across the vacuum sea, seeking the distant stars where such life may dwell...

Those born in the wake of that dream proved better suited than conventional humanity to existence in space, and in pursuit of continued research into Evidence 01, they relocated to the orbital research facilities that would one day become the PLANTs.

They truly were a new humanity, closer to the stars than any who had come before.

But those left behind by that rising tide grew to resent, and then to despise, the ones who stood upon heights they could never reach. However fiercely they struggled, however they altered their own bodies, qualities acquired after birth would never allow them to equal the Coordinators. They could never become Coordinators. That fact had been decided before they ever drew breath.

Those who lack will always envy those who possess. Human beings are quick to diminish what differs from themselves. In time, that hatred converged, inevitably, upon a single figure.

In C.E.53, George Glenn was assassinated by a Natural.

His killer was a teenage boy who had come to understand that the day he might venture out among the stars would never come. All his despair had focused itself on the man known as the First Coordinator, the living symbol of this new humanity.

It may be said that his death was the first omen of all that followed.

Persecution of Coordinators intensified across the Earth, and as their migration into space accelerated, the rift in consciousness born of that separation only deepened. The sponsor nations that controlled the PLANTs hoarded the wealth generated by space-derived resources, driving the disparity between themselves and the non-sponsor states ever wider. Later, when the PLANTs demanded independence and waged war against those sponsor nations, it was the non-sponsor states that aligned themselves with the PLANTs.

When the Coordinators demanded that George Glenn's assassin be surrendered, the Earth side not only refused but declared the boy innocent on grounds of diminished mental capacity. Even that response may be read as a portent of everything to come. Time and again the PLANT side revolted against the unreasonable impositions of the sponsor nations; time and again the two sides convened at the negotiating table only for talks to fracture. Incrementally, inexorably, the tension between them climbed. Within the PLANTs, where the sponsor nations had prohibited the maintenance of any armed force, the Zodiac Alliance of Freedom Treaty took shape, largely in the shadows, carried along by this same vast historical current.

Natural and Coordinator.

The history of their conflict began with the death of the man called the First Coordinator.

Phase.01

Heat. Scalding, unbearable heat. It feels as though every drop of blood inside him has been brought to a boil.

Through a mind hurled into disorder by the blaze, shards of memory rise without pattern, then fall away again.

A cockpit screaming with alarms. Every gauge is either vomiting impossible readings or gone entirely silent, and the monitors have drowned in static. Each breath hauls scorching air down into his lungs and chars them from the inside out.

"Where am I?"

Kira was in a panic. His eyes darted frantically, hunting for anyone, anything that might help, but all he could feel was the tight cockpit contracting around him, its walls inching closer and closer.

"Help me, somebody!"

Get me out of here!

No answer came. Terror and pain bore down on him until he felt consciousness beginning to slip away.

Then, all at once, something light grazed the back of his hand, and he heard a familiar trill he knew as well as his own heartbeat.

"Birdy?"

Flower petals were drifting down. Pale and weightless, they floated through the air, settling over Athrun's shoulder and catching in his hair as he held Birdy out toward him.

"We'll meet again. I know we will..."

And just as he had believed, they did.

"How can you be piloting one of those?! You're a Coordinator, so why... why are you in a mobile suit fighting for the Earth Forces?!"

Athrun's voice, raw with helpless, furious anguish.

"Why?"

"Why does someone like you, a fellow Coordinator, have to fight against us?!"

"Why?"

"Athrun, I don't know either. How did it come to this?"

"Why do we have to turn on each other? We were always together. We were—"

And yet, he has to shield them. Even if it means firing on Athrun.

A blue planet, so immense and so vivid it floods his entire field of vision, rushing closer until it threatens to devour everything before him. This was Mother Earth, the great homeland one was supposed to greet with longing, with tenderness, with the sweet ache of return. But all Kira feels is suffocating dread.

"I'm falling, seized by that colossal mass, crushed beneath it—"

Then, without warning, a child appears, her expression solemn as she carefully creases a flower from paper.

"It's okay. Mr. Kira will fight and protect you..."

Flay and a small girl stand side by side, fingers intertwined, smiling as they watch Kira from a great distance. Then, abruptly, the girl wrenches free of Flay's hand and bolts toward him, and Kira flinches in alarm. Her tiny body looks as though it might drift away and never come back, and he lunges for her desperately, straining to gather her into his arms.

Something warm meets his hand. Relief washes through him as he draws the small, soft weight of the child close.

"Mister..."

A young, guileless voice murmured against his ear.

"You lied, Mister."

His hand slides, *slick*.

A convulsion of horror rips up Kira's spine, and then he remembers.

His *failure*.

And that it is already too *late*.

"Why... didn't you protect me...?"

In a single instant the little girl's body flies apart, scattering into nothing, and all that remains in Kira's grasp is a paper flower drenched in blood. His throat seizes shut. He cannot draw breath.

Is this agony his punishment?

Is he being seared now in the fires of purgatory?

He turned against his own people, went on fighting them, and in the end could not even protect what mattered most to him.

But there is nowhere left to run.

Sealed inside this narrow cockpit, he has no choice but to go on killing his own kind until the day he dies.

The wind had fallen still.

Beneath a sky packed dense with stars, the sea of sand lay silent and perfectly motionless, reaching on without end. Even this scorched terrain, so fierce it seemed to refuse the very idea of life, looked almost tender now, faintly aglow under the starlight, as though it belonged to the landscape of a dream. The stars flung across the heavens blazed with a clarity no city sky could ever hold. And against that dazzling vault rose the vast black shape of a single vessel.

The Archangel, the new prototype assault ship that the 8th Fleet of the Earth Alliance had succeeded in bringing to the surface only at the cost of nearly its entire strength, had come to rest far from its intended destination, stranded in this ocean of sand in northern Africa.

"His fever... it's still not going down..."

Murrue's voice, no, Miriallia's, escaped in a low, anxious murmur. Her eyes were locked on Kira, thrashing in delirium, burning with fever. Flay sat beside him, dabbing away the sweat that ran in streams across his face.

"Look, what I'm telling you is that this isn't a fever caused by an infection, and there's nothing particularly wrong with his organs."

In the examination area of the infirmary, the military doctor who had come aboard just before atmospheric entry was laying things out for Tolle and Sai.

"Right now, the best we can do is keep fluids in him and bring his body temperature down. Hell, this is my first time treating a Coordinator too."

The young doctor's words only sharpened the boys' unease. Catching the look that crossed their faces, he softened his tone.

"Don't worry so much. Those people are physically superior to us in just about every respect."

"But..."

"They look the same on the outside, sure, but what's going on underneath is a completely different story. 'A body built for greater strength, a mind built to acquire knowledge,' that's the whole concept, right? They don't catch the kinds of illnesses that kill people, and their resistance is tougher across the board. So honestly, there's no need to worry like this."

"Come on..."

Tolle scowled at the casual ease with which the doctor said it. The doctor glanced his way and pressed on.

"Did anyone tell you how hot it got inside that cockpit?"

"Huh? No..."

"If it had been one of us in there, we wouldn't have survived."

Something complicated moved across the boys' faces at that. The doctor, not noticing, carried on in the same breezy tone.

"Well, sure, if they take a bullet they die, and I suppose every now and then they can spike a fever too. But the odds of that kind of risk are way lower for them than they are for us. Something like this..."

"Built different,' huh..."

Sai murmured it under his breath, quiet enough that only Tolle heard.

Ever since they had come aboard this ship, they had been forced to witness it again and again, just how far beyond the rest of them Kira truly was. And as men, each time they saw it, each time they heard it spoken aloud, it left them uneasy. But more than that, it pressed into them something they could not escape, that Kira was not, in truth, the same as they were.

Tolle turned away from the doctor, who was still talking, and crossed over to Miriallia where she remained at Kira's bedside.

"Milly, Flay... let me take over. You two should rest."

At his words, Flay tucked Kira's arm, dangling half off the mattress, back under the blanket and replied, her voice cool and even, "I'm fine."

"But Flay, you've been sitting with him this whole time. Just leave it to us for a while—"

Sai tried as well, but she raised her face only slightly and offered him a small, sad smile.

"You all have duties on the ship, don't you? I can't do anything else..."

"But, Flay—"

As Sai pressed further, Flay cut him short in a voice gone flat and hard, as though bolting the conversation closed.

"I want to stay with him."

That was the end of it. She turned her gaze back to Kira on the bed. There was something in her bearing that seemed to wall everyone else out, and Sai's expression clouded with suspicion.

Miriallia, who had been watching Kira in silence all this while, suddenly leaned her weight against Tolle's shoulder and whispered, "It's a good thing."

"Hm?"

"It's a good thing Kira's a Coordinator. It really is. Otherwise..."

Seeing the tears gathering in Miriallia's eyes, Tolle felt something land hard and deep inside his chest.

She was right. Had Kira been a Natural, he would already be dead.

And as that truth settled into him, Tolle felt a warm tide rise through his chest. He slipped an arm around his girlfriend and pulled her close.

"Yeah... yeah, it is..."

Miriallia was a good girl.

"I'm really lucky... to have someone like her."

"So that's Alaska."

Mu's finger touched a single point on the monitor. Then it tracked steadily downward, tracing a path across the world map.

"And if you follow it all the way down... this is where we are now."

His finger came to rest near the northern rim of the African continent. Mu dropped his hand and let out a long breath.

"Pretty lousy place to come down. We landed right in the middle of enemy territory."

The two of them were in the captain's quarters, working through a briefing over cups of coffee.

"It couldn't be helped. We had no choice but to stay with the Strike."

Murrue answered as she raised her cup to her lips in a mechanical motion. Yet for all the resolve in her words, hesitation still hung on her face.

Just as Mu had said, the African Community, spanning from the Mediterranean coast north of the Sahara to the Atlantic seaboard, was a bloc of nations that had declared themselves pro-PLANT, one of the regions already locked firmly under ZAFT control. Their ship, the Archangel, had effectively been cast alone into the dead center of enemy lines. Worse still, apart from Mu, virtually all of her crew were either noncommissioned personnel or enlisted men with little to no actual combat experience, and as for the captain, that was Murrue herself, only twenty-six years old.

On Earth, the N-Jammers that ZAFT had planted at the war's outbreak disrupted communications without cease. Calling for help from allied forces was out of the question, let alone establishing any contact to gather intelligence. Buried deep underground by ZAFT, the N-Jammers' precise number and locations could not be determined; naturally, no method of removing them was known either. These devices, which suppressed nuclear

fission itself, had rendered humanity's former ultimate weapons, nuclear missiles and their like, entirely useless. But in the same stroke, Earth had lost its capacity to generate energy through fission, and the planet had plunged into a severe energy crisis.

That was one of the reasons the Earth Alliance, for all its superiority in material resources and manpower, had been driven into such a grueling fight against PLANT.

If they were to shatter this deadlock, they had to deliver the new X-Series mobile suit, the Strike, to headquarters in Alaska and onto the production line, whatever the cost. By that measure, Murrue's judgment should not have been wrong. When the Strike's reentry angle had shifted during atmospheric descent because of the battle, the Archangel had abandoned its planned trajectory into Alliance-held territory in order to secure it. As a result, though they had not managed to recover the Strike into the ship itself, they had at least succeeded in setting it down on the upper deck, narrowly averting the danger of losing it outright.

And yet, in doing so, she had thrust the entire crew into a new peril. If that choice meant they could no longer reach Alaska, then hadn't she undermined the very purpose she was trying to serve?

Murrue lowered her gaze to the dark liquid in her cup.

Yes, she knew. This was her weakness.

Of course the new mobile suit mattered, but so did the life of the boy sitting in its cockpit. She had not been able to discard that life. She could not bring herself to do it.

"In any case," she said at last, her voice weighted and heavy, "our mission, and our destination, remain unchanged..."

Then, from the seat across from her, Mu asked in a quiet, careful voice, "You holding up?"

Murrue raised her eyes and found him watching her, his gaze calm and steady.

"Yes..."

She managed, barely, the ghost of a smile. But at his next question, even that much stiffened.

"And things all right with your XO, too?"

Her executive officer, Natarle Badgiruel.

Murrue's mind went to the order Natarle had issued on her own authority, the moment she had deployed the Strike into that razor-thin engagement at the very edge of the atmosphere's reentry limit.

It was not the first time Natarle had acted on her own, making calls that exceeded the bounds of her authority, and there had been many among them that Murrue simply could not accept. Yet it was equally true that those very decisions had pulled them through more than once. For that reason, she had let them pass. But in truth, such conduct could easily have warranted disciplinary action. Would it be better to discipline her after all? Or was it precisely because Murrue had failed to do so that Natarle had begun to regard her with contempt?

"It's fine."

She heard herself say it, but the words sounded hollow the instant they left her mouth.

"If you say so."

Mu pushed himself up from his seat.

"Well then, I'll go look in on the kid and then turn in. You should get some sleep too. If the captain's this run-down and falling apart, nothing's going to get done around here."

He delivered it in the same easy, offhand tone as always, offered her a casual wave, and stepped out of the room. After watching him go, Murrue poured the now-cold coffee down the sink and stood staring at the map that glowed on the monitor, her eyes dark and spent.

"What am I supposed to do now?"

She knew where they needed to go.

But as for how she was supposed to get them there, she could not even begin to imagine it.

"Oh, there you are, Athrun."

At the sound of Nicol's voice, Athrun glanced up from where he had been sitting alone, sunk deep in thought.

"I just got word, Yzak and the others made it down to Earth safely."

Nicol stepped into the pilots' ready room carrying the news, his relief plain on his face.

"Oh..."

Athrun answered without thinking, but his mind was somewhere else entirely, on the friend who had plunged toward Earth's gravity alongside Yzak and Dearka.

"Kira... is he safe?"

If Yzak and the others had survived atmospheric descent, then Kira, at the controls of the Strike, a machine with nearly identical base specifications, was probably safe as well. The logic was sound enough. But his heart would not quiet. Kira had gone somewhere beyond his reach, and Athrun could not stop himself from worrying about what was waiting for him there.

By now, based on the reentry angle, they had already calculated the probable landing zone of both the Archangel and the Strike with reasonable precision. It would fall within territory held by ZAFT, which meant, for Kira and the rest of them, the dead center of enemy ground.

"Their return hasn't been scheduled yet. Sounds like they'll be stationed at Gibraltar for a while."

Nicol went on talking, the relief audible in every word. Watching him take such uncomplicated joy in their comrades' safety, Athrun felt a sharp twist of guilt.

Before he realized it, Nicol had trailed off mid-sentence and was studying him, perhaps finding his silence strange. Athrun caught himself and covered quickly by asking,

"How bad is Yzak's injury?"



"Right."

As though that explained everything, Nicol gave a small nod and answered, "Nothing to worry about. He was fighting that hard out there on the battlefield, after all."

"Yeah... Right."

One entire wall of the ready room was glass, offering an unobstructed view down onto the mobile suit deck below. Nicol's Blitz stood there now on a maintenance cradle beside Athrun's Aegis. With the Gamow, their mother ship, lost along with the 8th Fleet, both Nicol and his machine had been transferred aboard the Vesalius.

Leaning close to the glass, Nicol murmured abruptly, "Still... I wonder."

"Wonder what?"

"In the end, we couldn't capture that last machine, the Strike, or the new warship... and we couldn't destroy them either..."

Unaware that Athrun's expression had gone rigid, Nicol continued, half thinking aloud.

"It's strange. The X-Series performance is impressive, no question. But we had four sister units on our side. And as for that 'legged ship', yes, the armor and firepower are formidable, but it's hardly some invincible battleship. So how did we let it slip away? Commander Creuset's team, of all people?"

Nicol gave a short, uneasy laugh, then quickly grew serious again.

"That's why the commander received orders to return, isn't it?"

There was such a thing as a jinx.

Or perhaps it was simply luck.

The Archangel had escaped annihilation every single time by the thinnest conceivable margin, sliding through their grasp again and again. At the outset, no one in the Creuset Team had imagined this assignment would prove so difficult.

And yet, somewhere within himself, Athrun knew there was a part of him that was relieved each time the enemy ship survived.

That truth gnawed at him as he stood there beside Nicol, whose concern extended no further than Rau's standing.

"No... it'll just be taken as proof that even Commander Creuset couldn't bring that ship down. The Council will most likely see it that—"

Athrun cut himself off.

What kind of shadow would that judgment cast over Kira's road from here?

If the conclusion was that the enemy was too formidable to justify further losses, then the ground forces might choose not to press their pursuit too aggressively.

But if the conclusion ran the other way, if they determined that such a dangerous force had to be crushed as swiftly as possible...

"Athrun?"

Nicol's voice pulled him back, and Athrun hurriedly picked up the thread.

"Huh, no, anyway, there's nothing to worry about. This recall sounds like it's tied to some other operation."

"Oh, I see."

Nicol smiled, visibly reassured.

Even after Nicol had gone from the ready room, Athrun remained where he was, mired in bitter thought. He was no longer thinking of the comrades who had descended to Earth, nor of his commander whose record was beginning to tarnish, nor even of the conversation he had just finished with Nicol.

Only one thing occupied his mind now, the lone boy who, for the moment, could be nothing but an enemy, his childhood friend, who had fallen beyond the reach of his hand, down into the depths of gravity.

"I went through the manual last night. Seems like a pretty fun machine... Though 'can also carry the Striker Packs.' What am I supposed to be, a delivery boy?"

On the Archangel's catapult deck, Mu said it with an air of weary resignation. His gaze was trained on the sleek, streamlined craft held fast by wire restraints.

The Skygrasper, a land-use support fighter designed to assist both the Archangel and the Strike. The craft was capable of mounting the Strike's power packs and employing the Striker Packs' firepower without modification, but it also served a second purpose, ferrying fresh battery packs to the energy-hungry Strike at maximum speed.

Murdoch, the chief mechanic, answered him with a grin.

"Hah, well, if it's you, Lieutenant, no, Lieutenant Commander, you can make deliveries anywhere in no time flat."

"Even if it was Admiral Halberton looking out for me, getting promoted in a situation like this isn't exactly something to celebrate."

Addressed by his new rank, Mu looked more than a little put out.

The late Halberton had arranged for the crew's ranks to be raised broadly across the board. In circumstances where proper personnel replacements were impossible, it had likely been the closest thing he could offer as a final gesture of goodwill.

"Sure, a bump in pay's nice and all... but when exactly am I going to spend it?"

Just as Mu said, under present conditions, it was worth precisely nothing.

"The kids got field commissions, apparently. The boy's an ensign, well, he is a pilot."

That was right. Even Kira and the others, who had been taken on as volunteers before reentry, now held ranks. Sai and Tolle were classified as privates, but Kira, by virtue of being a pilot, had been granted an officer's commission.

"Man... those kids, huh..."

Running through his checks on the aircraft, Mu let loose another tired sigh.

"Good gravy, they'll be the real deal before long."

Murdoch laughed as he said it, but quietly enough that the mechanic wouldn't hear, Mu murmured.

"Well... yeah. Truth is, they'd better be."

The fact that they had come down in a place like this had certainly weighed on the crew, but perhaps because none of them could yet fully absorb it as something real, they had taken it with surprising calm. Murdoch was probably a case apart, for him, keeping the mobile weapons operational came first, and everything else fell under someone else's jurisdiction. But did the rest of them truly have no grasp of how desperate their situation was? Not that Mu wanted them spiraling into panic. That would be its own catastrophe. But for an officer charged with finding a way out of that "desperate situation," it was enough to make his head pound.

Everyone had probably spent so long walking a tightrope ever since Heliopolis that their sense of danger had gone numb.

"Oh, right, how's the kid's fever?"

Prompted by Murdoch's question, Mu seized the opening to steer his own thoughts elsewhere.

"They say it broke this morning. Whether that says more about the Strike or about him, who knows. Come to think of it, why does Kira call that thing 'Gundam' sometimes?"

He gestured toward the Strike where it sat on its maintenance cradle, and Murdoch let out an "Ah ha" with a knowing grin.

"It comes up on the startup screen. General Unilateral Neuro-Link... something or other. Guess he's just reading off the initials. Military side only uses the first one, the 'G'..."

A nickname, then, perhaps. Before anyone had noticed, that mobile suit had apparently become Kira's "personal machine." The thought stirred something oddly warm in Mu, and just then one of the crewmen working on the Strike called out.

"Lieutenant."

"It's Lieutenant Commander now. Lieutenant Commander."

Murdoch corrected him on the spot, but Mu brushed it aside and asked, "What is it?"

"This, think it's trash? Found it tucked down in here."

With one hand the mechanic pointed into the Strike's cockpit, and with the other he held up something small, like a scrap of paper. Mu shrugged.

"Ask the pilot."

When mechanics worked around a cockpit, they had to tread carefully. Every pilot kept their own charms, rituals, lucky tokens. Something that looked like a worthless scrap to anyone else might mean life or death to the person who flew with it.

The mechanic sighed, then slipped it gently into his pocket.

"Kira's up?"

Miriallia's voice broke bright with surprise. Sai answered with equal relief plain on his face.

"Yeah. They say he's really fine now, so they moved him back to his quarters. Flay brought his food over, actually... Ah, there she is now."

From his seat opposite Tolle, Sai glanced toward the mess hall entrance and caught sight of Flay stepping through. Miriallia called to her at once.

"So? How's Kira?"

"He honestly seems fine. He even ate... The doctor wants him on bed rest through the end of the day, but when you think about how he looked last night, it's as though none of it ever happened."

Flay paused there, just briefly.

"He really isn't like the rest of us, is he... physically, I mean."

A flicker of discomfort settled over the table, quick and wordless. Then Miriallia spoke again, pushing warmth into her tone as though to scatter it.

"Right... That's great. I'm so glad."

"You must be exhausted yourself, Flay. You were at his side the entire time. You really ought to rest."

Before Sai could finish the thought, Flay answered, her voice flat and even.

"I'm fine. I already ate with Kira... He needs to recover as quickly as he can."

She pivoted away from Sai without ceremony, filled a cup for herself, and moved as if to leave immediately.

"Flay... hold on—"

Sai's hand shot out and closed around her arm. Flay spun back, fixing him with a stare sharp enough to cut.

"What?"

"No, it's just—"

It wasn't only Sai who flinched. Miriallia and everyone else at the table recoiled from the edge in her manner. Since the day she'd come aboard this ship, Flay had latched onto Sai at every chance, so where was this coldness coming from?

She lowered her gaze and spoke in a voice drawn tight with deliberate control.

"Sai... whatever existed between us was something my father arranged. And my father... isn't here anymore."

"What...?"

"It never amounted to more than words in the first place, and everything is different now. I don't see any point in staying shackled to some agreement made a long time ago..."

Silence swallowed the table whole. No one could process what she was telling them. Sai looked as if the floor had dropped out beneath him. While they all sat locked in that stunned stillness, Flay turned forward and walked out of the mess hall without another word.

"F—Flay—"

Sai found his voice at last and called after her, but she never once glanced back.

Moving down the corridor, Flay whispered beneath her breath.

"No... I won the bet..."

Whether those words were aimed at Sai, no longer anywhere near her, or directed inward at herself, there was no way to tell.

Just short of the block housing the officers' quarters, one of the maintenance crew flagged her down.

"Hey, miss, you heading to see that kid?"

"I am."

"Mind passing this along to him, then? It was sitting in the cockpit."

Flay regarded the object he extended with undisguised wariness for a moment, then accepted it and set it down on her tray.

A knock came, quiet, held back, and the door slid open. Kira's gaze drifted toward it, and the instant he recognized Flay crossing the threshold, he lost all sense of what to do with himself. His eyes darted away immediately.

"Did you get a shower? Are you feeling all right?"

Her tone was soft. Kira managed a stiff, clumsy nod.

"Y-yeah."

Then, grasping for something to mask how tense he was, he scrubbed the towel against his still-wet hair.

From what he'd gathered, Flay had remained at his bedside through the entire night, from the time the fever had taken hold of him and dragged him into delirium. It wasn't that her presence didn't make him glad. It did. But it left him tangled up inside. She was supposed to despise Coordinators, so why was she showing this kind of tenderness to him, a Coordinator of all people?

He wanted to let himself believe in her affection, and yet the wanting itself felt like something he had no right to. Beside it coiled the dread that if he trusted in it, the only thing waiting was another wound. The two impulses knotted together and held him motionless.

"Oh, Kira, here..."

Without warning, Flay lifted something from the tray and extended it toward him. His eyes went to it before he could think.

"One of the mechanics asked me to pass it along. He said it was in the cockpit..."

Midway through her words, Flay's voice seemed to drift somewhere far away.

Kira stood rigid, staring at the paper flower resting in her hand.

"Thank you... for protecting me all this time..."

The nightmare collapsed into the present.

Inside his mind, the face of the little girl who had pressed that flower into his hands surfaced, vivid for only a heartbeat before the memory of that pitiless detonation ripped the image to shreds. The shuttle lanced through by the Duel's beam rifle. The craft blown apart, then swallowed by fire as it fell through the atmosphere.

She had been inside.

In their final moment together, that child had gazed up at Kira with absolute, unguarded trust, and within those flames she had been devoured in a single instant. Those luminous, clear eyes. Those small, impossibly soft hands and feet. That guileless smile. None of it remained anywhere in the world.

"Kira?"

Flay's bewildered voice hauled him back.

"Ah... y-yeah... th-thanks..."

He extended a clumsy hand, reaching for the paper flower as if it carried no weight at all.

But the moment it met his skin, his entire body seized into trembling he could not control.

"Kira?!"

His legs would no longer hold him. He crumpled to the floor where he stood. Something immense swelled behind his ribs, a pressure like a vast weight inflating inside his chest, growing and growing, and Kira clutched the paper flower in his fist, dragging air in ragged, fractured gasps. A sob he had no power to hold back broke through his clenched teeth.

"Kira... what's wrong?"

The second he felt Flay's palm settle against his back, the tears tore free.

"That girl, I—!"

His voice ripped out of him like something wrenched loose at the root.

"I couldn't save her!"

When he should have been able to. So many lives that had been mere moments from reaching the ground safely, lost, all of them, because he had been too weak. They had been so close. So unbearably close.

He alone could have shielded them.

And yet, he had hesitated.

"It was my—!"

He had hesitated to kill his own kind.

Even if the enemy's strength had been overwhelming enough that no outcome was ever certain, it changed nothing about the fact that he had faltered.

"I couldn't protect them!"

As Kira folded into himself and wept, warm arms gathered around his shoulders.

"Kira... I'm here."

He raised his eyes and found the face of the girl who held him. Flay was smiling. With a gentle motion, she guided his head against her.

"It's okay... I'm right here..."

That smile, as though it absolved him of everything. That warmth, reaching for him without condition. Kira seized hold of her the way a drowning boy finally closes his hands around something solid.

"My feelings... will keep you safe."

Her whisper, sweet and low, slipped in through his ear and spread, slowly, slowly, through every part of him. Kira pressed his face into Flay's chest and

wept like a child undone. Tender fingers threaded through his hair, stroking it over and over again.

In that moment, Kira possessed no other means of holding his shattered heart together except to cling to the warmth of the body so close against his own.

"Tolle, wake up already!"

He had stumbled out of his room still mired in sleep, his uniform hanging off him in total disarray, one sleeve not even pulled on properly. Miriallia turned on him the instant she saw it.

"Honestly! Get yourself dressed right!"

"Nnngh..."

"If you show up on the bridge looking like that, Lieutenant Badgiruel is going to have your head again."

Their watch was due, and as the two of them made their way toward the bridge, both stopped short at the sound of Sai's voice.

"Flay... sorry for coming by so late."

Before they could think better of it, they leaned forward and peered silently down the corridor. There, standing before the room Flay had been assigned, was Sai with his back to them, speaking toward the interior.

"It's just... we haven't really had the chance to talk, the two of us alone... About what you said earlier..."

The berth where Flay was meant to be lay concealed behind a curtain pulled shut, and no movement came in response to his voice. Tolle and Miriallia withdrew as soundlessly as they could manage. For a stretch they walked without speaking.

Tolle, now jarred fully awake, murmured under his breath.

"I mean, finding out they were engaged, that caught me off guard."

"They weren't engaged," Miriallia corrected. "She said it had only ever been talked about."

"That's practically the same thing."

Neither of them had known any of this until now, and it showed plainly on both their faces, a shared look of unease.

"I always assumed they were just... normal. Like us."

"Mm. Although when I think about it, with how protective her father was, it does track that he'd only sign off on some hand-picked boyfriend..."

"Yeah... I suppose so."

The words had barely left their mouths before both of them realized the man they were discussing was already dead. Silence reclaimed them as they walked. A long while passed before Miriallia spoke again, her voice low.

"Flay's been... off lately, hasn't she?"

"Yeah..."

"She used to hate Kira, or, well..."

"She hates Coordinators. Right?"

Tolle said it plainly, and Miriallia cut him a sharp glance.

Even so, he wasn't wrong.

Flay harbored a deep aversion to Coordinators. She had never displayed open revulsion to Kira's face, but there had always been a conspicuous gulf between them. Miriallia knew she was far from the only one startled to witness Flay attending to him with such devotion. At first, the shift had seemed moving, something worth being glad about, even, but now there was a fragility to it, something that felt precarious in a way she couldn't quite name.

"Flay always turned heads back at school, too..."

Tolle said it without much thought.

"Kira's had a thing for her for a while now..."

Miriallia was already well aware. Flay Allster had been a year behind them, a different grade, a different major entirely, but because she happened to share a club with Miriallia, Kira had frequently found himself in her orbit as well. Both Miriallia and Tolle had picked up on his feelings almost immediately, and had been quietly cheering him on ever since.

At the time, though, they'd had no idea that anything like that existed between Flay and Sai.

"I just hope this doesn't spiral into something ugly."

At Tolle's words, a shadow passed over Miriallia's expression.

Kira and Sai both mattered to her, deeply, and in equal measure, each in his own way. She had no desire to watch the two of them turned against each other over a single girl. But beyond even that, something else nagged at her, something she could only register as fundamentally wrong. She wanted to articulate it for Tolle, that there was something twisted running through all of this, something unwholesome at its core.

But when it came down to it, she could not shape the feeling into words. And so, the only thing she managed, weighted with quiet dread, was a single word.

"Yeah."

"Well then? How's our much-rumored, most exalted Archangel looking?"

At the sound of his superior's voice, Martin DaCosta raised his head from the infrared scope.

"Sir! No movement of any kind!"

He looked up to find a tall, sharp-angled man looming above him. His frame, clad in desert camouflage, was wiry and pulled taut; his long face, burned dark by the sun, carried with it a kind of feral, unpolished edge all its own.

"Ground-level comms are in shambles thanks to the N-Jammers. So 'she' is still sleeping soundly, is she?"

Even as he spoke, the man lifted the cup in his hand to his lips, and in the next instant, his expression shifted entirely.

"Hm?!"

DaCosta snapped upright.

"What is it, sir?!"

His body tensed, certain some threat had been detected, but right before his eyes, his commander's face melted into one of profound satisfaction.

"No, no, I adjusted the Mocha Mattari down by five percent this time, and it's superb!"

It was, apparently, nothing more than a verdict on his coffee. DaCosta deflated with the anticlimax. His commander's personal obsession was engineering his own blends from scratch. Even with coffee-growing regions practically within arm's reach, was there truly any need to take it this far? That, at least, was DaCosta's private opinion, DaCosta, for whom coffee had never been anything but a bitter black liquid.

His superior, however, drank from the cup with undisguised pleasure, radiating the sort of unguarded delight that belonged to a boy with a new toy.

"Perhaps next time I'll experiment with something using Sheba Mocha..."

In moments like these, he looked like nothing more than a harmless eccentric amusing himself.

But he possessed another face entirely.

This man was Andrew Waldfeld, one of the most formidable commanders and most gifted pilots in the ZAFT ground forces, known far better by his other name: the Desert Tiger.

With a languid calm that seemed impossible for someone in the midst of a live operation, Waldfeld sipped his coffee as he descended the sand dune in an easy glide. When he flicked the emptied cup aside without a thought, DaCosta threw himself forward and snatched it from the air in a panic.

At the base of the dune, pale and still beneath the wash of moonlight, a massive machine crouched in silence like a shadow banked low, flanked by helicopters, buggies, and the soldiers bustling around them.

The troops caught sight of Waldfeld's approach and fell into formation without a moment's delay. Their commander addressed them.

"Now then, we commence the operation against the Earth Alliance's newest warship, the Archangel!"

He had raised his voice, yet the tone stayed buoyant, almost casual.

"Our objective is to gauge the combat effectiveness of the enemy vessel and its onboard mobile suit!"

At those words, one of the pilots spoke up, a grin already spreading across his face.

"So we're not permitted to destroy them, sir?"

Waldfeld let out a contemplative little hum.

"Well, if it comes to that, it comes to that... But don't lose sight of what that ship is. Creuset's team couldn't manage to finish it off in the end, and Halberton's 8th Fleet threw itself away just to deliver it safely to Earth. Bear that in mind."

Then, after the briefest pause, he added with breezy indifference.

"In principle, at least."

At that final qualifier, tossed off so lightly it barely landed, the soldiers' faces broke into assured grins. Between this commander and his men ran a current of trust that never faltered.

"Then I wish you all a safe return, and a fight worth having!"

At the call, every soldier drove a salute skyward in a single unified motion, and Waldfeld answered it with one hand raised. DaCosta's voice cracked out the next order.

"All personnel, mount up!"

In a heartbeat the troops dispersed in every direction. As each man swung into the cockpit of his machine, Waldfeld climbed aboard the command vehicle where DaCosta already sat behind the wheel.

"Mmm. A good cup of coffee really does set the proper mood."

And then, just for a fleeting instant, a lethal gleam cut through the eyes of the man who only moments ago had seemed so thoroughly at ease.

"Now then. Let's go make war."

When Tolle and the others filed onto the bridge and announced, "Here to relieve you," Neumann, planted at the helm, leveled a flat look their way.

"You're late."

"Sorr-ry."

Tolle slid into his seat wearing a guilty half-grin. Behind him, he caught fragments of Kuzzey and Chandra mid-conversation.

"The ship's waste heat gets vented through the black hole exhaust system, so as long as we can fool the infrared sweeps from satellites overhead, we should be fine..."

The Archangel suppressed its thermal signature by drawing in ambient air to cool its emissions, rendering the vessel far more difficult to detect. Without that system in place, there would have been no possibility of sitting this exposed and this idle. Chandra continued.

"And with radar effectively blind, that cuts in both directions..."

"N-Jammers, huh... Why did ZAFT have to go scattering something this insufferable all over the place?"

Kuzzey's voice dripped with open exasperation. Certainly, being harder for hostile radar to track was a mercy, but the more pressing burden was the gnawing unease of having no way to reach friendly forces.

"Sure, they've spawned all kinds of collateral damage, but still, better that than nuclear warheads streaking across the sky, isn't it? If they'd answered the strike on Junius Seven with a full nuclear response, the Earth itself might not still be here."

That made Tolle draw inward slightly. It was not a picture he cared to hold in his mind.

The assault on Junius Seven, the atrocity remembered as the Bloody Valentine tragedy, had shattered any possibility of reconciliation between Earth and the PLANTs. Before long, ZAFT had launched its ground offensive, moving to seize the orbital elevators and spaceports strung along the equatorial belt. Once every last launch facility fell under their grip, the

chain encircling the planet would close. That was why the campaign had been designated Operation Uroboros, named for the mythic serpent consuming its own tail. And as its opening phase, the Coordinators had driven N-Jammers deep into the Earth at sites spanning the entire globe.

The thought of what it would have meant had they chosen nuclear weapons instead crawled cold across his skin. For one brief, involuntary moment, Tolle found himself thinking they were fortunate the enemy had been rational Coordinators, and almost immediately, a second thought surfaced behind it.

"What on Earth had the Alliance been thinking when it deployed nuclear weapons in the first place? Had it never once occurred to them that retaliation would follow?"

Retaliation had followed, of course. Because of the N-Jammers ZAFT had buried in the planet's crust, both radio communications and nuclear power generation had been crippled across the face of the Earth. In the war's earliest days, that had plunged the world into a catastrophic energy crisis, one from which it still had not recovered. But even that, Tolle now understood, had been the price exacted for what their own side had done. Rising again in his mind was the image of Junius Seven as he had witnessed it, drifting among the wreckage, that solitary, unbearable vision of a PLANT laid waste by violence, every soul aboard it extinguished, hanging silent in the void of space.

Tolle was still mired in that uncommonly dark frame of mind when the bridge door opened and Natarle Badgiruel stepped through.

"Any changes?"

At her voice, Chandra, who had been slouched back in easy conversation only a moment before, snapped bolt upright.

"Ma'am! Nothing abnormal to report!"

Natarle crossed directly to the helm and offered one of the drinks she had carried in to Neumann.

"Do we have the hull-strain readings?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's only a preliminary assessment, but stress distortion is still within acceptable tolerances. For the full breakdown—"

Midway through his answer, Neumann reached for the keyboard and, out of sheer habit, let go of the drink without thinking. In space, the pouch would have simply hung there, drifting in a gentle bob. On Earth, naturally, everything obeyed gravity.

The drink dropped with a soft, dull plop. Natarle bent down, retrieved it, and placed it back in the hands of a visibly mortified Neumann.

"We can't have you living in a zero-gravity mindset indefinitely, Ensign."

"S-sorry, ma'am."

Watching from the edge of his vision, Tolle had to clamp down hard on a laugh. But in fairness, he and the rest of them were scarcely any better. Their bodies had adapted to weightlessness with startling speed, and now they kept committing blunders, launching themselves upward toward the

raised comm station, very nearly pitching headlong into CIC, and a dozen other graceless mishaps.

"There's an irregularity in the gravity field. Could be the influence of underground cavities..."

Natarle murmured it as though speaking only to herself, her gaze fixed on the instruments. Tolle leaned over to see what she was reading.

"What's that about?"

"The data predates the war, so the precise locations aren't certain, but it appears there are decommissioned oil and natural-gas excavation sites throughout this area."

Perhaps because Natarle was standing right beside him, Neumann's explanation emerged noticeably stiffer and more formal than usual.

"Which means?"

"It means there are massive hollow spaces running all through the ground beneath us. Not exactly an ideal place to set down without caution."

The color drained straight out of Tolle's face.

"Uh... so are we actually safe here? The ground isn't going to collapse under us while we're asleep or anything, right?"

"Ha, no chance. We're perfectly fine. ...Right, ma'am?"

Neumann let out a light laugh and tilted his head up toward Natarle for confirmation.

Their superior, however, offered no reply. Facing off in some direction entirely her own, she lifted her drink and took a long, unhurried sip.

Neumann's smile locked in place.

"We are safe... right?"

At that precise instant, the warning klaxon screamed across the bridge, and a shout erupted from CIC.

"This ship is being painted by laser!"

Natarle wheeled around at once, and Tolle flinched hard in his seat.

"Confirmed! They're ranging for a firing solution!"

Chandra's voice cut through sharp and clear.

There was no room left for misinterpretation.

Someone was about to open fire on them.

And that someone, of course, could only be the enemy.

"Condition Two battle stations! I repeat, Condition Two battle stations!"

At the alarm tearing through the ship in the dead of night, Murrue and Mu snapped awake as one. They threw on their uniforms and tore out of their quarters.

Sai, too, still hovering outside Flay's room, still speaking her name through the closed door, turned at last toward the bridge, pulled in two directions even as he went. Behind him, in the room he left, only the klaxon went on ringing, hollow and unanswered, through the dark.

And in the officers' quarters, Kira had been floating along the shallow edge of sleep.

"The enemy!"

A beat behind, the alarm finally broke through, and he launched upright. The motion was that of a cornered animal, but the fear that streaked across his face shifted in the next instant into something altogether different, the keen, predatory focus of a creature primed to kill. He threw himself from the bed and wrenched on the clothes scattered across the floor.

"I won't let anyone die again... I won't..."

The words spilled out of him like the muttering of a fever. He yanked his jacket on mid-stride and burst from the room.

After the door crashed shut in his wake, another figure rose slowly from the bed.

A smooth, bare back surfaced from beneath the sheet, a clean, graceful line disclosed by the dimness, and vivid red hair tumbled loose across her shoulders.

Flay, weighted down by a deep languor, ran a hand through it and listened for a time to the sound of Kira's footsteps fading down the corridor. Then, at last, she let her head sink back into the pillow.

"Heh... heh..."

A thin, dry laugh escaped her lips. A shudder ran through her without warning, and she folded her arms across her own shoulders, pulling herself deeper into the sheets as though trying to vanish inside them.

"Protect me... okay?"

The words slipped out in a whisper, and then she laughed again, this time with something that sounded like contempt turned inward.

There was no way back now.

She had won her wager.

She had succeeded in dragging Kira into the fighting.

"That's right... He's going to fight, and fight, and fight, until he dies. And if he doesn't die, I won't forgive him..."

The Coordinator who had failed to shield her father. The Coordinator who had killed her father. This was Flay's vengeance against them.

Her mother had died when she was still small. In the aftermath, her father had become everything to Flay, absolute, singular, the one presence in her life that nothing could replace. He had lavished affection on her so extravagantly it was as if he would have tucked her into the hollow of his own eye to keep her safe, gave her anything she ever wished for, and never once intended to let her venture beyond the shelter of his wings. Her world was a small one, whole and complete within the boundaries of what he provided. If she behaved selfishly, it was because her father had never once corrected her for it. If she had gone along with Sai, it was because her father had selected Sai. If she despised Coordinators, it was because her father despised them. To her, he had been the air she drew into her lungs, the shell encasing and guarding the pearl of herself.

And so, when he was taken from her, her world fell to pieces.

I will never forgive this.

But whom?

Who had done this to her?



Someone had to answer for it. She had been wounded this deeply, that meant there had to be someone, somewhere, who deserved to be punished.

It was not reason.

It was nothing more than raw, ungoverned passion.

A senseless response to senseless loss.

And within the cramped, narrow world she had inhabited her entire life, the enemy she fixed upon, because he stood within arm's reach, because he existed right before her eyes, was Kira Yamato.

Because he had not saved her father.

Because he was bound to the enemy by blood.

Because he was a Coordinator, that was why she had enlisted.

To ensure Kira could never leave the battlefield.

For that single purpose alone.

And Kira had come back.

Precisely as she had designed it.

That had been her wager.

Even if Sai and Miriallia and the rest were swept up in it.

Even if every one of them was placed in harm's way.

Even if her own life hung in the balance...

None of it mattered.

None of it carried any weight, so long as she could exact her revenge on Kira, on the Coordinators.

Kira would be her shield.

For her sake, he would go on fighting, even if it meant soaking his hands in the blood of his own friend.

Let Coordinators slaughter Coordinators, and let both sides grind each other into nothing.

If that was the cost, then surrendering her own body was meaningless.

Even if it meant allowing herself to be held by the very Coordinator she loathed, if it served the purpose of avenging her father's death.

"Destroy them... every last one..."

She breathed the words in a voice so guileless it could almost have belonged to a child, and then a low laugh began to stir beneath her breath.

And without ever noticing the single tear that traced a silent path from the corner of her eye, she went on laughing.

A salvo of missiles came screaming in over the far ridge of dunes. The 75mm automatic anti-air Vulcan system, Igelstellung, locked on, intercepted, and tore them apart mid-flight. Even deep inside the ship, the concussive punch of each detonation reverberated through the hull.

"I'm telling you, all I need is for it to be made flight-capable, that's it!"

"And I'm telling you, it can't be done!"

On the portside catapult deck, Mu and Murdoch stood locked in argument before the Skygrasper. Kira, already sealed into his pilot suit, hauled himself up into the Strike, chafing against the pull of gravity; he could no longer simply launch himself straight into the cockpit the way he once had.

"They're firing from behind the dunes! We can't isolate the launch point!"
The instant he opened his comm line, the bridge chatter crashed in on him.

"Condition One battle stations! Engines to full start!"

A low tremor passed through the ship as the engines roared to life. Then Tonomura's next report reached Kira and drew every muscle in his body wire-taut as he powered the Strike through its startup sequence.

"Three hostiles, five o'clock! Positively identified, ZAFT combat helicopters, Agiles!"

"Missiles inbound!"

"Targets have dropped off visual!"

Natarle's voice sliced through with an order.

"Launch illumination rounds! Intercept immediately!"

Kira, coiled tight with impatience, shouted into the comm.

"Where are they?! I'm taking the Strike out!"

"Kira? Wait, not yet—"

Miriallia's startled voice came back at him. Kira paid it no attention, slammed the cockpit hatch sealed, snapped the visor of his helmet down, and barked again.

"Open the hatch, now!"

"Hold on! We haven't confirmed their exact position or numbers yet, so settle down. No launch authorization has been issued!"

Tonomura scrambled to hold him back, but Kira fired right over him.

"How can you sit there and take it easy at a time like this?! Just open the hatch! I'll get out there and destroy them all!"

"Kira...?"

On the monitor, Miriallia was staring at him, her expression drawn tight with alarm, but Kira did not so much as register it. He shouted again, sharper and more savage than before.

"Now!"

"I don't care for the way you're saying it, but we're short on options."

Murrue's voice filtered through, threaded with irritation.

"The ship's guns don't have the traverse to handle this. Launch the Strike."

The hatch ground open. The Launcher Striker pack was locked into place, and Kira braced the machine atop the catapult rail. Natarle's final directive came through.

"Strike, eliminate the hostile combat helicopters. And do not forget about gravity!"

The linear catapult drove the machine forward and hurled it clear. Despite Natarle's warning, Kira faltered for a split second at the sight of the ground surging up to meet him.

"Uh—!"

His landing posture collapsed, and the Strike lurched, buckling down onto one knee. Fine sand hissed and scattered away from beneath its feet in pale streams. Then, from beyond the crest of the dunes, a combat helicopter erupted into view and unleashed a volley of missiles. Kira scrambled to

wrench the machine into an intercept stance, but the mobile suit, barely half-risen, lost its footing again in the treacherous sand. The warheads struck, and a roiling column of smoke and fire billowed skyward.

But when the wind sheared the smoke apart, the machine that stepped through had changed, its torso now blazing red and blue, its limbs a stark, brilliant white that burned even against the darkness.

"You—!"

Kira hauled the hyper-impulse cannon Agni, mounted at the left hip, around toward the helicopter. But the aircraft flicked back behind the dunes in a heartbeat and vanished.

The machine swayed again, impossible to stabilize. Kira glanced down through the monitor. The sand, bone-pale under the glare of the illumination rounds, shimmered faintly and ran in shifting rivulets like something liquid, nothing solid enough to anchor against.

"Damn it!"

Kira's face contorted. He kicked the Strike into a leap and fired its thrusters, chasing the helicopter. But under Earth's gravity, the machine simply lacked the thrust to sustain itself in the air. The Strike came down on the spine of a dune, only to be swept off balance at once by the cascading sand, skidding and sliding nearly to the base. Even the act of standing was so precarious on this terrain that the machine could manage nothing more than an ungainly, floundering struggle, and Kira bit down hard on his lip in raw frustration.

Then a warning alarm shrieked through the cockpit, a hostile contact.

A dark shape vaulted out from beyond the dune.

"What the?"

Not a helicopter.

The machine came tearing across the sand on caterpillar treads, and the instant it launched itself airborne, its silhouette shifted, then all four limbs hammered into the ground and propelled it forward.

"A mobile suit?!"

But its outline bore no resemblance to the familiar upright, bipedal human form he knew. Confronted with a shape and a manner of movement he had never once conceived of, Kira's reaction came a fraction too late. The quadruped machines, bounding across the sand as though it were solid ground, closed on the Strike one after another with the speed and ferocity of wild animals. Even with Kira's enhanced dynamic vision, they moved so fast he could not even count how many there were.

"Whoa!"

One of them drove a kick square into the Strike, toppling the mobile suit from its already unstable footing. As it pitched backward, the beast-shaped machine trained the launcher missiles mounted across its spine and fired. A brutal explosion swallowed the Strike whole.

"Kira!"

At the sight of the Strike swallowed by flame, Miriallia's voice broke loose, pitched high with fear. Then the smoke tore apart, and the machine stepped



through exactly as it had been, untouched. She released the breath locked inside her chest.

"Those are—!"

On the Archangel's bridge, Murrue's eyes went wide at the machines she did not recognize. Sai, having pulled the model identification, delivered his report.

"Five hostile units confirmed! TMF/A-802, ZAFT mobile suits, BuCUEs!"
"BuCUEs?!"

The blue-gray machines truly did call to mind four-legged predators, and with the wing-like assemblies riding their backs, they could have passed for creatures torn from myth, griffins stalking the earth. They carried either 400mm thirteen-tube missile launchers or paired 450mm railguns mounted above those "wings," ground-combat mobile suits engineered with stability under gravitational conditions as the guiding principle. In desert terrain especially, their design allowed them to leap and bound with eerie agility on all four limbs while also tearing forward at high speed on caterpillar treads. That devastating mobility had made them one of ZAFT's foremost ground-warfare assets.

Against the BuCUEs, purpose-built for terrestrial combat and for the desert above all, the general-purpose Strike labored under a crippling disadvantage.

Even now, the Strike was fighting just to hold its stance long enough to bring Agni around, but a BuCUE whipped a kick into it and sent the machine pitching sideways across the sand. Another unit came roaring in on its treads and hammered missiles into the opening.

Watching the Strike do little more than absorb punishment, Natarle clenched her jaw until her teeth ground together.

"Fire the Sledgehammer!"

Sai spun toward her at the order, horror plain on his face.

"That'll hit the Strike!"

Tomomura, seated at the firing controls, objected as well, but Natarle cut them both down without a breath's hesitation.

"It has Phase Shift armor!"

"But!"

It was true. Phase Shift armor rendered physical munitions, missiles included, all but useless against the hull. But that protection drew from a finite power reserve, and the more punishment it soaked up, the faster the battery bled dry. Even so, a direct missile impact would still subject the pilot to a punishing physical shock.

"That is an order! At this rate, the Strike can't accomplish a thing!"

The rest of the crew felt the same desperate urgency. They had to break into this one-sided mauling somehow, by any means available.

"Understood! Sledgehammer, firing!"

His face locked rigid, Tomomura pressed the launch switch. From the Archangel's aft missile tubes, an anti-air warhead screamed away into the night.

"Kira, get out of there!" Miriallia's scream tore across the comm.

The instant the missile left the tube, the BuCUEs encircling the Strike scattered from the area in a flash. Only the Strike, trapped, its footing destroyed by the sand, barely capable of movement, absorbed the full fury of the blast.

"Gahhh!"

Even under the protection of Phase Shift armor, the detonation flung the machine bodily through the air, and the cockpit bucked with the force of the concussion. Strapped firmly into his seat, Kira's body still whipped forward violently, his forehead cracking against the inside of his helmet. He wrenched his head clear and fixed a hard glare on the monitor.

The BuCUEs that had peeled away were already in motion again, driving on their treads, then springing forward on all fours, closing on the Strike from every vector with absolute freedom of movement. Kira tried to answer them, but on ground this treacherous he could barely even hold a firing line steady. As the previous barrage had already made brutally clear, no meaningful support from the Archangel was coming. This new enemy was playing with him at will, and Kira ground his teeth down hard.

"Damn it!"

The BuCUEs surged in again. Kira fought to drag the machine's posture back under control, then hurled the Strike high into the air. From above, he fired the 350mm gun launcher, but the BuCUEs slipped clear of his line of fire in an instant, then returned shots at the precise moment the Strike descended to land. Forced to abandon the exchange, Kira kicked the machine skyward once more. This time he unleashed Agni, and again failed to connect. Almost the very instant his feet met sand, he was already launching upward again.

To anyone watching from outside, it must have looked as though he were stubbornly repeating a tactic that had no hope of working.

But through all of it, Kira's fingers were tearing across the keyboard at a velocity no ordinary human being could have approached.

"If ground pressure keeps bleeding away, then I just have to compensate for the loss!"

He hissed the words through clenched teeth. In those slivers of time bought by each desperate leap, he was rewriting the Strike's motion program on the fly.

"Assume contact-pressure loss... set friction coefficient... granular sand behavior, minus fifteen..."

He twisted clear of the missiles fired to greet him the instant he landed and drove the Strike skyward yet again.

"Still not enough? Then revise to minus twenty!"

His fingers blazed across the keys. The ground came rushing back up to meet him.

Apparently weary of this pattern, one of the BuCUEs broke from the pack and bore down directly on the projected landing point itself. The moment the Strike touched earth, it pounced.

But this time, the Strike did not falter.

Kira locked his gaze on the monitor and drove pedal and control lever down in a single motion. The Strike dropped low, slipped cleanly past the lunging BuCUE, then planted on one leg and lashed out with a whipping rotational kick. The four-legged machine went cartwheeling away, skidding across the sand before sinking into it. A second BuCUE sprang at him from behind. The Strike spun and smashed it flat with the stock of Agni, then drove a foot down hard onto the fallen machine. Without a moment's pause, Kira jammed the muzzle against the hull and squeezed the trigger.

The blast erupted outward, drenching the ocean of sand in a savage red glare.

Monitor-light spilled across Kira's face, and there was no trace of hesitation left in it. With eyes grown cold and lightless enough to freeze the blood, he swept his gaze across the enemy machines converging around him.

"I won't let you lay a hand on the Archangel."

"We got one!"

A ragged cheer erupted across the Archangel's bridge before anyone could contain it. Every soul on deck had been watching the mobile suit engagement with breath held tight.

But then Chandra's voice sliced through the moment like a blade.

"Heat source inbound from the southwest! Artillery fire!"

In an instant, the atmosphere on the bridge turned to ice, that brief flare of elation smothered as though doused with freezing water. Murrue issued her command without hesitation.

"Get us airborne! Emergency evasion!"

Sand detonated skyward as the Archangel's enormous hull dragged itself free of the ground. The Igelstellung batteries shredded incoming missiles practically off the ship's bow, while several rounds that went wide hammered into the stretch of desert the vessel had occupied only seconds before. The shockwave caught the rising hull broadside and wrenched it savagely.

On the bridge, shuddering with the impact, Natarle's voice tore through the noise.

"Where is the fire originating?!"

"E-estimated source, twenty kilometers to the southwest!"

Sai's report tumbled out at speed, and then Tonomura gave voice to the bleak reality none of them wanted to hear.

"At the ship's current weapons range, we have no way to answer!"

With radar reduced to uselessness, they could not detect the enemy vessel itself, which meant there was no possibility of guiding missiles accurately to its position. Natarle bit down on her lip until it ached.

Then Mu's voice burst across the comms, and Murrue's head snapped upward.

"The Skygrasper is launching!"

"I'll close in and paint the target with the laser designator. You lock onto the return signal and send the missiles!"

If the Skygrasper could locate the hostile ship and hold a laser on it, the reflected beam would give them the fix they needed to strike.

"That's out of the question! Even if you begin a search now, there isn't enough time!"

Natarle's objection came sharp and immediate, but Mu demolished it in a single breath.

"What other option do we have?!"

Then he hurled one last line back at them, almost like a taunt flung over his shoulder on the way out.

"Just try not to get hit before I'm back!"

The transmission cut dead.

Murrue pressed her lips into a hard line and watched the white silhouette streak away into the dark.

The Skygrasper had been little more than a hasty field repair, it had not even finished loading its munitions. But Mu's point stood. There was no other path out of the threat now closing around them. They had survived the first barrage on luck alone, through point-defense interception and desperate maneuvering. Against missiles raining in from twenty kilometers out, they possessed no dependable means of shielding themselves as things stood.

But barely after the Skygrasper had disappeared from view, Chandra's voice rang across the bridge once more.

"Second wave, incoming!"

"Evasive maneuvers! All hands, brace for impact!"

That was everything Murrue could do, give the order, then watch the warheads bearing down on them and hold what breath she had left.

Tonomura, his voice climbing high and thin with dread, spoke the words every one of them had been terrified to hear.

"Direct hit, impact imminent!"

The crew locked themselves in place and braced for the blow about to land.

"The Archangel—!"

Kira caught the arc of the ship-launched missiles streaking inbound and a strangled sound tore from his throat. If that salvo connected in full, the Archangel would not survive it.

Through his mind flashed an image he had seen once before, a small girl standing hand in hand with Flay, watching him go.

"Why didn't you protect me?"

One of them was dead.

But the other?

Something deep inside him seemed to fracture.

Kira fixed a savage glare on the BuCUEs harrying the Strike and, raking them back with bursts from the shoulder vulcans, kicked away the one that threw itself directly at him.

Even in that sliver of time, the missiles were still hurtling toward the Archangel. Another BuCUE cut across his path, directly into his line of sight. "Tch!"

Kira brought the Agni up.

His awareness collapsed inward until it was honed to the width of a needle's point, compressed into a single, infinitesimal focus, and his finger bore down on the trigger.

In the next instant, a searing lance of light erupted from the muzzle. It punched clean through the BuCUE charging him, kept traveling, and struck the lead missile just short of the ship, as though the beam had been pulled into it by gravity.

Shot after shot from the Agni's barrel swatted missile after missile out of the sky, scattering bright threads of light across the darkness.

Inside the Strike's cockpit, Kira, his expression locked into something lethal and absolute, whispered, "I won't let anyone die again..."

This time, he would shield them.

He would shield them until the very end.

The ones who mattered to him.

Against his palms there still lingered the memory of warm skin, the girl he had held only a short time ago.

"I won't hesitate anymore. I won't let anyone hurt her. Not ever again."

For that, Kira would do whatever it took.

Even if it meant drenching his hands in the blood of his own kind. Even if the one standing before him was the friend he cherished most.

None of it mattered anymore.

If it was to protect her, to protect all of them.

The BuCUEs surged in again. This time Kira leveled his weapon dead-center at the machine bearing down on him.

But then, without any warning, the alert tones erupted into screaming.

Kira sucked in a sharp breath and shot a glance at the energy gauge. Somehow, the battery reserve had already bled down to the edge of the red zone.

"I overused the Agni?! Damn it!"

Three enemy units remained. The Agile attack helicopters were still circling as well. With this little power left, sustained combat was out of the question, but these were not opponents who would graciously allow him to disengage. The BuCUEs pressed forward without mercy, firing the launchers slung across their backs. Kira threw himself clear again and again, but several rounds still connected, bleeding yet more energy from the Phase Shift armor. And there was no possibility, none whatsoever, that he could evade every shot indefinitely.

"Ngh!"

He could not die here.

There were people aboard the Archangel, people he was sworn to protect. What would become of them if he fell?

Then, without warning, a helicopter overhead unleashed a volley of missiles straight down onto the cornered Strike.

He could no longer predict when the Phase Shift system might give out. And the instant it did, even a handful of warheads would be enough to annihilate the Strike. Kira steeled himself as the ordnance came screaming down over him.

But before a single one could reach the Strike, tracer fire rising from the desert floor tore them apart.

Kira's eyes blew wide.

That same barrage ripped into one of the attack helicopters as well.

The helicopter spiraled earthward in flames. Over the dunes, washed red by the burning wreckage, a line of combat buggies came vaulting into view. The people riding them fired grenades from handheld launchers and charged, utterly fearless, straight at the BuCUEs encircling the Strike. One vehicle peeled away from the rest and raced directly toward him. In the passenger seat, a figure with long golden hair streaming behind her fired a wire straight at the machine.

Caught completely off guard by the intervention, Kira had no idea what he was witnessing, until a clear, sharp girl's voice burst into his ears.

"Pilot of that mobile suit! Follow our instructions if you want to stay alive!"

The wire must have been functioning as an antenna, threading the transmission through the machine's frame. A heartbeat later, incoming data layered itself across his monitor. It appeared to be a local terrain map. A single point on it pulsed with light.

"There's a trap set at that position! Draw the BuCUEs to it!"

The same voice delivered the command, then severed the connection without waiting for acknowledgment.

For one frozen instant, Kira watched the buggies tearing away across the sand. He had no idea who these people were. Not even whether they could truly be called allies.

But one thing, at minimum, was beyond question, they were enemies of ZAFT.

And he had nothing else left to try.

Kira made his decision in a heartbeat and fell in behind the buggies as they threaded beneath the BuCUEs' feet.

The three machines, their coordination shattered by the sudden disruption, wheeled around and gave pursuit the moment the Strike began bounding away in a chain of leaps. They had taken the bait, that was how those people would probably have put it.

But Kira, who was the bait, had no notion of what awaited him next.

The gauge crept closer and closer to red. Keeping one eye locked on it, Kira matched the terrain scrolling past against the map overlay.

"There?"

With a final leap, the Strike came down squarely on the marked coordinates and turned, almost insolently, to glance back over its shoulder.

The warning alarm went on shrieking in his ears, and then at last the Phase Shift system died.

Cold sweat traced a line down Kira's spine.

The BuCUEs did not let the opening pass.

"They have to be right about this!"

Kira held his ground and drew them in until their claws were nearly upon him, then, at the last conceivable instant, launched the Strike high into the air one final time.

The ground where he had stood only a moment before, the very patch of earth the BuCUEs landed on, gave way with a deafening roar.

It had been sitting above one of the countless abandoned mine shafts honeycombing the region.

The three BuCUEs, legs thrashing and scrabbling as they plunged into the chasm below, were consumed a moment later by a colossal explosion. The instant the machines dropped into the shaft, those people had ignited the natural gas still pooled inside, triggering a chain detonation. It was an ingenious trap, built entirely around the derelict mineworks.

Wreckage from the obliterated machines, shrapnel and twisted fragments hurled skyward by the blast, rained down around the Strike in a clattering scatter of debris.

Breathing in harsh, ragged pulls, Kira stared at the severed foreleg of a BuCUE that had driven itself like a spear into the sand before him.

A sight that should have horrified anyone who saw it.

But in that moment, Kira felt nothing at all.

No triumph. No remorse. Both swept past him without finding purchase, and all that remained was emptiness.

"We're withdrawing."

At those words from Waldfeld, his adjutant Martin DaCosta turned toward him with the dazed look of someone surfacing from a dream. And in truth, it had carried the quality of some grotesque hallucination. But it was no hallucination.

They had positioned the command vehicle in the lee of a dune overlooking the battlefield and had observed the entire engagement from start to finish.

"This operation has achieved its objective. Rally whatever units survived."

Waldfeld delivered the order and started back toward the car.

Their original purpose, gauging the enemy's combat capability, had been satisfied beyond any reasonable measure.

At a devastating cost.

Five BuCUEs, erased in a single night.

And by what? A warship that had only just made planetfall, outfitted with incomplete equipment and operating on threadbare intelligence, and one solitary mobile suit. Even discounting the force that had thrown itself into the fight at the end, that was the sum of it. Even Waldfeld, the man whose



name alone inspired dread as the Desert Tiger, had never witnessed an engagement like this one.

"And that pilot..."

He had watched every moment from this vantage. He had seen the mobile suit at the outset, floundering and sliding across the sand, capable of nothing beyond graceless, lumbering motions, and then, mid-battle, begin moving all at once with the fluidity of an entirely different machine.

There was no room for doubt.

That pilot, while fending off five BuCUEs simultaneously, had rewritten the mobile suit's motion program in the heat of combat to compensate for desert terrain.

And beyond even that, the way he had, in a single breath, picked off incoming long-range missiles with the launcher.

"And I'm supposed to accept that a Natural pulled that off...?"

Waldfeld let a low sound escape him and bent his lips into a dry, knowing smile.

At certain moments, the enemy had executed maneuvers so coldly precise they should have been unthinkable under that kind of pressure. And yet the very same pilot had driven himself to the razor's edge of total energy failure without so much as noticing it, backing himself into a corner of his own making.

A deeply peculiar adversary.

At last, Waldfeld cast a single glance back over his shoulder.

"Whatever the case may be... it seems we've finally encountered an enemy worth the effort. This Archangel, and—"

His gaze settled on the mobile suit making its way back toward the Archangel, flanked by buggies racing alongside it, each one throwing up a long plume of sand in its wake.

Meanwhile, on the Archangel's bridge, every soul present shared the same overwhelming wave of relief at the sight of the Strike, pulled back from what had seemed, only moments before, an utterly hopeless situation.

Then an incoming laser communication lit up Miriallia's monitor.

"Message from Lieutenant, no, Commander La Flaga! 'Enemy mothership sighted, but attack aborted. Enemy mothership identified as the Lesseps!'"

As she read the transmission aloud, Murrue's voice went sharp.

"The Lesseps?!"

"I repeat, the enemy mothership is the Lesseps. Returning to the ship now.' End of message."

Catching the gravity that had overtaken Murrue's expression, Natarle pressed her.

"What is the Lesseps?"

"The Lesseps..." Murrue answered, her gaze hardening as though she could bore through the darkness itself to the enemy vessel she had not yet laid eyes on.

"That's Andrew Waldfeld's carrier."

Her voice dropped lower still.
“Our enemy is the Desert Tiger.”

Phase.02

The Archangel touched down on open ground not far from where the fighting had taken place. Dawn had already begun its slow arrival, and under a sky stained with a thin, hemorrhaging blue, the earliest morning light painted the dunes in a dim wash of red.

The buggies belonging to the unidentified faction, whose purpose and loyalty remained a mystery, rolled to a stop at a cautious distance from the ship. Between them and the vessel, the Strike held its position, as though silently measuring the other side's next move. With its Phase Shift system powered down, the machine wore the flat, dark steel of raw, uncoated armor.

The figures who dropped from the buggies looked to be Arab. Each of them carried themselves with a certain hardness, faces bold and sharp with danger, and their clothing was a patchwork, traditional garments mixed with military camouflage, varying in age and cut, making it immediately clear that these men belonged to no formal army.

But nobody took on BuCUEs for amusement.

Natarle crossed to Murrue, who had already risen from her chair, and asked,

“Do we treat them... as friendlies?”

A beat of hesitation passed before Murrue replied,

“At minimum, their weapons aren't aimed at us.”

She turned and made for the elevator.

“Regardless, I intend to speak with them. They seem open to the same. If things break our way, this could work in our favor on more than one front.”

She willed her voice to carry more conviction than she actually felt, but the faces of the crew watching her were clouded with anxiety. She offered Natarle a slight smile.

“I'll leave everything here to you.”

Mu was already waiting at the hatch, having climbed out of the Skygrasper ahead of her. A handful of crew members rushed up clutching rifles and flattened themselves into cover on either side of the opening.

“Seems like these visitors aren't going to be a simple bunch either.”

He delivered it in that easy, throwaway way of his, thumbing the cartridges in his pistol before sliding them home.

“Honestly, I've never been much use with firearms...”

He muttered it like the whole ordeal was an imposition, then tucked the weapon into the holster on his hip. Mu La Flaga, the “Hawk of Endymion,” a man who had downed multiple GINNs, no good in a gunfight? The notion caught Murrue off guard, and a smile broke across her face. Maybe that was

simply how it worked. Perhaps mastery in one form of combat bore no real connection to another.

Something in her loosened. Maybe that had been his intention all along. When the thought occurred to her, Murrue felt with sudden clarity how steadying it was to have this man at her side. What she needed right now, far more than any sharpshooting, was that instinct of his.

"Opening up."

Mu keyed the hatch controls. A brief gust of sand swirled inward on the bite of the morning wind, and Murrue stepped through.

The unknown men tracked their approach with guarded, penetrating stares. From among them, a heavyset man, broader and visibly older than the rest, came forward to meet Murrue and Mu as they advanced. He was unmistakably the one in command. A dense beard framed his jaw, and a thick scar carved its way across one sun-blackened cheek. His eyes, startlingly acute, swept over the two of them as if weighing exactly what they were worth.

"Then I suppose I owe you my gratitude... for stepping in?"

When Murrue spoke, the man locked his gaze onto her face. His eyes gave away nothing, guarded, impenetrable, whatever lay behind them kept firmly shuttered.

"My name is Murrue Ramius, with the Earth Alliance 8th Fleet."

At her introduction, a boy who still looked barely past childhood let out a derisive laugh.

"Wait, didn't the 8th Fleet get wiped out?"

Murrue shot him a look before she could catch herself. The man who appeared to lead them raised a hand, as if pulling in a loose rein.

"Ahmed."

Then his attention returned to them.

"We're the Desert Dawn. I'm Sahib Ashman. You don't need to thank us, you realize that, don't you? We didn't rescue you. Not really."

Murrue searched Sahib Ashman's dark eyes, trying to see what lay beneath the surface. He met her scrutiny with a lopsided grin.

"We were just taking down an enemy of our own. That's all it was."

So that was the shape of it, these people were local fighters waging their own war against ZAFT. A resistance force running guerrilla operations.

"You've been keeping this up all this time... against the 'Desert Tiger'?"

Mu asked from beside her, a thread of disbelief woven through his voice. Sahib regarded him with a slow, appraising look.

"Your face. I've seen it somewhere."

"Mu La Flaga. I don't know a soul out here."

Mu's reply was clipped, but Sahib broke into a laugh, visibly pleased.

"Well now. I never imagined I'd cross paths with the Hawk of Endymion in a place like this."

A faint flicker of surprise passed over Mu's expression, and inside, Murrue felt no less startled. For a guerrilla outfit scraping by in the deep desert with handheld launchers, these people were remarkably well informed.

"It seems you have access to considerable intelligence, then. Which means you already know who we are?"

"You're the Earth Forces' new special assault vessel, the Archangel, correct? Pursued down to the surface by the Le Creuset team. And standing over there is—"

Sahib tilted his chin toward the Strike looming nearby. But from behind him, a voice pitched slightly higher cut across his words before he could finish.

"X-105... the prototype mobile weapon designated Strike, developed by the Earth Forces."

Murrue turned in surprise and noticed a girl with golden hair. Like many of the resistance fighters, she wore what appeared to be a ballistic vest, and her bearing was rough-edged and boyish. Those fierce eyes, nearly gold in color, were trained unwaveringly on the Strike, so that from where Murrue stood, only the girl's sharp, resolute profile was visible. Something about her set her distinctly apart from the others. At first glance, she did not even appear to share their ethnicity.

But for the moment, more than who the girl was, it was the substance of what she had said that snagged in Murrue's mind. How had these people come to possess intelligence that specific, and through what channels had it found its way to them?

As Murrue stared at the girl, Sahib moved forward, stepping directly across her line of sight.

"Well then, now that introductions are out of the way, it'd be nice if that settled matters, but frankly, from where we stand, having something this troublesome fall out of the sky on us is a bit of a shock. ...Though I expect from your end, crashing down in a place like this is its own brand of misfortune. So, what exactly do your people plan to do from here?"

Sahib's tone was easygoing, almost disarming, but his eyes remained watchful, reading every flicker of response, probing for whatever he could draw out of Murrue and the others. Naturally, they were doing precisely the same. Murrue asked, keeping her voice level,

"Would you be willing to lend us your support?"

The man returned a smile that revealed nothing.

"If we're going to have that conversation, the weapons need to come down first."

So he had known all along about the soldiers positioned out of sight behind the hatch, held in reserve just in case. Murrue signaled with a quiet gesture to the crew concealed there, watching the exchange.

"And?"

"The pilot of that machine, too."

Sahib angled his chin toward the Strike, towering over the gathering like some colossal sentinel. Murrue exhaled briefly, then turned back toward it with a sharp pivot.

"Ensign Yamato! Come down here!"

Her order reached the cockpit through the Strike's external speaker, and Kira unsealed the hatch. He gripped the ladder and set one foot onto it, feeling it extend smoothly all the way to the ground on its own. It really was nothing like zero gravity. As he started toward Murrue and the others, Kira raised a hand to his helmet. The instant his face came into view, a restless murmur rippled through the resistance fighters.

"Hold on, that's the pilot?"

"He's nothing but a kid!"

Among them, one person sucked in a sharp breath. A heartbeat later, a girl with stiff golden hair flying behind her broke from the group and planted herself directly in Kira's path.

"You!"

Her sudden lunge cut jarringly against the careful, measured probing that had governed the encounter on both sides. Everyone went rigid for a frozen instant, and Mu's hand moved to his holster, certain she was about to strike Kira. But as though to forestall even that reaction, a tall, heavily built man stepped into his way. Lank hair hung before his face in a grimy curtain, but the eyes glinting through it were honed to a blade's edge.

Meanwhile, blind to the tension locking tight around them, the two young people stood staring at each other. The girl barked at him, hostile and raw, and swung her fist up.

"Why are you riding around in something like that?!"

Kira caught her fist on reflex, his face contorting with bewilderment at the words. She was the same girl who had tried to reach the Strike during that earlier battle. But the way she said it, it was as though she had known Kira from before.

The girl's expression twisted in frustration when her punch was stopped short, and she fixed him with a blazing glare. Something stirred in the familiarity of those tawny eyes, so close to gold, burning with a feral intensity. Kira's own eyes went wide.

"You... you were there, that day... at Morgenroete...!"

She was the girl who had come to see Professor Kato on that fateful day when ZAFT had stormed Heliopolis. After that, the chaos of the attack had swept them in opposite directions, her toward an evacuation shelter, him into the cockpit of the Strike, and that had been the last of it.

And yet, though scarcely a month could have passed since then, it felt like something from an impossibly remote past.

Kira stood rooted in place, stunned, while the girl thrashed, trying to wrench her hand loose.

"Tch, let go of me! You idiot!"

Her free fist cracked across Kira's cheek. He released her instantly and staggered back, pressing a hand to his face.

"Cagalli!"

Chastened by the leader's voice, the girl called Cagalli flicked a glance back at him and pulled away with visible reluctance. She threw Kira one last



burning look from those unforgettable eyes, then turned and stalked back to her companions.

More than the sting of the blow, it was the sheer bewilderment that swallowed him whole. Kira could only stand there, staring vacantly after her retreating figure.

Why was she... in a place like this?

"I'm relieved to learn that you both arrived safely at Gibraltar."

The face on the communications room monitor belonged to a blond man wearing that unmistakable silver mask.

Gibraltar, ZAFT's forward operating base. It was here that Dearka Elsman and Yzak Joule had been received, along with the Buster and the Duel, after Earth's gravity had dragged them down during the engagement with the 8th Fleet. Now the two of them stood before the communicator, awaiting orders from their commanding officer.

"You performed admirably in the last battle."

To the masked man's praise, Dearka responded with a crooked, caustic grin.

"Well... I *did* almost die."

They had punched through the atmosphere in nothing but their mobile suits, no reentry capsule, no shielding of any kind. It was only because their machines carried the Phase Shift armor engineered by the Earth Alliance that they had not been incinerated by atmospheric friction, and it was sheer fortune alone that their descent trajectory had carried them over the Mediterranean, letting them manage something close to a controlled splashdown. Dearka was alive and standing here having this conversation, but he had absolutely no interest in repeating the experience.

The man on the monitor was his superior officer, Rau Le Creuset, the "masked man."

"It is regrettable that we were unable to bring down the legged ship and the Strike, but the fact that the two of you descended to the surface along with them, unintended as it was, may yet prove advantageous."

Here was a man who had never let quarry escape him, and yet he had failed to destroy the Archangel, allowing it to reach the Earth intact. Even so, not the faintest trace of frustration showed on the face concealed behind Rau's mask; from first word to last, his voice remained perfectly composed. Dearka despised that voice.

"The legged ship will now fall under the jurisdiction of our forces stationed on Earth, but the two of you are to remain at Gibraltar for the time being and join the pursuit alongside them."

He allowed the words to settle for a moment, then turned his gaze back to Dearka and Yzak with something faintly mocking in it.

"Naturally... should the opportunity arise, you are free to destroy it."

The transmission cut out. Dearka sank back in his chair and glanced up at the colleague standing beside him.

"So there it is. What, we're not being recalled to space?"

He spun the chair in an aimless circle and released a long, weighted sigh.

"You're saying we have to drag ourselves through the dirt alongside the ground forces, chasing after the legged ship?"

Both Dearka and Yzak Joule, who had come down to Earth with him, were ace pilots of the space forces. Simply belonging to Le Creuset's team demanded a level of skill that justified the assignment, and as men who carried fierce pride and a deep sense of elite distinction, neither one could quite stomach the fact that they had fallen to the surface through their own miscalculation, in the middle of combat, no less. Beyond that, as far as Dearka was concerned, the true glory of mobile suit warfare belonged in the void of space. That was self-evident. They were second-generation Coordinators, born among the stars and raised among them. For men who had spent every day of their lives beyond the atmosphere, standing here on Earth felt profoundly unnatural.

The whole ordeal had left Dearka thoroughly disgusted, but when he happened to look up, he went rigid. Yzak, standing at his side, had begun peeling away the bandages that covered half his face.

"Hey, Yzak..."

Dearka felt a strange unease tighten through him. Yzak had taken a slash across the face from his own shattered visor during that recent clash with the Strike. He had kept fighting even afterward, entering the battle before atmospheric descent with the wound still raw and open.

Now that he thought about it, Dearka had never once asked how severe the injury actually was. Since Yzak had returned to combat almost immediately, he had assumed it could not have been anything too dire, but what lay beneath those bandages stopped the breath in his throat.

A grotesque scar cut diagonally across the full breadth of Yzak's face.

His features had always been so refined, so sharply sculpted, that the wound carved into them looked all the more savage for the contrast, and Dearka, against his will, found himself unable to look away. Yet with the medical technology available to them, an injury like this could have been treated without leaving so much as a mark. Which meant Yzak had deliberately chosen to keep it.

For him, then, being bested by an Earth Forces mobile suit must have remained, quite literally, a wound that refused to close.

His face, already distorted by the taut pull of the scar, twisted further with fury, and through teeth clenched tight he snarled.

"If the opportunity arises?"

He crushed the loosened bandage in his fist and let out a cry saturated with hatred.

"I'll destroy it! The next time we meet, I will, without question!"

The Archangel was closing in on a jagged spur of rock that thrust upward from the flat expanse of sand like a solitary island. It stood roughly two hundred kilometers east of the point where they had come down. With the buggies leading the way, the enormous white vessel crept forward, picking

its path through the stones. Men who evidently lived among the rocks stood gaping, eyes wide at the sheer scale of the ship. At the floor of a valley enclosed by walls of stone, the Archangel settled in, its outstretched wings grazing the rock faces on either side. Overhead, crews of men and mobile suits set about draping camouflage netting to shield it from any aerial surveillance.

"Sahib! What in the hell is the meaning of this?!"

A man came charging out from somewhere deeper in the rocky heights, shouting his protest at Sahib Ashman. But the resistance leader answered with nothing more than a terse command.

"They're guests. Act like it."

Murrue, Mu, and Natarle fell in behind him as he pressed farther inside.

So this outcrop of stone served as the Desert Dawn's base. Whether the caves had been here before them or hollowed out afterward, they gaped open at intervals throughout the rock, and within them lay stacked weapons, ammunition, and the mundane provisions of daily life, all of it lending the place a cluttered, improvised feel. The rough, grimy men busy hauling cargo and tallying inventory let loose sharp whistles as the female officers walked past. Murrue answered with a bright, unbothered smile; at her side, Natarle returned their stares with undisguised irritation.

They followed Sahib deeper still, eventually reaching what appeared to function as a command room. The chamber, lit by the wan glow of electric lamps, held communications equipment, computers that likely served for intelligence work, and a broad table positioned at its center. Mu let out a low whistle.

"Not bad. But you actually live in a place like this?"

"This is a forward base. Everyone's got a home in town. Assuming it hasn't been burned to the ground."

Sahib replied as he crossed to the wall and lifted a pot from an electric heater. Murrue caught on the word.

"In town?"

"Some of us are from Tassil, some from Moula, some from Banadiya. We're just volunteers from places like those. Coffee?"

He asked this while pouring the dark liquid into an enamel cup, and Murrue extended her hand with a grateful "Thank you," only for the man to raise it to his own lips, take a sip, and walk off with a flat, "Help yourself to whatever."

Murrue was left standing with her hand still suspended uselessly in the air. She glanced around, but there was not another cup in sight. Since Natarle had already moved briskly ahead, Murrue abandoned the prospect of coffee and hurried to catch up with Sahib.

"And for helping conceal the ship as well... thank you."

She added the gratitude belatedly. With something that massive, there was no place to put it where it would not draw attention, but here, at least, they had found an ideal refuge.

The blond girl from earlier drifted silently up to Sahib, murmured something close to his ear, then slipped away again. Mu watched her go and asked,

"And who is she?"

Sahib regarded them with those same unreadable eyes before answering,

"Our goddess of victory."

"Oh?"

A teasing light entered Mu's gaze as he looked after the girl. For someone bearing the title of goddess, she seemed remarkably short on conventional femininity.

"Does she have a name?"

When no reply came, Mu turned those blue eyes back to Sahib and offered a shrug.

"Seems poor manners, addressing a goddess by her title alone when we don't even know what to call her."

After a slow pull of coffee, Sahib answered in a grudging tone.

"Cagalli Yula."

He set the cup down on the table and unfolded a map across its surface.

"So. Your people want to reach Alaska..."

He was clearly steering the conversation elsewhere. For a moment Murrue found his evasiveness peculiar, but the map quickly consumed her full attention.

"First order of business, you need a route out of Africa. True, this may be ZAFT-controlled territory, but it's still just land. It's not as though they've stationed troops across every stretch of desert... but ever since Victoria Spaceport fell three days ago, they've seized the momentum."

Sahib laid out the situation with blunt precision, and Murrue and the others erupted over him before he could continue.

"Victoria has fallen?!"

"Three days ago?"

Even Mu winced.

"That's ugly..."

"The African Community has always tilted toward the PLANTs. And the South African Union, the last holdout still putting up a fight, was most likely written off by the Earth Forces in the end. The front lines are redrawn practically by the day."

As things currently stood, the African continent was, in broad terms, split in two. Roughly seventy percent of it, spanning the north and west, belonged to the African Community, which sided with the PLANTs, while the south was held by the South African Union, aligned with the Earth Alliance. ZAFT's ground invasion campaign, Operation Uroboros, had been designed to seize every spaceport strung along the equatorial belt. The Kaohsiung spaceport had already been lost, and now even Victoria, the vast facility constructed over the reclaimed basin of Lake Victoria, had fallen into ZAFT's hands as well...

"Then Panama is all we have left..."

Murrue said it quietly, her mood darkening.

"Your people are holding together remarkably well, all things considered."

Mu collected himself and offered Sahib a grin, but Sahib fixed him with a stony look.

"Understand something. To us, ZAFT and the Earth Forces are one and the same. Both of them come here to govern us, to take from us. In good times, they keep the wealth for themselves. When things turn bad, they push the cost onto us so they never have to sacrifice what they've already claimed..."

Murrue dropped her gaze, unsettled.

Before the A.D. era had drawn to its close, this land had thrived as a sophisticated urban hub of Mediterranean commerce. Roman ruins still stood along the coastline. In later centuries, Arab peoples had made their home here, but during the nineteenth century the region had also suffered colonial subjugation at the hands of European powers, and after cycling through one upheaval after another, it had ultimately been absorbed into the sprawling territory of the African Community as one of its member states. There was no question that Sahib and his people had every right to their bitterness, lives shaped perpetually by the calculations of greater powers. At the very least, the ones who governed them now had never been their choice.

But Mu only gave a light laugh.

"Then why lend us a hand?"

"I told you, we didn't. But... let's put it this way. 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.'"

Mu flashed a knowing grin, and for just an instant it seemed the mouth concealed behind Sahib's beard curved into something resembling a smile as well.

"How does that ship perform in atmosphere?"

"It's unable to achieve significant altitude."

Natarle fielded the question, and Sahib leaned in over the map.

"If it can't clear the mountain range, then the only alternative is to force your way through Gibraltar..."

"With what we've got? You can't be serious."

Mu's brow creased. The Strait of Gibraltar housed a ZAFT forward base that served as the bridgehead for their campaigns into Europe and Africa. The idea of the Archangel punching through that overwhelming sphere of control on its own was beyond consideration.

"Then your sole option is to drive hard for the Red Sea, break out into the Indian Ocean, and cross from there to the Pacific."

Sahib delivered it with casual finality. For him, after all, it was somebody else's problem. But those who were actually in the thick of it began weighing the viability of that route in earnest.

"The Pacific..."

"Without a secured supply line, that is not a distance we can manage in a single stretch."

"But he's right, isn't he? There really is no other way..."

"The Oceania Union is entirely under ZAFT control, correct? Does the Equatorial Union still hold neutral status?"

The three of them hunched over the map with their heads drawn close, working through it together, until Sahib let out a noise thick with exasperation.

"Hold on, aren't you getting a bit ahead of yourselves? You're already fretting about what's that far down the road?"

All three looked up with wary eyes. Before them, the resistance leader brought one heavy finger down on a single point still well within the African continent.

"Here! The Lesseps is stationed right at Banadiya!"

A beat of silence followed before Mu managed a feeble, deflecting laugh.

"Ah... so when you said 'drive hard and make it through,' that's what you were getting at?"

Murrue stared at the spot beneath Sahib's finger, then released a long, heavy sigh. Perhaps... she really should have taken that coffee after all.

As fortification, if nothing else.

Once the camouflage netting had been stretched over the Archangel and Kira had descended from the Strike, the girl approached him again, the one they called Cagalli.

"About before... that was on me."

She muttered it while glowering up at him from beneath her brows.

"I didn't mean to hit you," she began, then caught herself midsentence and corrected it with blunt candor. "Well, that's not entirely true either, but it happened in the heat of the moment. I'm sorry."

She finished with a stiff sincerity, though nothing in her bearing actually resembled remorse. A laugh escaped Kira before he could stop it, and she fixed him with a stung, indignant glare.

"What's so funny?!"

"What's funny is..."

She seemed completely oblivious to how contradictory she was being. Seriousness was probably her default setting. Which was precisely why she could not tolerate being laughed at. And yet even when she bristled, there was something about her like a small animal, ferocious in a way that was almost charming.

Cagalli pulled her anger back just as quickly and looked away.

"I kept thinking about it. After everything, what had happened to you..."

She said it in the same brusque, irritated tone as before. Kira recognized it now as her way of papering over discomfort.

Back on Heliopolis, when Kira had been told the shelter was already at capacity, he had forced Cagalli inside anyway with a desperate plea, "At least take one more." He had done it because he was a Coordinator and she was a girl, but Cagalli had known nothing about him. And if some complete stranger had chosen to save only her, only to be consumed in the colony's

destruction afterward... when Kira imagined that happening to himself, he understood with perfect clarity what she must have carried since.

"I'm sorry."

The words left him before he could think better of them, though on reflection, apologizing made little sense either. But Cagalli received them with imperious certainty.

"Damn right. Pull something like that again, and I won't forgive you."

Even as she said it, Kira had the quiet feeling that if the same situation arose, he would almost certainly do the exact same thing. While he stood there privately tangled in that small contradiction, Cagalli's voice sharpened once more.

"And besides, how do you end up showing up in something like that? On top of which, you've gone and joined the Earth Forces?"

She had no standing to interrogate him this way, and yet somehow Kira felt that being taken to task was only natural. His gaze dropped.

Really... how had any of this come to pass?

And yet there had been no other path open to him. It sprang from the same impulse that would probably drive him to surrender his place in a shelter to Cagalli all over again.

"A lot happened..."

Kira said it softly. In that instant, faces surfaced unbidden, his friends, Athrun's anguished cry, the paper flower pressed into his palm, and the shuttle burning as it fell away.

"A lot, huh."

Perhaps she caught something in the weariness threaded through his voice, because Cagalli did not push any further. She only watched him with a searching look. Wearing that expression of open concern, she suddenly looked far more like a girl.

"Now that I think about it... what about you? Why are you out here?"

The question struck Kira without warning, and he voiced it aloud.

"Weren't you from Orb? Or are you originally from this part of the world?"

"Huh?! Uh..."

Cagalli turned aside, her face stiff with awkwardness.

And then, a commotion from elsewhere.

"Wait a second, Flay! You can't expect me to follow you when you talk like that, just explain it clearly!"

"Oh, be quiet! I already have explained!"

The sound of a boy and girl arguing carried closer, and both of them turned toward it. Rounding the edge of a jutting rock came Flay, with Sai hurrying at her heels. The instant Flay caught sight of Kira, she ran to him as though reaching for rescue.

"Kira!"

She seized his arm with both hands and sheltered herself behind him. Sai pulled up short, visibly uncomfortable, then called out in a strained voice, "Flay!" But it was Kira who answered him.

"What?"

Sai faltered under the cold look Kira leveled at him.

"I need to talk to Flay. This has nothing to do with you, Kira."

"It absolutely does have to do with him!"

Flay cried out from behind Kira's back.

"I was in Kira's room last night, after all!"

Cagalli, who had been standing nearby throughout, went rigid at those words and flushed a vivid red, then beat a hasty, mortified retreat. That left only the three of them.

For several moments Sai simply stood there, staring vacantly, as though what he had heard refused to register. There was even something innocent in the look on his face. Kira could not bear it and turned his eyes away.

"Wh-what do you mean... Flay, you..."

Sai began in a voice that shook, but Flay severed it with a shout.

"What does it matter! It has nothing to do with you, Sai!"

Her hands clenched tighter around Kira's arm. A dizzying rush of exhilaration surged through him, pressing his guilt beneath it.

She was no longer Sai's.

He did not have to go on wanting her from a distance, aching and hopeless, any longer.

She had become Kira's.

"Nothing to do with me? What do you mean it has nothing to do with me, Flay?!"

As Sai's voice rose, Kira spoke.

"Just stop, Sai."

"Kira?"

Sai stared at him in disbelief.

"No matter how you look at it, you're just chasing after Flay when she doesn't want you to."

"What did you just say?"

The eyes behind Sai's glasses said it plainly enough.

"You too? You're betraying me too?"

Kira dropped his gaze before he was even conscious of doing it.

"Just... stop making a scene. We're all exhausted from last night's battle..."

He turned his back on Sai. He could not endure hearing another word. Flay pressed herself against Kira with even greater deliberateness, and the two of them began to walk away.

Then, a strangled shout.

"Kiraaa!"

With that, Sai threw himself at him from behind. But the hand that reached for him was seized and wrenched upward in an instant by Kira, bent back with effortless speed. Flay recoiled from the sudden violence erupting between the two.

"Don't."

Kira heard his own voice emerge so cold it startled even him.

"If we fought for real, there's no way you could win against me, Sai."



He released him with a light shove, and Sai stumbled backward and dropped to the ground. His eyes were wide with shock. Whether it was shock at the gulf in strength between them, or at the fact that Kira, who had always been quiet and yielding, had turned on him like this without warning, was impossible to tell.

Until now, Kira had never once deliberately shown his friends the full extent of what he could do, not in schoolwork, not in anything physical. For someone living among Naturals, perhaps it was a survival instinct he had developed without ever being aware of it. Now, for the first time, having stripped that strength bare, he felt something savage thrill through him. There was revenge woven into it too, however slight, revenge against the one who had always looked past him, who had paraded his closeness with Flay in front of Kira's eyes without a thought.

But Sai had never known any of that. He had never looked down on Kira. In his own way, Sai had always tried to shield him, to watch out for him.

And yet this was how Kira repaid him...

The brief flash of cruelty was swallowed by a guilt that swelled rapidly to overtake it.

"Flay was kind to me."

Kira forced the words out, his face turned aside.

"She stayed with me the whole time... held me... told me everything was all right... said she would protect me..."

His voice shook.

"And none of you ever once cared what it's been like for me to fight!"

It was unfair to say it now. Cowardly, even.

But he could not hold it inside any longer.

Alone in that cockpit, never knowing when a beam might tear through and end him. He had crushed down that overwhelming isolation and gone on fighting, killing his own people for the sake of those who could never truly be his kind.

For everyone else.

And now, were they going to strip away the one warmth that had finally reached him?

At Kira's cry, the words died in Sai's throat, and he stood in silence.

"Kira..."

Flay's hand came to rest on his trembling shoulder. Her fingers moved gently through his hair, then drew him close.

"It's all right. I'll stay with you. Always..."

That sweet voice, that warmth, seeped through his frozen body and slowly dissolved the hard knot lodged deep in his chest.

Without this now, he could not go on.

"Excuse me, sir, it's DaCosta."

He knocked and pushed the door open, and the instant he did, a staggering reek hit him with such force that his hand flew to his nose. Coffee was meant to smell pleasant, wasn't it? But at this concentration, it

had crossed the line from aroma into weapon. The room's occupant, wholly unbothered by the dense, suffocating cloud, was placidly working a bamboo spatula through his brew.

"Ugh... Commander, could we at least open a window?"

DaCosta finally managed, and Waldfeld turned a look of genuine puzzlement on him.

"Did you really come all the way here just to tell me that?"

"No, sir! That's not what I—"

Hopeless. When the man was consumed with coffee, no, really, when it came to someone whose grasp of common sense was roughly equivalent to a passing familiarity with a foreign tongue, there was simply no reasoning with him. DaCosta abandoned the effort and delivered his report.

"Launch preparations are complete."

"Good."

Waldfeld decanted the freshly brewed coffee into a cup, drew the curling steam toward himself with a long, deliberate breath, and released a sigh of pure contentment. How the man could possibly distinguish individual notes through that asphyxiating haze was beyond DaCosta's comprehension. If not for this particular fixation, he might almost have been an exemplary commanding officer, DaCosta caught the thought there, recalled several of the man's other eccentricities in quick succession, and silently appended another five or six caveats.

His commander, still operating entirely on his own internal clock, showed no inclination to hurry as he savored the coffee and broke into a look of serene delight.

"Yes... very good. This time I blended in a touch of Hawaiian Kona."

"I see."

DaCosta answered with studied neutrality. Once before, he had carelessly let a "What kind of bean is that?" slip out and been subjected to a lecture of punishing length. If he repeated that error today, there was no telling how long the soldiers, already assembled and standing ready for deployment, would be left waiting in formation.

"Yes... this is quite good as well. Hawaiian Kona has a way of making its presence known even in the smallest quantity. I'm fond of that quality."

Waldfeld set his cup down and strode briskly from the captain's quarters.

On deck, three BuCUEs stood poised for immediate action alongside armored vehicles, and arrayed before them the soldiers waited in formation for their commander. Waldfeld addressed them in the same unhurried, almost offhand manner he always carried.

"We will now commence an assault on the resistance base! Last night, they were entirely too naughty. Misbehaving children deserve a proper lesson."

Evidently, the man was constitutionally incapable of resisting one unnecessary flourish. Yet the soldiers betrayed no impatience with their freewheeling commander, nor any particular eagerness to curry favor. No one in this unit made the mistake of underestimating Waldfeld. Eccentric

beyond question, but every man present understood exactly how formidable he was.

"Target is Tassil! All hands, mount up!"

Waldfeld's epithet, to begin with, owed its origin to the saber-tiger-model BuCUE he had piloted in the war's earliest campaigns. He had fallen for the prototype the moment he laid eyes on it and seized control of it through sheer obstinacy. Mounted on its head were elongated blades that genuinely recalled the fangs of a saber-toothed predator, and as though that alone were not conspicuous enough, he had ordered the entire machine painted in two-tone yellow and black, rendering it impossible to overlook. Sensing an opportunity, a PLANT advertising firm had seized on it for propaganda purposes and coined the moniker "Desert Tiger." But the reason that name had come to strike dread into the enemy was the string of victories Waldfeld himself had delivered, not any embellishment from military public relations. That was something DaCosta and every soldier under his command understood in their bones.

Near the outskirts of Tassil, Waldfeld ordered the vehicle to halt.

The desert might climb past forty degrees Celsius during the day, but the moment the sun dropped below the horizon, temperatures began their swift decline, and by dawn they could plunge close to ten. Soldiers raised in the meticulously regulated environment of the PLANTs, where temperature and humidity were both held under absolute control, were Coordinators blessed with resilient constitutions, and so they rarely fell seriously ill, but a great many of them still found these brutal conditions nearly unbearable. DaCosta, by fortunate chance, had acclimated quickly. Waldfeld, on the other hand, seemed to take genuine pleasure in the weather's caprice. There was likely no other Coordinator alive who derived as much satisfaction from life on Earth as he did.

The city of Tassil had gone dark; household lights were extinguished, and only the meager glow of streetlamps and a handful of shops still open deep into the night persisted, scattered so thinly that the rest of the place seemed poised to dissolve into the blackness behind it. The energy crisis surely contributed to that, but even setting that aside, electricity consumption in this region had never been high.

Without entirely knowing why, DaCosta dropped his voice.

"It's the hour when everyone's fast asleep."

"Then let them sleep forever."

The ruthless line, so unlike his commander, jolted through DaCosta for a moment.

But then, at the words that followed, DaCosta very nearly pitched headlong into the sand.

"Not that I would actually say such a thing."

Waldfeld, however, looked entirely in earnest.

"We commence the attack fifteen minutes after a warning is issued."

"Sir...?"

Unable to fathom his meaning, DaCosta stared at him, wide-eyed. At moments like these, he could never tell which of his commander's remarks were jests and which were deadly serious. More than once he had half-genuinely suspected the man was simply amusing himself at a junior officer's expense.

"Well, go on then. Get moving and notify them."

Judging by the impatience sharpening his voice, he meant every word. DaCosta snapped to attention with a hasty "Yes, sir!", saluted, then tumbled out of the vehicle and broke into a run.

A shrill whistle tore through the camp.

It was clearly some kind of alarm. Sahib exploded from the command room, and Murrue and the others were right behind him, straining to see what was happening.

"What is it?!"

The boy stationed in the watchtower shouted back in a voice still pitched high with youth.

"The sky... the sky's on fire!"

Every breath caught at once.

"It's coming from the direction of Tassil!"

At that, Sahib spun on his heel and plunged back inside, heading straight for the radio. One of his men had already been working it; he struck the speaker, crackling with static, with the heel of his fist.

"It's no use! I can't get a signal through!"

Outside, men were already yelling over one another as they sprinted in every direction, and the growl of vehicles roaring to life shredded the air.

"Grab the ammunition, now!"

"Those bastards! My mother's bedridden!"

"Get in, move! Keep dragging your feet and we leave without you!"

Sahib came storming back out.

"Wait! Don't go charging in blind!"

"You expect us to just abandon them, Sahib?!"

"That's not what I'm saying, I said half of you hold here! Pull yourselves together! There could be a second column!"

Watching the chaos of men scrambling into motion, Murrue dropped her voice and turned to Mu at her side.

"What's your read on this?"

"Mmm," Mu murmured, crossing his arms.

"I've never heard anything about the 'Desert Tiger' being the type to slaughter civilians, at least."

"Then what's the purpose of all this...?"

"How would I know? It's not as though we've been introduced."

His manner, as always, was so thoroughly devoid of urgency that for one brief moment Murrue's shoulders slumped.

"So, what's our move?"

"The Archangel stays where it is. A second force really could be out there. Commander, would you mind going?"

When Murrue said it, Mu blinked and pointed at himself.

"Me?"

For all his posturing about what do we do, it was clear the man had been fully prepared to treat this as someone else's crisis from the start. Whether as retribution or simply because the moment called for it, Murrue smiled at him with pointed sweetness.

"The Skygrasper is our fastest option, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I suppose it is. Fine then, off I go."

He rolled his shoulders as if the whole affair were an unbearable imposition, then turned toward the Archangel. Murrue called after his retreating back, making herself perfectly clear.

"We are providing support only! Nothing more! We'll send a buggy as well, with the doctor and one other!"

"Okaaay."

Without so much as glancing back, Mu lifted one hand in acknowledgment and broke into a run. Cagalli came tearing past him, shouted "Ahmed!" and waved down a buggy driven by the same boy Murrue had noticed earlier. Sahib had already mounted another and roared away. As Cagalli threw herself into Ahmed's vehicle, the large man who had stepped in front of Mu that morning, as if shielding her, swung into the rear seat, and the buggy tore off.

Murrue wheeled around and barked at everyone within earshot.

"All hands! Back to the ship, now! Go to alert status!"

The commotion had already reached Kira and the others. The instant it registered, Kira wrenched free of Flay's hands and launched into a sprint as though something had physically propelled him forward.

"Kira!"

Flay tried to run after him, but Sai caught her by the shoulder and held her in place. She turned, fixed him with a look black with resentment, and knocked his hand away. Sai stood rooted to the spot.

More than what she had done the night before, more than the ache in the arm Kira had wrenched behind his back, it was that frigid look in her eyes that wounded him most deeply. It was a gaze saturated with contempt, as though she were staring at some miserable insect, and only days ago she had been closer to him than anyone, always tilting her face toward his with that near-sweet, trusting dependence.

Sai could not make sense of any of it.

Flay, who had despised Coordinators that fiercely, with Kira...?

It was true that lately she had been paying Kira more and more attention. Sai had read it as simple kindness, and had even been quietly glad that she had come to accept Kira as one of their own. What an idiot he had been.

He had not even registered that her heart had already gone elsewhere.

Why Kira? Why him, of all people? Setting Tolle aside entirely, why not Kuzzey, or anyone else among the crew? Why, out of everyone, did it have to be *him*?

And the moment that thought formed, Sai flinched from the truth buried in the deepest recess of his own heart.

Kira's a Coordinator...

That was the crux of it.

He, the one who had always wrapped himself in palatable words, "He's an important friend," Natural or Coordinator, it makes no difference, he, of all people...

In the end, he had never truly accepted Kira's existence at the very bottom of his heart. The thought of a Coordinator laying hands on the woman he loved filled him with visceral revulsion.

I hate Kira.

He hated the man who had taken Flay's heart and stripped him of his dignity right in front of her.

Sai stood there, paralyzed, shaken by the darkness he had discovered coiled inside himself.

Was I really this ugly a person all along?

The city was a sea of flame.

Tassil had been remade into a single enormous torch, its blaze illuminating the desert darkness in every direction.

"Commander!"

DaCosta returned and swung into the passenger seat. Waldfeld, who had been sitting with his eyes shut, cracked one open.

"Done?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Casualties on either side?"

"Huh?"

The response escaped DaCosta before he could catch it. If they had somehow managed to take losses against unarmed civilians with no capacity to fight back, they would have been the laughingstock of the entire force.

"None, sir. That wasn't a battle!"

"On either side?"

"Well, among the townspeople I imagine there are those who were caught in falling debris, or burned, things of that nature..."

Lately, DaCosta had come to believe that Waldfeld simply operated by a personal prohibition against doing anything he found distasteful. Harming or killing noncombatants, women, children, the elderly, he avoided because it repelled him. That did not make him a humanitarian. Far from it. If circumstances required it, he would put a town or two to the torch without flinching, and there were occasions when he would take civilian lives as well. But if razing the city alone could achieve the same outcome, then that was sufficient. It was, DaCosta supposed, a code of behavior dictated by Waldfeld's own peculiar sense of rationality.

And now, with that same effortless simplicity, Waldfeld said,
"Then we withdraw. Linger too long, and the gentlemen of the house will come rushing home."

DaCosta could not help but stare at him in bewilderment.

"Aren't we staying to ambush them when they return?"

"Now, now, that would be cowardly, wouldn't it?! DaCosta, do you honestly believe I set their town ablaze just to draw them out?"

The wounded indignation in his voice left DaCosta with nothing but a feeble,

"No, sir..."

Cowardly or otherwise, this was war, that was how such things were conducted. But offering so perfectly reasonable an opinion to this man would have served no purpose whatsoever.

"Our objective here has been accomplished! All units, return to base!"

Waldfeld issued the order, and DaCosta passed it down the line.

All the while thinking, yet again, that comprehending this commander's reasoning was simply beyond his reach.

The Skygrasper ripped across the darkened sky.

Tassil sat several dozen kilometers to the east of the resistance base, yet there was no chance of straying off course. A fire like this would have been unmistakable from a hundred kilometers away.

As he closed in on the burning city, Mu banked into a wide orbit overhead, wary of the violent updrafts below.

"Ahh... this is bad..."

Even he couldn't stop the grimness from bleeding into his voice.

"Looks like they wiped it off the map..."

Hardly any part of the town remained standing, and what little still held together would soon be devoured by the advancing wall of flame and ground down to cinder. Nowhere in the streets was there any trace of movement. The blaze raged with such ferocity that it felt as if the aircraft itself might be wrenched sideways by the thermals.

Then something snagged Mu's attention. His eyes shifted behind the visor of his helmet, and for one brief moment his face went slack with surprise.

There were people gathered on a low rise at the town's edge.

There were survivors.

No, it was more than that. As Mu brought the Skygrasper in low, it became clear that the majority of the townspeople had made it out. The settlement had never been large enough to hold many residents to begin with, but he could pick out figures not only on this hill but dotted across the surrounding outskirts. And they were far from few.

Some raged at the sky, others sobbed openly, and still others simply stood rooted in numb silence, watching their homes burn.

Mu opened a comm channel.

"Flaga here... survivors confirmed."

"I see... thank goodness."

On the distorted display, Murrue's expression eased into a faint smile.

"Actually, it looks like nearly everyone got out alive."

"What?"

"So, what exactly are we dealing with here?"

Mu let the confusion show in his voice, and Murrue straightened abruptly.

"The enemy?!"

Her mind went there at once, and understandably so. If that were the case, then torching the town had to be bait, designed to lure in either them or the resistance.

But there was no trace of hostile forces anywhere. Not unless they had buried themselves beneath the sand.

When Mu relayed as much, Murrue fell quiet too, visibly at a loss. The presence of survivors was a relief, certainly, but the utter illegibility of the enemy's purpose only deepened the unease.

"No figuring out what goes on in a Coordinator's head, I suppose."

"Commander, that comment was... inappropriate."

Murrue's reply came through the monitor with unmistakable reproach. Mu clamped his mouth shut. She was right. It wasn't something Kira should have had to hear.

By then the resistance buggies had come into view, tearing in through billowing curtains of sand. Their occupants were out before the vehicles had fully skidded to a halt, sprinting toward the faces they recognized.

"Father! Mother! Are you all right?!"

"Darling! The house—!"

"Sara! Sara!"

On every side, people were flinging themselves around wives and children, women crumpling against their husbands in tears, families confirming one by one that those they loved were still breathing.

A short while later, the Archangel's buggy pulled in as well. Natarle stepped out and made her way quickly to Mu, who had already climbed down from the cockpit and stood watching the reunions play out before him.

"Commander... what is all this?"

Even Natarle could not mask her shock at the sheer mass of evacuees, it was as though the entire population of the town had been scooped up whole and deposited here.

"Get the injured over here! If you can still move, lend a hand!"

Sahib vaulted from the truck and began barking orders without breaking stride as he wove through the refugees. Cagalli caught sight of a boy and the old man standing beside him and let out a cry of sudden relief.

"Yaru! Elder!"

Sahib's gaze snapped toward them at once. The boy, it turned out, was his son.

"You're safe, Yaru. Your mother and Nene?"

"Old Shamseddin fell and hurt himself while we were running, so they stayed behind with him."

The boy delivered his answer with a steadiness beyond his years, and even the battle-hardened leader of the resistance allowed himself one long exhale.

"I see..."

He set a broad hand on the boy's head and mussed his hair in quiet approval. Perhaps it was that simple touch that broke through, because Yaru's eyes brimmed with tears. But Sahib had already reassembled the face of a commander.

"How bad was it?"

At that, the old man they called Elder raised his deeply creased face.

"No one was killed."

"What do you mean?"

The words burst from Cagalli in open disbelief, and by now Mu and the others had drifted close enough to hear for themselves. The old man continued, his voice steeped in bitterness.

"They gave us a warning first. 'We are going to burn the town. Run.' That is what they told us..."

"What?"

Sahib drew a sharp breath at the revelation, while something clicked into place for Mu all at once. Without a warning like that, there was no conceivable way this many people could have survived a nighttime assault by fire.

"After the warning came the BuCUEs. Then they set it ablaze. The houses... the food, the fuel, the ammunition... every last bit of it..."

A quiet fury carved the lines of the old man's face deeper still, lines the desert sun had spent long years etching into his skin.

"It is true, no one has died. Not yet. But after they have burned everything we possessed, how precisely do they expect us to go on living from tomorrow?"

"Those bastard tricks...! What was that tiger trying to prove?!"

Sahib's fist clenched white. And then, into that air dense with rage, a measured voice interjected from the side.

"But there's still a way forward, isn't there? So long as you're alive."

"What?!"

Sahib and the others turned sharp, hostile stares on Mu, who had spoken. His gaze was still fixed on Tassil, where the flames showed no sign of fading.

"Seems to me like this 'Tiger' of yours has no real intention of fighting you in earnest."

"What are you saying?"

"This was retaliation for last night, nothing more. Call it a punishment, if you want. If he was willing to stop at this, he strikes me as a fairly merciful man."

"What did you say?!"

At Mu's casual tone, Cagalli surged forward, close enough to seize him by the front of his shirt.

"Stop at this? You call burning an entire town stopping? Where in any of this do you see mercy?!"

Even Mu flinched under the full weight of her fury. Had the gap in their heights not been so considerable, she might well have driven her fist into his face on the spot, exactly as she had with Kira.

"My apologies. If that was offensive, then I apologize. But they're a professional army, aren't they? You have to realize that if they'd been in earnest, it wouldn't have ended this way."

He had meant it as nothing more than a blunt confrontation with reality. With only a handful of BuCUEs, it would have been perfectly feasible to massacre every last soul in this town within two or three hours. Had things gone that far, none of them would have had the chance to see their families again, or to agonize over what came next.

But rather than sobering her, his words seemed only to pour fuel on Cagalli's rage.

"He's a cowardly, underhanded bastard! He burns a town while we're away and calls that a victory?! We've always fought with courage! We brought down BuCUEs yesterday!"

Cagalli had erupted, screaming at the top of her lungs. Around her, the other resistance fighters fixed Mu with the same look of contemptuous solidarity. Even Natarle's eyes seemed to have grown a shade colder.

"That's exactly why that coward had to get his revenge this way! Some Desert Tiger!"

But the only reason they had managed to destroy those BuCUEs at all was that the enemy had been preoccupied with the Strike and dropped its guard. The same trick would not work twice. The enemy were Coordinators, whatever else could be said of them, they were not stupid.

And yet, within Cagalli and the others, the fact that they had "brought down BuCUEs" had already begun swelling into something larger than itself.

"Where do you think you're going?!"

At Sahib's sharp bark, every head turned toward him. Several resistance fighters were piling into buggies, weapons clutched in their hands.

"They can't have gone far! They only just pulled out of town, if we move now, we can run them down!"

"What are you—!"

Listening to the exchange, Mu muttered beneath his breath.

"Whoa, hold on... they're actually serious?"

He had been so absorbed by that spectacle that only then did he register Cagalli still boring into him with a glare hot enough to incinerate him where he stood, and he hastily arranged his face into a weak, conciliatory smile.

"Ah... right... yeah. This Tiger of yours really is something else."

"You too!"

The girl hurled it with enough volume to split his eardrums, then spun on her heel and stalked toward her comrades. Over by the buggies, Sahib was already locked in argument with the men.

"If we hit them now, right after the attack, they've got to be running low on ammunition!"

"We're going after them! You think we can just swallow this after what they did?!"

The men shouted over each other, faces dark with fury, and gunned their engines. Sahib fought to hold them back.

"Don't be fools! If you've got time for this, tend to the wounded! Stay with your wives and children! That takes priority!"

But the men roared back with twice the ferocity.

"And what exactly does that accomplish?! Look at it! Tassil is done! The houses, the food, it's all ashes! So what, you want us to sit there holding our wives and children and weep?!"

"Don't tell me you're ready to roll over for the Tiger, Sahib!"

Sahib wavered for a single heartbeat at that accusation, and in the opening the buggies tore away. Stranded behind them, Sahib drove his boot into the sand in helpless frustration, then snapped his chin at one of the men nearby.

"Edol!"

"Right!"

Grasping the order instantly, the man threw himself into a buggy and fired the engine. Cagalli came sprinting over.

"You're going too, Sahib?!"

Sahib swung into the passenger seat beside Edol, his expression shuttered and grim.

"I can't just let them go alone."

"I'm coming too!"

Cagalli tried to clamber in after him, only to be brushed aside as effortlessly as a stray kitten.

"You stay here."

That was all he offered before the buggy kicked up sand and vanished. Cagalli, not even pausing to consider what he meant by it, stood hacking in the dust and glare of the wake, glowering after him with open resentment.

"Sahib!"

Then Ahmed's vehicle swung to a stop in front of her.

"Get in!"

The broad-shouldered man who trailed her everywhere was already seated in the back. Cagalli's face broke into immediate brightness, and she leapt in without hesitation before the buggy surged off after the rest.

"Well, now..."

Mu watched them disappear and let a long breath drain out of him.

"Passionate land, passionate people..."

Natarle paid his wistful musing no attention whatsoever. She was too appalled by what could only be described as the reckless insanity of the resistance fighters.

"They're going to be annihilated. With equipment like that, against BuCUEs?"

"Yeah... more or less."

As expected, when Murrue heard the report she was equally dumbfounded.

"They what?! They chased after them? What utter idiots!"

Even Mu had not been quite that blunt about it. Women pulled no punches. And it did not end there, on the monitor, Murrue swung an accusing look squarely at him.

"Why didn't you stop them, Commander?!"

A fine thing to be held responsible for.

"If I'd tried, I think we'd have found ourselves at war with them instead. More importantly, what about the town? This is going to be an immediate crisis. Food, and above all, water. There are far too many people here. And a good number of wounded on top of it."

Behind Mu, while he maintained the link with the Archangel, Natarle appeared to be having a wretched time with a crying child whose injuries had reduced him to inconsolable sobs.

"Ah, d-does it hurt? Come now, stop crying..."

Plainly unaccustomed to soothing children, she fumbled through her pocket and fished out a snack for a little boy of perhaps five who was howling at full capacity. He went silent on the spot and began cramming the treat into his mouth with absolute single-mindedness. Natarle exhaled in relief and allowed herself a smile, only to notice the other children converging from all directions, and her expression froze solid.

"Ah... n-no, I don't have that many. Th-this is a problem..."

Catching the scene from the corner of his eye, Mu suppressed a grin, careful not to let her see it. The spectacle of Natarle besieged by a swarm of children was not something one witnessed often. He would have to pass this along to Murrue later.

Murrue, for her part, sighed audibly through the channel.

"I'm dispatching Ensign Yamato. We can't simply leave these people to perish. We'll load the remaining vehicles with water and supplies."

"Sounds good. Much appreciated."

He replied in his usual unhurried manner, but somewhere beneath the surface, the colder machinery of his mind was already dismantling the situation.

To put it plainly, had the town simply been obliterated in the conventional fashion, they would not now find themselves burdened with this many refugees. Neither the resistance nor the Archangel could turn their backs on people who had been targeted because of them, which meant they would have no choice but to surrender a significant share of their own provisions.

Viewed through that lens, perhaps the Tiger's true objective had been to generate as many refugees as possible.

And refugees, for Mu and the others, could all too easily become a set of chains.

Of course, if he voiced that thought aloud, that fierce little goddess would almost certainly put her fist through his face this time.

"Commander... shouldn't we be picking up the pace a little?"

Tugging at the collar of his uniform, DaCosta let the question out with a note of worn-thin exasperation. Waldfeld, slung back in his seat, cracked a single eye open.

"That eager to get back, are you?"

"That's not what I'm saying... at this rate, they're going to come chasing after us."

Paying DaCosta's worry no mind, Waldfeld let his eye fall shut again. After a stretch of silence, he murmured, half to himself.

"A fork in fate."

"Huh?"

Unable to tell whether the conversation had continued or whether that had simply been a thought spoken aloud, DaCosta asked on reflex.

"Self-propelled guns against BuCUEs... that's not even a contest."

Waldfeld opened his eyes at last and tilted his face toward the sky. Dawn was bleeding it white by degrees, though a faint residue of night still held on, the whole expanse suffused with a soft, surrendering blue.

Then, without warning, he asked, "You hear people say fairly often that death is the better choice, but is that actually true?"

"Sir...?"

How would I know? I've never been dead, DaCosta was on the brink of saying exactly that when a transmission broke through. One of the BuCUE pilots.

"Commander, we have vehicles closing from behind. Six... no, eight. They appear to be resistance combat vehicles."

DaCosta's eyes went instinctively to his superior. So that was what Waldfeld had been circling around in those half-voiced fragments. He had read the resistance's reaction from start to finish. Had he razed the town from the very beginning with even this outcome in mind?

Perhaps he had. He truly was a rational man, in the end. He shed no civilian blood, refused to stoop to the cowardice of lying in ambush to cut the resistance down on their return, and yet he would still break them. Because the decision would belong to them. It was the resistance who, inflated by the previous night's victory and goaded past all reason, had made the reckless choice to pursue ZAFT forces whose superiority was beyond question.

Still gazing into the deepening blue of the desert sky, Waldfeld murmured.

"So in the end, is death really the better choice?"

"Cagalli! Ahmed! No, fall back!"

Sahib bellowed from the top of his buggy, but Ahmed only laughed him off.

"Who was it that took those BuCUEs down the other day, huh? That was us, wasn't it?"

"There's no trap buried underground this time! Turn back, Ahmed!"

Sahib, at least, had not lost his grasp on the true measure of their strength. The only reason they had managed to destroy BuCUEs before was that

every condition had aligned in their favor, the traps they had labored to prepare, the unlooked-for intervention of the Strike, the gambit of catching the enemy off guard. It had succeeded because all of those elements had converged at once. Fortune, even. A head-on clash was a fight they could not win.

But young Ahmed, intoxicated by the fact that they had forced the enemy to choke on its own pride, was brimming over with conviction.

"Sahib! Since when did you turn into such a coward?!"

He flung it back with a sneer, and from the passenger seat Cagalli hefted the launcher in her grip.

"Even without traps, there's no shortage of ways to fight!"

"That's what I'm talking about!"

Ahmed stamped the accelerator flat and rocketed past Sahib's vehicle. Sahib bit down hard on his lip, and as the buggy swept alongside, he called out to the broad-shouldered man in the rear seat.

"Kisaka!"

The man called Kisaka slid his eyes sideways and gave a wordless nod, as though to say he understood.

The instant they topped the dune, the BuCUEs and the jeep came into view. The resistance vehicles at the front hoisted launchers to their shoulders and let fly at the BuCUEs lumbering forward on all fours.

"Eat this!"

With a sharp, clipped report, a missile streaked out and struck the massive steel beast square on.

But the BuCUE scarcely flinched. Its mono-eye swiveled toward them.

"Forget the jeep! Bring down the Desert Tiger!"

This time the launcher swung toward the exposed jeep. Reading the trajectory, the driver wrenched the wheel, and a column of sand erupted from the ground just beside it.

"Good! Hit them again!"

But the next missile hammered into a BuCUE that shouldered its way between them, and the intended target slipped away unscathed. As one of the BuCUEs bore down on the lead buggy, raising its enormous forelimb to crush it, Cagalli squeezed the trigger. The shot caught it full in the face. Something in the camera must have been damaged, because the limb locked for a split second. Kisaka followed from the rear seat without hesitation, loosing a bazooka round, and the remaining vehicles opened up all at once. Several shots cracked against the towering iron forelegs, and unable to sustain its own weight, the steel beast sagged to its knees.

"Yes!"

Ahmed's voice rang out in triumph.

But that was where their luck ran dry.

Apart from the one unit whose joints had fused from the barrage, the other two advanced as though the torrent of incoming fire were nothing at all and began herding the resistance fighters into a tightening corner. One of the machines, barreling forward on four legs, launched itself skyward and

shifted to caterpillar mode in midair, slamming down onto the buggy racing beneath it and flattening it outright.

"Aaagh!"

Another friendly buggy streaked past the wreckage. The BuCUE whipped through a savage turn and locked on. The buggy broke away at the final instant alongside another, both trying to scatter and flee, but it was already too late. One was caved in broadside by a sweeping forelimb; the other was ground into the sand beneath a massive foot.

"Jaful! Ahid!"

The names ripped from Sahib in raw anguish.

"Damn it!"

Ahmed wrenched the wheel and drove straight at the third BuCUE, the one running down another buggy. They threaded beneath its towering legs. Cagalli and Kisaka raised their weapons and fired upward into its exposed underside from directly below. By the time the warhead detonated, they were already fighting to tear out through the other side. The blast made the mobile suit stumble for an instant, but only an instant.

Kisaka, who had held his silence until that moment, shouted without warning.

"Jump!"

The word had barely left him before he clamped one arm around Cagalli and threw himself bodily out of the hurtling buggy, taking her with him.

"Wh—?!"

Ahmed did not grasp why. He faltered.

That sliver of hesitation settled everything.

With a scream of metal and brute force, a colossal forelimb whipped down and smashed into the buggy while Ahmed still sat behind the wheel. The dull, sickening crash of colliding steel rang across the sand as the vehicle was swatted away like a discarded toy.

Cagalli, tumbling through the sand in Kisaka's arms, stared in frozen horror.

"Ahmed!"

She watched the boy's body flung high into the air with the buggy, mangled past anything that could still be called a shape.

"Ahmed!"

The BuCUE, having overshot them, wheeled around and turned its mono-eye back in their direction.

But before it could close the distance, a shell from Sahib's weapon struck its shoulder, wrenching its attention away. Kisaka seized the opening and hauled Cagalli, still locked rigid with shock and unable to will her legs to move, away at a dead run.

The BuCUE pivoted toward this new quarry, dropped into caterpillar mode, and surged forward. Sahib's buggy swerved wildly, fighting to stay clear, but the machine carved through its turn with terrifying speed and bore down in relentless pursuit. There was no possibility of outpacing it in a buggy.

"Damn you!"

Teeth grinding, Sahib raised his bazooka.

And then, a single beam seared the sand beside the BuCUE.

Cagalli jolted back into herself and looked up. Blazing against the sun that had just crested the dunes, the red, blue, and white machine sweeping toward them burned itself into her eyes.

"The Strike!"

The first shot sailed wide of its mark by a considerable margin. The second fared no better.

"My shots aren't connecting?"

Kira pulled the sights away from his face. The beam rifle's trajectory was curving off target in an unnatural arc. A beat later, the reason struck him.

"I see, the desert thermals!"

The sand plain, already heating fast beneath the climbing sun, had whipped the atmosphere into violent convection. The beams were warping through it, unable to find their mark. And with the Strike fitted in its Aile configuration, the beam rifle was its principal weapon; if he could no longer rely on its precision, he was effectively disarmed. As he drove the Strike forward, Kira's fingers tore across the keyboard. By the time the machine vaulted again, the rewritten program was already in place.

Kira's eye, settling behind the sights from above, had gone steady now. The muzzle of the rifle he leveled flared, and this time the shot punched clean into a BuCUE's missile pod. The pilot shed it instantly, and it blew apart in a violent bloom of fire and shrapnel.

"Damn."

A flicker of frustration crossed Kira's face at having failed to finish the enemy outright, but it dissolved just as quickly, and he swept his monitors again.

"Three enemy units, one of them immobilized..."

One of the BuCUEs, damaged somewhere in its frame, sat crouched on the sand without stirring. That machine could hardly be counted as a fighting asset anymore. Touching down, Kira absorbed a missile impact on his shield and flicked his gaze toward the corner of his display, where a human figure was visible. Cagalli, crumpled on the ground, clutching Ahmed's broken body. For one instant, something bitter moved behind his eyes.

"Why!"

He ground the word out, clipped and raw, then wrenched his focus back to the BuCUE bearing down on him.

"Oh?"

Observing the engagement, Waldfeld exhaled a note of genuine admiration and lowered his scope.

"Why is the Strike here?"

DaCosta, gripping the wheel, sounded completely at sea.

"Did it come to support them? The Earth Forces... aiding the resistance?"

Paying none of that the slightest attention, Waldfeld murmured.

"Different loadout from last time."



"Sir... ah, yes... that's true..."

"And that beam targeting... he compensated for thermal convection in the parameters on the fly?"

His mind had already moved past questions of motive or purpose. That mobile suit had appeared for reasons of its own, and it was engaging them. That was the other side's affair. What mattered to him was the hunger to know more, about its combat capabilities... and about whoever sat inside that cockpit.

It had been the same during their previous encounter. The pilot had been rewriting the mobile suit's OS in the middle of combat. An Earth Alliance pilot with that caliber of programming skill, with marksmanship sharp enough to intercept naval fire, with reflexes and physical coordination of such extraordinary quality...

"Interesting."

It appeared that Kirkwood's BuCUE, the one that had taken a resistance hit to the leg earlier and been left immobile, had managed to recover. It spun its treads, worked its forelegs, confirmed nothing in the joint assembly had seized, then heaved itself ponderously back to standing. The moment Waldfeld registered that, he reached for the radio.

"Kirkwood, switch with me."

"What?!"

The pilot's startled voice crackled back across the line.

"I said hand over control of the BuCUE. Did you copy?"

"Yes, sir, I heard you! But..."

At his side, DaCosta burst out, "Commander!" in alarm, but Waldfeld brushed him off and pressed the exchange with Kirkwood.

"I'll buy you a drink next time."

"Make it something with actual alcohol in it, then."

The pilot, having once been subjected to the commander's prized blend of coffee, conceded with unmistakable reluctance.

"Commander!"

This time DaCosta's voice carried open reproach. A commanding officer, he surely meant to argue, ought to stay planted where he belonged and leave the fighting to those tasked with it. But Waldfeld had built his present reputation as a pilot, and even now, that was still what he was. For some time his skin had been crawling with restlessness. He wanted to face that pilot himself.

Turning toward his uneasy adjutant, Waldfeld flashed him a sharp grin.

"There are things you only learn once you've traded fire."

The BuCUEs unleashed a rapid barrage of missiles. The Strike dodged clear and vaulted skyward, and the enemy machine launched itself up after him. As it bore in on momentum, driving a kick meant to crush him, Kira deflected it with the shield. The BuCUE tumbled off-balance in midair, and Kira locked his sights onto it in the same breath.

"Got you!"

The target marker blazed to life directly before him.

Then something struck him hard from the side.

A missile had hammered in from his right flank. Kira wrenched the machine around in a surge of alarm to face the new threat, but before he could orient, a second impact landed.

"The third one?! It's still operational?"

Kira choked back the curse. The unit he had dismissed as neutralized had slipped back into the fight without his noticing. The three BuCUEs drew together, falling into line abreast as though executing a rehearsed formation, spun their treads up, and came barreling in at speed. Unable to clear their path, the Strike was flung sideways, and Kira buckled under the force of the collision. He shook his head and looked up, only to find the monitor swallowed edge to edge by inbound missiles.

"Ugh!"

One grazed the head. It failed to destroy the camera, but the blast smoke whited out his vision for a critical instant. In that sliver of blindness, a BuCUE vaulted squarely into view.

"Uwaaaah!"

He triggered the head vulcans on pure reflex, but a vicious kick had already hammered into the Strike's chest. The sudden spike of G-force made his collarbone groan. At the last conceivable instant he fired the verniers and narrowly avoided being driven into the ground, but there was no escaping the fire raining from the BuCUEs above. Missiles cascaded down without reprieve, and Kira fought with everything he had just to keep the machine under control.

"What is this?"

The question surfaced on its own.

Something had shifted unmistakably in the way the BuCUEs were moving compared to moments before. From the instant that third unit had reentered the fight, they had begun operating with a seamless cohesion, executing sophisticated tactics as though governed by a single will. It was not simply a matter of greater numbers. They left him no room even to draw breath. However well Phase Shift armor could deflect conventional warheads, it had its limits. The PS system itself demanded a constant draw of power, and every hit it absorbed drove consumption higher, dragging the operational threshold closer. If he sustained much more punishment, the PS system itself was at risk of collapse.

The BuCUEs touched down and, falling once more into that same formation, launched another coordinated assault. Missiles streaked from all three units, converging on the Strike.

"If those connect, I'm dead!"

And then, all at once, that strange sensation washed over Kira again.

His awareness honed itself to a killing edge, and everything seemed to flood in simultaneously. The trajectories of the dozen-odd missiles already launched and screaming toward him, the fierce sunlight striking the tapered

snouts of the BuCUEs, the spin of their treads... It felt almost unnatural that he could not hear the pilots breathing inside their cockpits.

Kira let the missiles close to point-blank range, then slammed reverse thrust. They converged precisely where the Strike's nose had been and smashed into one another, detonating in a violent chain of explosions. By then his hands had already jammed the throttle to its forward stop and his foot had kicked the pedal flat. The Strike carved through a sweeping arc, and in the instant it cut across the BuCUEs' front and broke free to the flank, Kira released the shield. It struck the outermost unit and knocked it clear of formation. Then the Strike whipped around in midair with blinding speed. The beam rifle flared. The BuCUE sprang aside and escaped the shot by a razor's width, but the formation had been shattered completely.

A missile fired to intercept him at the moment of landing streaked in low, and Kira simply dropped his body and slid beneath it. A BuCUE lunged in to strike on the heels of impact, only to lose one of its wing blades to the beam saber Kira had already drawn; its balance disintegrated, and it plowed into the ground in an uncontrolled wreck. Faced with yet another missile volley still inbound, the Strike braked hard. Propellant gas roared from its leg verniers, throwing up a towering cloud of sand. The missiles plunged into it, and this time the detonation churned the air into a dense curtain of smoke. One of the BuCUEs tried to clear it by vaulting over the blast.

And when the smoke tore apart, what the pilot found was the Strike, skating low through the air on a parallel course, matching the BuCUE's speed with uncanny precision.

Kira squeezed the trigger.

The beam punched clean through the cockpit. Fire erupted from the BuCUE as it plummeted into the desert. The last surviving unit hurled itself at him with blind, furious desperation, and Kira answered with a single blazing arc of the saber. The two machines crossed.

When the BuCUE touched down, one of its severed forelegs tumbled across the sand behind it.

The outcome had been decided.

Watching the crippled BuCUE drag itself into retreat, Kira sagged back into his seat.

When Kira climbed down, the members of the resistance met him with faces marked by unmistakable unease.

He was angry, angrier than he almost ever permitted himself to be. Part of it had been carried forward from the clash with Sai before launch; part of it stemmed from being dragged into a battle fought so close to the edge of annihilation. The sight of the crushed vehicle wreckage, the smoke still threading upward, the corpses crusted with sand only scraped that rawness deeper.

Standing before Cagalli, who faced him wearing the rarest of expressions, as though she might at any moment break into tears, and Sahib and the others, Kira spoke in a voice pitched low.

"Do you have a death wish?"

He was livid. Had these people seriously convinced themselves they could bring down BuCUEs with nothing more than buggies and launchers? In a tone colder than any he had ever used, he pressed on.

"What meaning could *any* of it possibly have in a place like this?"

"What did you say?!"

Cagalli closed the distance in an instant. She seized him by the front of his clothes and thrust one hand toward the bodies behind her.

"Look! Can you say that to *them*?!"

Several corpses lay there. Among them was the shattered body of the boy Kira had noticed before, the one not so far removed in age from himself. Tears brimmed in Cagalli's eyes, but still she drove forward, her voice pitched high with grief and fury.

"They fought with everything they had! They're fighting now! Desperately, to protect the people they love, and the things they believe in, *desperately*! Protect.

Fight because you want to protect.

But if it ended like this, then who, what, could possibly still be protected?

A foolish boy, just like him. Because of his own weakness he had failed, and the cost of that failure was paid in other people's lives, while this boy had paid with his own. And yet this girl could not see the foolishness in it at all; she would go on repeating the same mistake endlessly.

Kira lost his grip on himself.

Before he knew it, he had struck Cagalli across the face.

"What do you think feelings alone can protect?!"

Cagalli stared at him, eyes wide.

In the pale darkness, sweet with the scent of flowers, the murmur of water went on softly without end. The hotel that had been commandeered for officers' quarters possessed, despite standing in the heart of the desert, an enormous fountain in its inner courtyard. In this region, there could scarcely be a greater extravagance.

"Andy."

A soft voice, faintly nasal, called his name from behind. Only one person here addressed him that way. Still gazing absently at the fountain, Waldfeld smiled as he felt lithe arms wind around his neck from behind.

"Andy, have you eaten?"

"Ah, is it that late already? Aisha."

The woman called Aisha smiled with a dark, glossy warmth. Her long black hair slipped over her bare shoulders and grazed Waldfeld's cheek. That striking black hair was threaded on either side with strands of gold, and though her features held the soft, alluring quality of a cat's, something faintly dangerous clung to the air around her. Her enigmatic dark eyes settled on Waldfeld now with a coaxing gleam.

Waldfeld had no idea who had first taken to calling her the "mistress" of the "Desert Tiger." Certainly, it might well have been thought improper that

he so openly kept a woman living in his quarters this way, but for an unmarried man like himself, the word “mistress” did not quite fit. Still, one thing held true, the mysterious presence Aisha carried about her suited neither “lover” nor “wife.”

“What happened today? Martin was furious.”

That honeyed, faintly lisping cadence was almost certainly deliberate. Every Coordinator possessed abilities that exceeded the ordinary. Perhaps in her case, that gift had been channeled into the very fact of being a woman. Letting the idle thought turn over in his mind, Waldfeld shifted to face her.

“Let him fume if he wants. Something good came out of today.”

“Oh? And what might that be?”

“Something good enough to blow away the tedium of these past days.”

“Ahh, I see.”

Aisha let out a soft, rippling laugh for reasons Waldfeld could not begin to guess.

Tedium, yes, Waldfeld had been restless with it. That did not mean he failed to take pleasure in life in the desert, or in life itself. The savage sunlight that seemed bent on scorching a man alive, the sky dimmed behind curtains of drifting sand, the clamor of bustling markets, irrational human beings, every one of those things held a fascination for him. He was drawn to whatever defied prediction, whatever refused to be reduced to tidy calculation. That was precisely because he himself possessed a mind capable of seeing far beyond what most could. What he loved were the shifting patterns wind carved into the rippled sand, the shapes water drops assumed in falling, the flavor of coffee that could never quite be anticipated by working out which beans ought to pair well, and Aisha.

But he could not deny that what he loved most of all was piloting a mobile suit.

That was why the absence, here, of any adversary capable of testing him had remained his private frustration. At best, what was asked of him was to ride out and put a town to the torch; his enemies were Earth-born men who charged BuCUEs in buggies armed with cheap hand-held missiles.

“I’m tired of bullying the weak.”

Tonight, for the first time in a long while, he felt alive. The opponent he had encountered today looked like someone who might push his abilities to their absolute limit, abilities he ordinarily had no choice but to leave sleeping. He had never experienced a battle like that one. Never, until now, had he found something he could hurl himself into so completely.

Aisha read the expression on his face and pressed herself closer against him.

“How wonderful.”

Waldfeld could not tell whether the remark was meant for him, or for what had transpired that day. It might even have been aimed at something else entirely. He suspected he would never fully understand Aisha. Drawing his so-called “mistress” onto his lap, he kissed her lightly.

Smiling, Aisha peered into his face and spoke in a teasing lilt.



"But if Martin goes bald from the stress, you'll have to take responsibility and make him a wig."

Waldfeld laughed out loud, sounding genuinely entertained.

"Gladly. Though, Aisha, I very much doubt baldness runs in his genes."

Aisha cocked her head and regarded him with open skepticism, then leaned in for another kiss.

Phase.03

"Four hours, then."

Cagalli hit the ground first, vaulting from the car with her usual restless energy, and Kira stepped out behind her. The big man perpetually stationed at her side, Kisaka, delivered one final warning before they parted.

"I know, I know. Be careful on your end, too, Al-Jairi isn't someone you drop your guard around, right?"

A trace of worry crossed Cagalli's face as she spoke the name of the man Kisaka and the others were heading off to meet.

From the car parked ahead, Natarle twisted around in her seat.

"Ensi—" She caught herself mid-word and stumbled over the correction. "Never mind." One slip of "Ensign" out here and every precaution they'd taken to pass as locals would have been for nothing. Next to her, Tonomura ducked his head, almost certainly biting back a laugh.

"J-Just... don't let me down."

Natarle ground the words out, rigid with discomfort, and immediately whipped back around to face forward. The jeep bearing Sahib, Kisaka, and the rest pulled away, and then it was just the two of them, Kira and Cagalli, stranded in the press of bodies and noise.

Banadiya. That was the name of this place. It lay farther east than Tassil and served as the stronghold of the so-called "Desert Tiger." Under a sun that blazed white off the sand-colored buildings, the streets teemed with people, and the calls of hawkers carried from every direction. For a long moment Kira simply stood there, staring at the sheer vitality of it all.

"Hey! You planning to stand there all day?"

Her sharp voice jolted him back, and he turned to find Cagalli glaring at him, arms crossed with impatience.

"You're supposed to be my bodyguard. Try to remember that."

Both the Archangel and the Desert Dawn were stretched to their limits, weighed down by the refugees out of Tassil and ground thin by days of continuous combat. They were dangerously low on supplies. That was the whole reason for this errand. Cagalli had been tasked with picking up everyday provisions from the town's market; Kira was there to watch her back. The others had gone after the sort of things no ordinary shop could sell.

Keeping pace with Cagalli as she wove through the crowd like someone who had walked these streets a hundred times, Kira leaned in and murmured,

"This is really where the Tiger operates out of? It seems so... alive. Almost peaceful."

His voice carried not the faintest edge of wariness, and Cagalli scrunched her face at him in disbelief.

She tipped her chin forward.

"Just come on."

They shouldered their way through the throng for several minutes, and when they rounded a corner, Kira stopped dead. Clothes hung drying on lines stretched between windows overhead, and children went tearing past down the narrow lane. The alley was flanked by earthen walls so white they ached in the sun, and there, right in the center of that ordinary scene, the ground had been torn wide open, a raw wound that could only be the scar of an airstrike. Set against the thoroughgoing calm of everything surrounding it, that gash of ruin stood out with brutal clarity.

"Peaceful. Maybe it looked that way, but it's nothing more than a mask."

Bitterness edged every word Cagalli spoke, her eyes locked on something past the wreckage. Looming above the broken shells of buildings, the enormous silhouette of a warship shouldered into view. The Lesseps, Andrew Waldfeld's flagship.

"That is what really rules this town. Resist, and you're wiped from the map without a second thought. Every square meter of this place belongs to ZAFT, to the Desert Tiger."

Kira's gaze traveled from the rubble underfoot to the tranquil-looking town that stretched away on all sides.

He thought, "I don't understand this."

If resistance only brought annihilation, why not simply refuse to resist? The people flowing through these streets looked at ease, content, even. More so than Kira felt right now.

So, what drove them to keep taking up that fight, again and again?

He hadn't witnessed the burning of Tassil with his own eyes, but he had seen the faces of those who fled it. If the cost of waging war was the very families you meant to shield, the very homes you'd built your life around, then he knew with certainty that he could never wage it. He fought to keep the people he loved alive. He could not fathom the conviction of those who would offer up the ones dearest to them on the altar of some larger cause.

Was there truly something that mattered more than the people you loved, something so vital it was worth laying down your life to defend?

"God almighty, hauling this kind of disaster out of here..."

Murdoch's groan carried all the way to the hangar's vaulted ceiling. He was half-swallowed by the Strike's cockpit, dragging out meal trays, food scraps, cups, wads of crumpled paper, and every other scrap of refuse crammed inside, pitching them one after another onto the deck below. Up on the catwalk, Flay collected it all with open disgust and shoved it into a trash bag. Garbage detail as her very first real assignment since enlisting was, to put it mildly, not what she had envisioned.

The sheer volume of waste packed into that cockpit told its own story: for the past several days, Kira had barely left the thing at all.

"But... how long has it been like this?"

From a neighboring catwalk, Murrue kept her voice low as she put the question to Mu. Her eyes drifted briefly toward Flay as she spoke.

"Hard to say... but my guess would be ever since we made landfall. Before that, none of us had a spare second to breathe."

Mu answered with an easy shrug.

"That girl... she's Sai's, well, his girlfriend, isn't she? And she's really with Kira now?"

"Caught you off guard? Yeah. I had the same reaction."

What they were circling around was a troubling piece of intelligence concerning the Strike's irreplaceable pilot, the kind of thing that put a crease between anyone's brows. To be direct about it, word had reached Mu that Kira had taken Sai's girl. Given what they were talking about, the two of them had very nearly drifted into the register of shipboard gossip.

But they were not digging into Kira's personal affairs out of idle fascination. The matter bore directly on the ship's survival, which made the pilot's mental state a genuine operational concern. And with crew morale tangled up in it besides, it was hardly something the captain of a vessel that didn't even have a counselor on staff could wave away.

If anything, this might have been a far uglier problem than dealing with the Desert Tiger.

Murrue exhaled a long, exhausted breath and turned from the hangar. Mu matched her stride.

"So, what's the situation now? Is the kid actually sleeping in that cockpit?"

"It would appear so."

"There's no way he's getting proper rest in there."

"No..."

Mu himself had grabbed sleep in the alert-ready bags before, but Kira seemed incapable of prying himself loose from the Strike even for a moment. It was true that the Archangel carried no backup pilot. The two of them, Mu and Kira, were all there was. And the crushing reality that when combat broke out it would inevitably be them who had to launch, bore down with a weight no outsider could truly comprehend.

"Whether he cracked under the pressure and ended up with that girl, or ended up with that girl and cracked afterward, I couldn't tell you which. But either way... the kid is *not* in a good place."

Even Mu's voice had turned heavy and grave as he said it, and Murrue dropped her gaze.

"I was negligent... He performs so extraordinarily well as a pilot that I... I let myself forget he's still just a boy. One who's never had a single day of formal training..."

"You can't shoulder that alone. I should have been watching more closely myself."

Everything Kira had done in battle verged on the impossible. It wasn't merely the mobile suit's performance specs, and it wasn't reducible to his being a Coordinator. Mu understood that better than most, he had

exchanged fire with enough Coordinators over the years to recognize the difference.

And now, in hindsight, perhaps even that extraordinary performance had come from Kira wearing himself down to the absolute limit. I have to protect the Archangel. Nobody else can do it. That conviction must have bored deeper and deeper into him with every sortie.

The reality that had boxed Kira in so completely left a bitter, corrosive taste of shame in Mu's throat. Even he, the man they'd once called the Hawk of Endymion, couldn't lift the weight off those shoulders. Without leaning on a sixteen-year-old boy, they couldn't even guarantee the ship's safety.

"Is there anything you think might help him?"

He glanced up at the question and found that Murrue had stopped walking. She stood gazing up at him.

"You know... for the kind of stress that comes from sustained combat. You are his senior as a pilot, after all."

"Hm?"

"Something that might help, something that might help..."

Mu turned the thought over as he studied Murrue's face.

She always maintained that taut, composed mask when she wore the captain's authority, but whenever she tilted her head up at him this way, there was something almost vulnerable hidden beneath it, or maybe that was nothing but his own ego talking.

Now that he was really looking, she had a better figure than you'd guess at first glance. The slim taper of her ankles was exactly his weakness. And her chest was more than a little ample, and there was that appealing shape to her lips, the kind that looked perfectly made for kissing... and it was right around there, just as his thoughts wandered that far, that he registered her eyes locked coolly onto his, as though she had read every last indecent thing running through his head.

"Uh, ah..." Mu forced out a strangled, clumsy laugh. "Maybe I'm not the right guy to ask."

"Clearly not."

Murrue delivered the reply with a curt, icy tilt of her chin, then turned her back on him and walked away without another word. Her retreating figure practically radiated a scorching, "Men... honestly."

"In any case, I just hope today's little outing lifts his spirits even slightly!"

She threw it over her shoulder in a flat, perfunctory tone that made her intention to kill the conversation unmistakable, and strode off without so much as a backward glance. Abandoned there in the corridor, Mu let his shoulders slump.

"Ahh... must be nice to be young..."

"Still... the captain really went all-out, didn't she? Letting Yamato off the ship for a few hours, on top of everything."

Chandra remarked on it from his station on the watch.

"God, I wish I could get out for a while too..."

Seeing the others off toward the bridge with a chorus of envious groaning trailing behind them, Miriallia breathed a quiet sigh and cast her eyes toward the outside.

"What's wrong, Milly, did you want to go along?"

Tolle turned to her, and Miriallia gave him a lopsided half-smile.

"Hm? It's not that, really... it's more like it just feels strange. Not having Kira here."

Kuzzey, walking alongside them, shared the feeling entirely. No matter what he happened to be doing, the moment his mind drifted to what would happen if the enemy struck while Kira was gone, something cold and heavy knotted itself deep in his gut.

Tolle laughed and slung an arm across his girlfriend's shoulders.

"Relax. He'll be back before we know it. Until then, we've got you covered."

"Yeah. You're right."

Miriallia's smile came warm and uncomplicated. But Kuzzey wanted to cut in and ask: How, exactly? Kira was the sole person capable of operating the Strike, and Tolle couldn't so much as get the Skygrasper off the ground, so what, precisely, was his plan for keeping anyone safe?

"I don't know... it just feels like everything keeps sliding further and further off the rails..."

The grumble escaped him before he could swallow it, and Tolle shot him a sideways look.

"Hm?"

"What are we even doing out here in the middle of a desert?"

Kuzzey's voice dropped to barely a murmur, and Tolle's expression hardened.

"That's... because we had no other option. We couldn't just leave Kira on his own out here..."

"Yeah. I know."

The truth was, he didn't want to know. He understood they needed Kira. But at the same time, Kuzzey couldn't silence the part of his brain insisting that the only reason he was trapped in a hellhole like this was because of Kira to begin with.

"But seriously... why are we camped out at some guerrilla base? None of this was supposed to happen..."

Kuzzey released a deep, leaden sigh. This was the first desert he had laid eyes on in his entire life, and he was already certain that once would last him a lifetime.

Sand that shifted and gave way with every step and worked its way into his shoes, a sun that felt as though it were cooking him from the outside in, gusts of scorching wind that drained both energy and willpower, born on a colony and raised on a colony, he found the whole environment punishingly hostile.

No matter how many times he scrubbed his hands, his palms still felt coated in a fine, gritty film, and the instant he set foot outside, airborne dust invaded his mouth and scraped between his teeth. If the killing heat of direct sunlight chased him into the caves for relief, swarms of tiny insects would descend in search of moisture, massing around his nose and lips no matter how furiously he batted them away.

Misery pressed in from every conceivable angle.

"God... if I'd had any idea it would turn out like this, I never would've opened my mouth back then..."

If he had never volunteered to stay with the military, he would never have wound up living in a wretched place like this, crammed up against mortal danger day after day. This was not how any of it was supposed to go, Kuzzey thought.

"Sure, but if you'd gotten on that shuttle back then, you'd probably be dead right now."

Tolle said it with an ease that bordered on infuriating, dragging up a memory Kuzzey would have preferred to leave buried for good.

And he wasn't wrong. If they had left the ship when they'd had the chance, the shuttle they would have boarded had been blown apart by the Duel in the thick of battle.

So even if they had tried to walk away and reclaim their old lives, they never would have made it. It was like sliding into the pit of an antlion. Like thrashing inside a nightmare, clawing for consciousness and finding none.

Would they ever manage to drag themselves free of this?

"I have to say, I'm surprised. That you, of all people, would come to me—"

After being ushered into an opulent sitting room and made to wait the better part of half an hour, the man who finally materialized was a sleek, middle-aged dandy with an unmarked face and a voice like warm syrup poured over silk.

The moment Tonomura spotted the heavy gold chain glinting at his collar and the conspicuously expensive watch strapped to his wrist, a visceral wave of distaste rolled through him.

"So, this is how you live it up after getting your hands on the water, Al-Jairi."

Sahib, by contrast, spoke with a bluntness that bordered on contempt.

"Believe me, I'd sooner never lay eyes on you again. But we're out of options. We can't sit by while our people's water supply dries up..."

At that, the man's smile spread, slow, slick, deliberate.

"You might consider revising your thinking... What truly matters is not principle, but survival, Sahib Ashman."

His manner never wavered from its polished, velvet courtesy, yet something in his delivery made every word sound as though it were being dispensed from a great height, gazing down on them. His name was Al-Jairi, and whatever this town's open markets could not supply, people said he was the man who could.

"Water sources shift. But water remains water, regardless of its origin. As long as it can be drunk, that is sufficient. That is what preserves life..."

He carried on as though parading his own standing in open mockery of the path Sahib and his people had chosen against ZAFT, but Sahib severed the thread without ceremony.

"I didn't come here to relitigate that with you."

Tomomura had no notion what history the two of them shared, but it required no special perceptiveness to feel the bad blood between them. Even if they had somehow found common ground on matters of ideology, their temperaments alone were fundamentally incompatible.

Sahib put it to him flatly.

"Well? Are you going to hear what we need, or aren't you?"

"Why, naturally... fellow countrymen ought to look after one another."

The man, who appeared to care for nothing beyond what they could pay him, delivered the sentiment without the slightest hint of self-consciousness. Given the right price, he looked perfectly capable of selling out his own people as well.

"Now then, the particulars can be discussed in the factory..."

He rose with an affected, languid slowness and let out a thin, piercing little laugh, "Fuh-ho-ho-ho," pitched high, almost feminine. As Tomomura stood along with Sahib and the rest, his gaze briefly met Natarle's beside him.

Even she, normally so unflappable, seemed ill-suited to her surroundings; a trace of unease flickered across her features. However critical the resupply mission was, he couldn't help questioning the wisdom of sending someone as rigidly principled as her into an environment that reeked of under-the-table dealing from every corner.

Wouldn't Mu have been a better fit? Then again, with Kira already off the ship, dispatching Mu as well was out of the question.

Tomomura caught himself vaguely praying that by the time this operation was over, the lot of them wouldn't have been picked clean and sold off themselves. At this stage, trusting Sahib and the others to navigate the situation was all they could do.

The "factory" Al-Jairi had mentioned occupied the basement of a battered, age-worn building at the edge of town.

"The water, provisions, fuel, and the like are already prepared. As for the items in question..."

A knot of thoroughly disreputable-looking men hauled several wooden crates before them. Al-Jairi lifted one hand with a grand, theatrical gesture, and the men pried the lids open.

"Seventy-five-millimeter armor-piercing rounds, Morgenroete-manufactured EQ-17 magnetic field disruption units, Mark 500 radar arrays..."

As Al-Jairi rattled off the names in rapid succession, Tomomura inspected the contents of each crate and let out a sharp cry before he could catch himself.

"Wait—these are the real deal!"

"This is unbelievable. Honestly... where on earth did these come from?"
Bitterness threaded through Natarle's voice.

Alliance-standard ammunition and military hardware, and not imitations, either, turning up in a place like this was staggering on its own. Which meant, inevitably, that someone with military connections was siphoning them off through unofficial channels, and from the standpoint of everything she believed about military order, that had to be intolerable.

But for them, here and now, it was nothing less than a lifeline.

"There are a great many underground currents in this world that you may be unaware of, hm? Fuh-ho-ho-ho."

Visibly gratified by their reaction, Al-Jairi produced that same shrill laugh once more.

"Now then, though I hesitate to frame it as 'in exchange'—"

He slid a sidelong glance toward Sahib.

Sahib, looking irritated, said, "I know," then turned to them and pressed, "Well? Will this do?"

Still wrestling with her reservations, Natarle dipped her head.

"Yes. I have no objection to the goods themselves, but..."

The sticking point, naturally, would be the price attached.

"You're able to supply everything on our list, then?"

"But of course. Here."

With a smile, Al-Jairi passed Sahib what appeared to be an itemized bill. Sahib did not so much as flinch, but Tonomura, craning over his shoulder to read the figures on the page, very nearly lost his footing.

"What—what is this figure?! You can't be serious!"

It was only to be expected that a man of this stripe would exploit a buyer's desperation, but even accounting for that, this was extortion on an entirely different scale.

"Precious water commands a precious price."

Al-Jairi said it mildly, as if merely stating the most self-evident truth in existence.

"After all, these are the things that keep you alive, are they not?"

At that, Sahib took the paper, and, for reasons Tonomura could not fathom, handed it not to Natarle but to Kisaka. The big man, whom Tonomura had only ever known as Cagalli's perpetually silent shadow, a reticent wall of muscle who looked more like hired brawn than anything resembling a strategist, cast a single glance at the total and asked, clipped and brief,

"Payment in Earth Dollars?"

"Yes, certainly, that would be perfectly accept—"

As Al-Jairi's face split into a broad grin, Tonomura's vertigo deepened.

"This much money? Without so much as haggling? Paid in full? And before any of that, why was Kisaka the one handling this?"

"Then have it delivered immediately."

Kisaka said it without inflection and turned on his heel. Confronted with this entirely unanticipated dimension of a man he had written off as nothing

more than Cagalli's bodyguard, physically imposing, certainly, but hardly a man of calculation, Tonomura leaned toward Natarle, who stood beside him looking every bit as blindsided, and whispered.

"Wh-what just happened? I can't make sense of any of this..."

"D-don't look at me."

Tonomura found himself reflecting, with admittedly poor morale, that there was at least some small comfort in knowing he was not the only one entirely out of his depth.

"Haah..."

Kira slumped into his café chair. A small garrison of overstuffed shopping bags stood in formation beside him.

Technically this was a mission, which meant he hadn't exactly been in a position to refuse, but one merciless truth had been hammered into him over the course of the day: no man should ever let himself be dragged along on a woman's shopping expedition. Cagalli, who had cheerfully offloaded every last bag onto him and marched him across the entire marketplace without breaking stride, stood there looking thoroughly untroubled as she scanned the shopping list.

"We've knocked out most of it, but honestly, this Flay girl's requests are insane. Elizario lotion, skin toner... there's no chance a place like this carries any of that."

Even hearing it, Kira couldn't summon the energy to respond. At this stage he didn't care what they bought, so long as they reached the end of the list soon.

A server appeared and set tea and food down before them. Thin flatbread lay beneath sliced tomatoes, lettuce, and an assortment of other vegetables, crowned with golden-brown strips of roasted lamb. It must have been what Cagalli had ordered for the two of them earlier.

"What is this?"

Kira studied the plate with open curiosity.

"Doner kebab! God, I'm starving. Come on, eat up. You drizzle this chili sauce over—"

The instant Cagalli reached for the sauce, a voice erupted from beside them.

"Hold it right there!"

Both of them flinched and turned, then stared even harder at the man looming over their table.

"Chili sauce on kebab? What on earth are you talking about, young lady?! The correct accompaniment is yogurt sauce, that should go without saying!"

He balled one fist and threw himself into the argument with absurd conviction. He wore a garish Hawaiian shirt and a straw boater, an ensemble that stuck out all the more in a town where Arab-style traditional dress was still the norm, and had topped the whole look off with a pair of oversized sunglasses.

Northern European, perhaps, but whether he was a passing traveler or some eccentric expatriate who'd put down roots here, one thing was beyond dispute: the man was suspicious to the point of comedy.

Cagalli could only gape at him.

"Huh?"

That sole syllable only spurred him to wave both hands more frantically, pleading his case with mounting theatrical urgency.

"No, more than mere common sense, it's... yes, precisely! To consume this dish without yogurt sauce is practically an act of blasphemy against the cuisine itself!"

"Who the hell are you?"

Anyone would have said the same, not just Cagalli. Pointedly ignoring him, she doused her doner kebab in a flood of chili sauce. The man let out a cry of pure anguish.

"I'm not obligated to let some random stranger dictate how I eat my food!"

A perfectly reasonable position, though the way she then chomped into the kebab with exaggerated relish and pulled a face squarely at the stranger was, by any measure, childish.

"Ahh! Delicious!"

"Ahh... what a tragedy..."

The man looked genuinely devastated by this act of culinary barbarism, which was hardly more dignified on his end. And then, as if they'd rehearsed the timing, both of them pivoted to Kira at the exact same instant.

"Go on, you too."

"Ah! Wait just a moment! You're going to drag him down the path of heresy as well?!"

"What are you even talking about? Chili sauce is obviously the way to go with kebab!"

"No, yogurt. Yogurt sauce and nothing else!"

Brandishing their respective sauce containers like weapons, Cagalli and the man wrestled briefly over Kira's plate before, in the end, splashing both sauces across his kebab in one disastrous deluge.

"Ahh!"

The two of them gaped at the wreckage they'd created, then glanced up at Kira wearing identical expressions of sheepish apology. For a long moment, Kira simply stared down at his plate in quiet despair.

What had looked perfectly appetizing moments ago now lay buried beneath a catastrophic landslide of red and white sauce, but it was probably still edible. It wasn't going to kill him.

With a sigh of resignation, Kira took a bite.

"No... really, I'm sorry about that."

At some point, the man had installed himself quite comfortably at their table.

"No, it's... fine, I guess. The combination isn't terrible..."

Kira answered as he reached for his glass. The blended sauce wasn't exactly awful, but if he was being honest, all he could taste was sauce.

"Still, that's quite the haul you've got there. Throwing a party?"

The man craned his neck to peer into the shopping bags, and Cagalli immediately bristled.

"None of your business! And while we're at it, what is your deal? Nobody invited you to sit down!"

"Now, now..."

The man began to wave her off, then cut himself short and glanced sharply toward the street outside. In the very same heartbeat, every muscle in Kira's body went taut.

"And on top of everything else, you just plant yourself here without even—"

Cagalli was still mid-complaint when Kira shot his hand across the table and seized her arm.

In the next instant, something came shrieking into the café on a shrill, tearing whine.

The man at their table moved without hesitation, wrenching the table up as a shield while Kira hauled Cagalli down behind it. The kebab and tea that had been sitting on the tabletop cascaded over Cagalli in spectacular fashion, but Kira paid it no attention, pressing her lower as though pinning her bodily beneath cover.

At the same moment, the rocket that had punched into the shop detonated.

Screams tore through the air.

Kira and the others huddled tight behind the overturned table, riding out the blast wave and the storm of flying debris.

"You all right?!"

The man, aside from having his hat blown clean off his head, otherwise entirely unscathed, roared the question as he drew a handgun from a holster strapped at his ankle. Even his voice was hard to make out, partly because the explosion had left their ears singing, and partly because gunfire erupted almost immediately afterward.

Armed men came pouring into the café from outside, firing automatic weapons as they advanced.

"Die, Coordinator! You monster from space!"

"For the sake of a blue and pure world!"

As the attackers bellowed those slogans one after another, Cagalli's eyes flew wide.

"Blue Cosmos?!"

Blue Cosmos, the anti-Coordinator movement bent on eradicating every last Coordinator from existence. These men were almost certainly one of its far-right extremist cells. And if that was the case, then the target here was someone nearby.

The man at their table leaned out from behind cover and squeezed off a shot, and instantly the attackers' muzzles swung toward him.

Then one of the café's other patrons rose from where he'd been crouching and put a round through one of the attackers. Not just one.

Others scattered across the café were returning fire in the same coordinated fashion. Not customers at all, then, or rather, people who had been posing as customers, stationed here in advance.

"Doesn't matter. Eliminate every one of them."

The man beside them barked the order. Every trace of the carefree, frivolous manner he'd worn moments earlier had vanished without a whisper; in its place was a voice honed to a blade's edge, one that wore command like a second skin.

"Who is this man?"

Amid the roar of gunfire, shielding Cagalli with his own body, Kira stared up at him in stunned confusion. One of the combatants, attacker or disguised operative, he couldn't tell, took a bullet and crumpled, and as he fell a handgun skittered across the floor to Kira's feet.

Undaunted by the difference in armament, the man from their table and his planted allies cut the terrorists down with methodical efficiency. The man who'd been sheltering behind the overturned table straightened and leveled his pistol at a fleeing attacker. Watching for an opening, Kira caught at the edge of his vision a sudden metallic glint.

A terrorist pressed flat against the wall had raised his weapon toward the standing man.

Before thought could catch up with instinct, Kira exploded from behind the table, snatched up the fallen pistol at his feet, and hurled it.

"Wh—?!"

The gun sailed true, striking the hidden shooter squarely and discharging on impact. As the man recoiled, Kira closed the distance in a single explosive burst and drove him to the ground with a devastating kick. The blow connected flush with the man's face, and he collapsed into unconsciousness almost instantly.

When Kira came back to himself, the gunfire had stopped.

The elimination was over.

A thin haze of cordite still hung in the air. Kira surveyed the café, wrecked beyond all recognition, bodies and wounded strewn across the wreckage, and for one brief moment, a dark shadow passed over his face.

"Hey!"

Cagalli erupted from behind the table. She ran straight to him and shouted at the top of her lungs.

"You idiot! Don't tell me you can't even fire a gun?!"

Even as she screamed the words, her face was naked with relief that he was unhurt. Kira understood, this was how she showed she cared, and he very nearly laughed.

Because Cagalli, soaked head to toe in kebab sauce and spilled tea, was an absolute mess.

"What are you laughing at?!"

"No, it's just..."

Then, still fighting to hold it in, Kira's gaze caught on something behind her.

The man from their table was watching him. Staring, in fact. His eyes remained hidden behind those sunglasses, but the weight of that gaze pinned Kira unmistakably in place, and a strange, knowing smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

At that moment, several of the men who appeared to be his operatives came rushing to his side.

"Commander! Are you injured, sir?!"

Commander?

The word froze both Kira and Cagalli where they stood. The man tipped his chin toward them and spoke.

"I'm fine. Thanks to him."

Then he pulled off the sunglasses that had concealed his face. Beside Kira, Cagalli drew in a sharp breath.

"Andrew Waldfeld!"

At the name she whispered, Kira went rigid too.

Of course.

As the target of Blue Cosmos, who else in this town could it possibly have been?

Who but the Desert Tiger himself?

"What do you mean?! Kira and Cagalli haven't come back?"

Murrue's voice cut across the Archangel's bridge, and every crew member on watch looked up as one. Sai felt his own body lock tight with a sudden, visceral jolt.

On the monitor, Kisaka's face was barely resolving through the static. With over a hundred kilometers separating them, the poor reception was no surprise.

"Yeah... they still haven't turned up, even though the window's long past. Have Sahib and the others made it back to you yet?"

"No. Not yet."

"It seems there's been a Blue Cosmos terror attack in the city as well."

At Kisaka's report, every face on the bridge drained of color. No way... The thought drifted through Sai's mind like fog. Nobody in a place like this should have known Kira was a Coordinator. But... it was just as possible that he'd simply been swept up in it by accident.

"The signal's too degraded. We haven't been able to get through to them on our end. And we don't have the manpower to mount a proper search."

Even on Kisaka's habitually stoic face, a faint crease of worry was visible. Murrue turned immediately.

"Petty Officer Pal! Get Lieutenant Badgiruel on the line."

"If you can reach them from your side, send some of them back into town..."

As Murrue and Kisaka traded rapid instructions, Chandra muttered half under his breath.

"They probably just got carried away shopping and lost track of time. That's all it is. While we're all here working ourselves into a panic, they'll wander in like nothing happened."

There was a prayer buried beneath his words: Please let that be all it is.

"But... what if Yamato doesn't come back?"

Pal had barely begun to speak the fear every one of them carried when Chandra elbowed him sharply.

"I said it'll be fine!"

As concern for Kira's safety rippled outward through the bridge crew in widening circles, Sai alone nursed a different feeling in secret.

If Kira never comes back?

Somewhere deep down, Sai wanted exactly that. Kira might have been caught in the terrorist attack by sheer chance... and Sai found himself hoping it was so.

He slipped off the anxious bridge without anyone noticing and made straight for the hangar.

There was nobody near the Strike. For a long while, Sai simply stood there, gazing up at the towering humanoid machine.

"If... Kira never comes back..."

Quietly, he climbed into the mobile suit's cockpit. It felt like trespassing. No, worse than that. It felt like committing a transgression that should never be committed, like putting his hands on another man's woman...

The thought surfaced unbidden, and it drew a dark smile out of him.

"Then that makes us even, Kira."

This time he sealed the hatch with less hesitation than before and powered up the OS. Light flooded the monitor, and the instrument panels blinked to life one after another.

"It's fine. I can do this."

Shaking with the volatile mix of exhilaration and terror churning inside him, Sai wrapped both hands around the control levers and throttle.

At that very instant, Murdoch caught the low thrum of an engine cycling up from somewhere in the hangar and turned toward the rear.

Something was off. Light glowed in the Strike's eyes.

"Hey!"

He flagged down a crewmate passing nearby.

"When'd the kid get back?"

"Huh? He didn't. We just got word from the bridge, he's missing."

"Missing?!"

By the time the word tore from Murdoch's mouth in raw disbelief, the Strike had already begun to move. Its left arm lifted, slow, graceless, and shoved aside the movable catwalk extending in front of the machine.

"Then who the hell is piloting that thing?!"

The mobile suit lurched free of its maintenance berth and forced one staggering step forward. From that clumsy movement alone, it was unmistakably nothing like Kira's piloting.

"Hey! What the hell is going on?! Who's in there?!"

Murdoch bellowed in fury, punching a fist skyward for emphasis, but the pilot showed no sign of stopping. Drawn by the uproar, Flay came running in from deeper in the ship, and Tolle and Miriallia rushed in from outside, shock plain on their faces.

"W-what?! What's going on?"

The Strike heaved into another step, rocking dangerously from side to side.

"Hey, cut it out! You moron!"

"Who on earth—?"

At Tolle's demand, a mechanic nearby answered.

"That Sai guy was lurking around here a little while ago..."

"Sai?!"

Hearing their friend's name, Tolle and the others went wide-eyed.

The Strike staggered forward in jerky, halting motions, attempted one more step, and lost its balance entirely. It twisted wildly, flailing to recover its footing, but the correction only compounded the problem, and at last it pitched forward and toppled.

"Aahhh!"

Miriallia screamed, and everyone recoiled.

The Strike slammed down onto its hands and crashed to all fours. The brutal clang of metal hammering against metal rang through the hangar's vaulted ceiling. Tolle and the others slowly pried their eyes open and stared up at the motionless mobile suit.

"Aw, hell..."

Murdoch pressed both hands over his face.

By some miracle, no one appeared to have been crushed beneath it, but that did nothing to temper his rage. If the machine sustained damage in combat, that was the cost of war, but having it wrecked like this, no mechanic alive could be expected to stomach that quietly.

Behind him, though, Flay gazed up at the mobile suit sprawled on all fours with something tangled and unreadable in her expression, then abruptly looked away.

And inside the cockpit, Sai sat motionless, staring blankly at the console. The monitor showed him nothing but the hangar floor. The Strike under his hands hadn't even reached the hatch.

To be this completely, hopelessly incapable...

Disappointment bled through Sai's chest, slow and inescapable.

Forget fighting in Kira's place and protecting everyone, he couldn't even manage a few steps. Was the gap between himself and Kira really that vast?

A thin, broken sound escaped Sai's throat.

How ugly he was. This filthy self that despised Kira, that envied him, that had even wished he would never return, this wretched, contaminated self. And now, heaped on top of everything else, he'd been made to understand that even in raw ability he stood nowhere near Kira's level.

It was too pathetic to bear.

So full of himself, playing the big brother figure to Kira all this time. So smugly certain that Flay's love belonged to him by right. When he looked back at the man he'd been, the sight of what he'd become now, stripped of everything, brought to his hands and knees, was more misery than he could stand.

"Fu... uuh... ngh..."

Sai wept in choked, fractured sobs, sealed inside that cramped cockpit, a narrow space that still seemed to hold the trace of Kira, though Kira himself was nowhere to be found.

"Uh... no, really, we're fine."

Kira said it again, the same assurance he'd already offered several times over. To anyone watching, they might have passed for a pair of civilian teenagers wilting before the imposing façade of an expensive hotel. But the real reason cold sweat was trickling down their spines was the row of ZAFT guards stationed outside and the GINN OCHRE standing sentinel in the courtyard.

"No, no, I absolutely cannot allow that! We already ruined your tea, and on top of that you saved my life. You can't honestly expect me to just send you on your way after all that, can you?"

Andrew Waldfeld appeared entirely oblivious to their panic. He stepped from the car ahead of them and extended a hand.

"And besides, just look at the state of her, her clothes are a complete mess. The very least I can do is sort that out. Wouldn't you agree?"

"N-no, really, I'm totally fine!"

Cagalli shook her head with frantic energy, but he countered without missing a beat.

"Well, I certainly won't be satisfied if you refuse!"

At that point, pushing back any harder would only have looked suspicious. Kira and Cagalli traded a glance, then steeled themselves and walked straight into the heart of enemy territory. The instant the soldiers spotted Waldfeld approaching, they snapped ramrod-straight and saluted. His eye-scorching aloha shirt looked patently absurd against the military backdrop, yet apparently not a soul there found it the least bit unusual. A door swung open, and a red-haired soldier who looked about twenty came rushing out.

"Commander! I heard Blue Cosmos made a move on you?!"

"Well, if you already know that much, there's not much point in asking me to confirm it, is there?"

"This is exactly why I keep telling you to stop wandering into the city by yourself, and just the other day, too, going out personally against a mobile suit whose combat capabilities were completely unknown!"

So one of the BuCUEs Kira had faced the other day had been piloted by Waldfeld himself. The memory of that battle stirred to life inside him, and Kira felt a prickling unease crawl across his skin.

"Lieutenant DaCosta. We have guests."

"Ah... my apologies."

The soldier called DaCosta broke off what could only honestly be described as a lecture and gave Kira and Cagalli a curt nod.

Waldfeld strode past him without breaking stride, and behind them Kira heard the abandoned red-haired soldier release a heavy sigh. Serving under a man like that couldn't be easy, Kira felt a fleeting pang of sympathy, until he noticed that DaCosta's unexpectedly keen eyes had fixed on the two of them with open suspicion, and he quickened his pace to catch up with Waldfeld.

In the wake of a terror attack, heightened scrutiny of outsiders was only natural. Even so, the weight of that gaze left him deeply unsettled, as though their real identities had already been seen through.

"Don't worry about him."

Waldfeld said it in the same breezy, unguarded tone as ever.

"He's a better adjutant than I deserve, truthfully, he just has no idea how to enjoy life."

"Um... is it always like that when you go into town?"

Kira ventured the question carefully. Waldfeld arched an eyebrow.

"Hm?"

Then he laughed.

"Oh, those shadow boys? I keep telling them to knock it off, it's a nuisance, but they never listen."

Of course they didn't. After what had happened today, those "shadow boys," his concealed escort, were anything but optional.

Having to disguise themselves as ordinary townspeople and tail him like that every single outing must have been exhausting beyond measure. Thank God our captain is a sensible person, Kira thought to himself.

"Welcome back, Andy."

A soft voice floated in without warning, and both Kira and Cagalli looked up in surprise. The woman who had appeared before them was strikingly beautiful, lustrous black hair spilling over her shoulders.

"It's good to be back, Aisha."

Kira and Cagalli stood in uncomfortable silence as Waldfeld slid an arm around her slender waist and kissed her. She didn't quite give the impression of a wife, was this man actually bringing his lover along to a battlefield?

The woman called Aisha turned to face them and offered a warm smile. She wore a functional jumpsuit, likely on account of the military setting, but if anything the utilitarian cut only threw the lines of her figure into sharper relief.

"So this is the girl, Andy?"

She asked in a slightly lilting, almost coquettish tone, resting a hand on Cagalli's shoulder. There was something oddly amusing about the way Cagalli, despite being face to face with another woman, visibly lost her composure and flushed red.

"That's her. See what you can do, would you? She got doused in chili sauce and yogurt sauce, with tea piled on top of that."

"Oh dear, kebab, was it? Come along, then."

Aisha took Cagalli's hand with gentle authority and began to lead her away. Cagalli, for all her usual bravado, cast a plainly anxious look back at Kira, and Kira moved instinctively to follow, unwilling to let her go alone, but Aisha wagged a finger directly in front of his face.

"No, no. You mustn't follow a lady while she's changing. It won't take long, so just wait here with Andy. Boys with boys, girls with girls."

She delivered the admonishment in the sweetly scolding manner of someone correcting a small child, then cheerfully spirited Cagalli away. Waldfeld, already half through the doorway of another room, called back over his shoulder.

"Hey! You're with me."

It was difficult to believe that woman, guileless as she seemed, meant Cagalli any harm, but this was still the very heart of enemy ground. With a reluctance he couldn't quite shake, Kira turned and stepped into the room where he'd been summoned.

"You see, I have very particular views when it comes to coffee."

Waldfeld announced this while already busying himself with a siphon brewer.

"Well then, sit down. Make yourself comfortable."

Easy enough to say, but there was absolutely no way Kira could think of this place as comfortable. The room was spacious and flooded with light, Waldfeld's office, most likely, judging by the antique writing desk positioned before a wall of French windows that overlooked the courtyard. That desk alone had to be worth a small fortune.

A faded silk carpet stretched across the floor beneath a sofa set, and along one wall stood a fireplace that looked as though it genuinely functioned. Kira, raised in a perfectly ordinary space-colonist household, had no frame of reference for this kind of atmosphere.

But resting on the marble mantelpiece was something even he recognized at a glance.

A replica of that strange fossilized organism everyone had encountered at least once: a creature with what appeared to be the framework of wings projecting from the center of its torso.

As Kira studied the replica, a voice reached him from behind.

"Evidence 01, have you ever seen the real thing?"

Waldfeld approached bearing two cups. Kira shook his head.

"No..."

The original, Evidence 01, was housed in PLANT now. Apparently, tours from Earth had once been organized to view it, but since the outbreak of war it had naturally been closed to everyone except PLANT residents. Waldfeld contemplated the replica with a pensive expression before asking.

"I've always wondered, why do they call this the 'whale stone'? Does this honestly look like a whale to you?"

"Uh... well, even if you ask me that..."

It was hardly Kira's fault what people had decided to name it. But the man known as the Tiger was entirely in earnest, jabbing a finger at the fossil's wing-like structure as he pressed his case.

"Right here, no matter how you look at it, these are wings, aren't they? Whales don't typically come equipped with wings."

"Well... no, I suppose not... but it is a lifeform from another planet..."

Kira offered the obvious fact regardless.

Evidence 01, popularly dubbed the "whale stone," was not the fossil of any organism that had evolved on Earth. It was proof of life utterly unlike anything born on this world, something that had arrived from outer space by sheer accident. Its overall form did bear a resemblance to one of Earth's whales, but that hardly made it a creature of the same kind. Even that hotly debated skeletal structure, no one could say with any certainty that it had actually served as wings.

"No, that's not what I mean. What I'm asking is, why is this thing a whale in the first place?"

When Kira turned the question back on him, Waldfeld cocked his head.

"Hm... well, when you frame it like that, I'm not sure what else you'd call it. Doesn't exactly look like a bird either, does it? 'Flying fish'... no, that's not quite right. Hm... Ah, never mind all that, what do you make of the coffee?"

At the prompt, Kira lifted the cup Waldfeld had handed him and took a sip. Bitter.

Waldfeld, who had plainly been studying his reaction, showed not the slightest trace of offense.

"Hm. Perhaps you're still a bit young to appreciate the flavor of adulthood."

He delivered the verdict with open self-satisfaction, then sank heavily into the sofa and savored the black liquid as though it were something precious. Kira, slightly self-conscious now, lowered himself into the seat opposite. Waldfeld let his gaze drift back to the replica on the mantel.

"Well... it's a delightful nuisance, isn't it. That thing, too."

Kira latched onto the word immediately.

"A nuisance?"

"Well, of course. Discovering something like that made people start believing in hope, or rather, in possibility..."

Kira tilted his head, unable to follow what he meant.

"That humanity can still reach farther... much farther than this."

As the words left him, Waldfeld fixed Kira with a sudden, direct look.

"That's what lies at the deepest root of this war."

For one instant, something dangerous surfaced in the eyes of the man who had seemed so effortlessly lighthearted until now, and a jolt passed through Kira like current.

This is not the end yet.

We can still see farther than this. Farther... farther still... farther...

And so, humanity had reached for genetic alteration, something once treated as absolute taboo. Grasping at what lay beyond, convinced there had to be more possibility within themselves than this...

And what it had produced was a new fracture: Naturals and Coordinators, the self and that which is not the self...

More... more... more...

Human appetite had brought this war into existence. But if that were true, then didn't it also mean that Coordinators themselves, people like Kira, stood at the very origin of this conflict?

Almost without meaning to, Kira's eyes traveled back to the replica above the fireplace.

"I'd never thought of it that way before..."

Lowering his gaze to the cup cradled in his hands, he spoke barely above a whisper.

"But... isn't Evidence 01 *hope*? For humanity, I mean."

"Hope?"

"Because if humanity were the only life in this vast universe, that would be... unbearably lonely, wouldn't it?"

Far beyond the lightless sea of vacuum that rejected all life, they existed.

That single fact warmed Kira's heart like a distant, faint light.

Humanity was not alone.

And the moment the words left him, embarrassment flooded through. It was naive, sentimental, the kind of thing that was easy to laugh at.

But Waldfeld only said, in a voice gone unexpectedly gentle, "Are you lonely, then?"

Kira flinched. When he looked up, Waldfeld was watching him with eyes that held warmth, and something quietly sorrowful.

"I see..." Kira thought.

He had been lonely all this time. Even surrounded by Flay and Tolle and the others, Kira could never truly stand on the same ground they did. He had chosen to stay among the Naturals, and yet within himself he carried something foreign, something that could never fully dissolve into their world...

That was why the light on the far shore called to him.

A quiet knock came at the door, and Kira glanced over.

It swung open to reveal Aisha stepping through, with Cagalli trailing just behind her, half-concealed in her shadow so that Kira couldn't get a clear look.

"What's the matter? There's no reason to be bashful."

Aisha laughed and eased her forward with a gentle push.

Kira's jaw dropped.

"Well, well."

Waldfeld stood and gave her an openly appraising once-over. Cagalli's hair had been swept up, and someone had applied a touch of light makeup as well. She wore a long dress whose hem swept nearly to the floor. When she drew closer, a delicate fragrance drifted with her, bath salts, maybe, or

shampoo. The sunburn marks were unfortunate, but dressed like this she was practically unrecognizable. Kira had always thought her features were striking, but now that rough, unpolished edge to her face read as something entirely her own, a sharpness that made her almost startlingly beautiful.

"A... girl..."

The words tumbled out of Kira before he could catch them, and Cagalli erupted.

"You little—!"

Kira scrambled to backtrack.

"No! I just meant, what I was trying to say was, 'So you really were a girl...'"

"That's the same damn thing!"

She wasn't wrong.

Kira deflated on the spot. It was pitiful, really, being this hopelessly incapable of producing the kind of words that might actually please a girl.

Waldfeld and Aisha laughed as they settled the two of them side by side and pressed coffee on them.

"Why do I have to wear something this annoying?!"

Cagalli was still seething, and Aisha answered with perfect, unflappable calm.

"Because your clothes are being laundered as we speak."

"Even so, weren't there any other options?!"

"Oh, what's the harm? You're a girl, you should dress up now and then. Look, even he seems pleased, doesn't he?"

"Eh?"

Dragged into the conversation without warning, Kira stiffened. Aisha, wearing a serene smile, and Cagalli, fixing him with a glare that promised violence, both turned their eyes on him simultaneously, and he bobbed his head in a hurry.

"U-um... yeah... I think it looks really nice."

Cagalli's expression stayed stubbornly sour, but a faint blush crept into her cheeks.

"What you were wearing before suited you as well, but the dress is wonderful on you. More than that, there's something strangely natural about it, somehow."

Waldfeld delivered the compliment with such effortless grace that Cagalli only looked more aggravated.

"Say whatever you like."

"If you didn't open your mouth, you'd be flawless."

"That's none of your damn business!"

From the corner of his eye, Kira quietly watched Cagalli raise her coffee cup. She took a sip without the faintest hesitation, swallowed it without a flicker of complaint, and set the cup back down. Realizing he was apparently the only one at the table who couldn't appreciate this so-called "taste of adulthood," Kira felt, for some reason, faintly deflated.

Perhaps because her task was finished, Aisha slipped out of the room. Thinking back on it afterward, Kira wondered whether Waldfeld had given her some silent cue to excuse herself.

"Why do you dress people up like this? Are you really the Desert Tiger? Or is this just another one of your little games?"

Cagalli put the question to him with a hard, level stare. Waldfeld tipped his head to one side.

"The dress was Aisha's choice. And as for another one of my little games?"

"Going into town in disguise for kicks... letting the residents evacuate and then burning just the city to the ground... that kind of thing."

At Cagalli's words, ice slid down Kira's spine. How could she throw something like that out so recklessly? What did she plan to do if he figured out who they really were?

Waldfeld regarded her for a long moment.

"You have good eyes. Direct and honest."

One corner of his mouth curved into a bold, fearless smile.

"Truly fine eyes."

Cagalli detonated.

"Don't screw with me!"

She slammed both palms onto the low table and surged to her feet. Her cup overturned, and the dark, rich liquid pooled across the tabletop. Kira grabbed her by the shoulders and hauled her back.

"Cagalli—!"

Feeling her shoulders shaking beneath his hands, Kira remembered. She had only just lost her comrades. And the man who had killed them was sitting right there in front of her, telling her to stay calm was beyond asking.

Waldfeld looked up at the two of them with eyes so cold and precise that the easy warmth he'd shown until moments ago might have been a dream.

"Are you one of those who'd rather be dead?"

Pinned in place by that gaze, both of them went still. He was still draped across the sofa in that absurd aloha shirt, but the presence radiating from him carried the savage chill of a predator, bearing down on them with physical weight. Then, without warning, Waldfeld shifted his eyes to Kira.

"And what about you, young man? What's your take?"

"Eh?"

"How do you think this war comes to an end? As a mobile suit pilot, I mean."

"You... how do you know that?!"

Before Kira could even draw breath, Cagalli had already blurted it out. Waldfeld immediately broke into laughter.

"Oh, come now... being too straightforward has its downsides too, you know!"

So, it had been nothing more than a bluff. And Cagalli had walked straight into it.

Still chuckling, Waldfeld rose from the sofa.



"Wars don't have time limits or scoreboards. They're not like sports or games. Wouldn't you agree?"

Kira drew Cagalli closer, circled around the sofa with his eyes fixed on the man's every movement, and braced himself.

"So how do you decide who's won and who's lost? Where do you draw the line?"

Where?

Even as Kira gauged the gaps in his opponent's stance and mapped an escape route, another part of his mind grappled with the question.

Where does it end?

Until now, he had been too consumed with beating back whoever came at him to spare a thought for anything beyond that. More than that, did such an ending even exist?

War was nothing like a game. In a game, nobody got hurt.

"By destroying every last enemy... perhaps?"

For one brief instant Waldfeld dipped slightly, and when he straightened to face them again, a gun had materialized in his hand. The muzzle leveled directly at them. Kira heard Cagalli's breath catch in a small, sharp gasp.

Yes. This was war.

Waldfeld and Kira would fight until one of them was destroyed, no other relationship between them was permitted. They were not allowed to share a meal, to laugh together, to sit and talk together, no matter how natural it had felt, even if Kira could not bring himself to hate the man, not even slightly.

Kira's mind raced through every possibility.

Could he use the sofa for cover and hurl himself through the window?

A drop of two, maybe three stories, but Cagalli couldn't survive that jump. If he could create some kind of diversion and get the barrel turned away, then, as if he had read Kira's thoughts down to the letter, Waldfeld spoke.

"Even if you got hold of the gun, you couldn't pull the trigger. Could you?"

Kira flinched for a fraction of a second, then crushed the hesitation down and met the man's gaze head-on.

"This time, I will."

Something shifted in Waldfeld's expression, a thin, quiet smile.

"You'd be wiser not to try. Even if you are some kind of berserker, do you honestly think you could tear through this place and walk out alive? Everyone here is a Coordinator. Same as you."

Kira's eyes went wide, and Cagalli let out a startled, "What?!"

He knew?!

"You—!"

Cagalli shot Kira a look that demanded to know why he hadn't told her, even at a time like this. And yet there wasn't the slightest trace of disgust in her face or her manner, and absurdly, even in a moment like this, Kira felt a small, irrational surge of gratitude for that.

"I've watched you fight twice now. Sand pressure distribution, thermal convection parameters... even among our own kind, you seem exceptionally

talented. I'm not the sort of fool who'd dutifully accept that a pilot like that was a Natural."

As Waldfeld laid out the evidence piece by piece, Kira stared at him in stunned silence.

So, he had known from the very start. And that reaction in the café, that was where he must have connected Kira with the "Coordinator pilot."

"I don't know why you chose to turn against your own people... but so long as you are the pilot of that mobile suit, you and I are enemies."

That had been Waldfeld's design all along. He had drawn them here to confirm that Kira was the enemy, and to eliminate him.

Kira forced down the turmoil roiling inside him and faced the man squarely. This is war, he told himself. Kill or be killed. Hesitate, and he would die. Cagalli was behind him, he had to protect her.

Then, before Kira, whose every nerve had drawn wire-tight, Waldfeld smiled, faintly, and with something almost like regret.

"And yet... does it really have to end with one of us destroyed?"

His eyes were the same as when he had spoken of Evidence 01, gentle, carrying a quiet undertone of sorrow. Without preamble, he lowered the gun.

"Well, for one thing, you did save my life today. And this is not a battlefield."

Kira and Cagalli stood rooted in disbelief as Waldfeld turned his back on them and slid the weapon into its holster.

"You may go. I enjoyed our conversation today. Whether that was a good thing or not... I couldn't say."

For an instant, the bitterness trailing at the end of those words struck Kira as strange, but right now all he could focus on was getting out of there alive. He traded a glance with Cagalli, and before the man could have a change of heart, the two of them made for the door.

As Kira pulled it open, Waldfeld spoke without turning around.

"Until we meet again on the battlefield."

Kira paused at the words for a single heartbeat, then, unable to find any reply worth giving, closed the door silently behind him.

Aisha was standing in the corridor.

Both of them went rigid at once, but the older woman only offered a soft smile.

"Your clothes."

Folded in her arms was Cagalli's freshly cleaned outfit. It was almost as though she had been waiting there, having already anticipated how the conversation would unfold. Cagalli flustered immediately.

"Ah, th-then the dress..."

"Don't worry about it. You can keep it."

Aisha said it as though it were nothing.

"It suits you far better than it ever suited me."

"B-but..."

Caught between the desperate urge to flee this place and her own stubborn sense of obligation, Cagalli wavered. Aisha smiled.

"Really, it's fine. I have no use for clothes that look lovelier on someone else than they do on me."

It was the kind of remark only a woman could deliver with that much venom laced through it, yet somehow she said it without a single cutting edge or trace of malice. Both Kira and Cagalli fell silent for a moment. Aisha's face still held the same luminous smile, radiant as a flower in full bloom.

"Go on, now. The others still don't know who you are."

Awkwardly, the two of them dipped their heads, then fled the place as though escaping a burning house.

"How did it go?"

Aisha's voice found Waldfeld where he stood at the window, his back to the room.

"Terrible."

"Oh, dear."

She said it the way someone might soothe a pouting child, and crossed the room to join him.

"They were lovely children, weren't they? What was there to dislike?"

"I liked them. That's exactly why I feel terrible."

Aisha laughed at that and leaned softly against his back.

"You hopeless man. That's what you get for indulging your whims."

"Precisely."

Waldfeld smiled, turned to face her, and drew her into both arms.

"If you had a car whose speedometer only went up to two hundred kilometers per hour, and you tried to push it past two hundred, what do you suppose would happen?"

"It would go."

Aisha answered without a moment's pause. With that sweetly pampered cadence of hers, she could play the guileless fool who understood nothing at all, and just as readily deliver something razor-sharp and practical. This, apparently, was one of the latter moments. Waldfeld smiled.

"Exactly. Even if the gauge only reads to two hundred, if you keep your foot buried in the accelerator, the car will exceed it."

Aisha said nothing, only gazed up at him.

"But, Aisha, I've never once driven past what the meter could show me."

"That's because your meter goes to two thousand."

She stated it plainly, as though reciting an obvious truth. Whether she genuinely knew it, believed it on faith, or was simply flattering him to feed his vanity, there was no way to tell. And then, without any warning at all, that dissolving smile of hers unfurled across her face.

"You hopeless man. You want to see what lies beyond two thousand."

Waldfeld smiled.

"That's right."

He wanted to know. How far he himself could fight if he ever truly committed everything. How far he could reach. What waited out there, past this point, farther... farther still...

Aisha touched his cheek with gentle fingers.

"You poor thing..."

Who had those words been meant for?

For DaCosta, perhaps, whose nerves were worn raw every time his commander did something reckless? For the boy they had just sent away? Or was it, in the end, for Waldfeld himself?

Aisha was impossible to read.

And that was precisely what made her irresistible.

Phase.04

A PLANT drifted through the void like a sand-laden hourglass, Aprilius One.

Across one of the islands that floated, sunlit and open, in the sea stretching beneath its lower half, Athrun Zala steered an electric car through a hushed residential quarter. A breeze calibrated to precisely the right humidity tousled his dark hair and stirred the bouquet resting on the seat beside him.

Before long, even among that neighborhood of grand homes, he turned onto a private lane that led toward a mansion commanding a notably expansive estate, and drew to a stop at the gate. A camera fixed to the gatepost scanned the vehicle, and a green indicator blinked to life.

"Confirmed. Please proceed."

The invitation came in a synthesized voice shaped to resemble a softly spoken woman's, and Athrun raised his identification card before the lens.

"Identification number 285002, Athrun Zala of the Le Creuset Team. I have an appointment to see Miss Lacus."

The system verified his credentials against its records and swung the gate wide. Athrun guided the car through.

As he stood waiting in the foyer after the butler had gone to announce him, his mind drifted unbidden to the very first time he had ever set foot in this house. He had been fourteen the day his father informed him, abruptly, without preamble or discussion, that Lacus Clyne was to become his fiancée. Even then, Lacus had already risen to extraordinary fame as the most celebrated songstress in all the PLANTs. That girl, paired with him? Athrun had nearly spiraled into outright panic, and it was in very nearly that same state of alarm that he had arrived here.

Now, just as she had on that occasion, Lacus Clyne appeared at the head of the staircase. Her pink hair seemed to float around her in soft, weightless waves, her complexion was luminously pale, and when her gaze found Athrun, a smile spread warmly across her rounded cheeks. Measured against those earlier days, she looked almost entirely unchanged.

"What about me?" The thought surfaced in Athrun without warning. In hindsight, the world that had surrounded him back then had been a remarkably uncomplicated thing.

"Welcome... I'm so pleased you came."

As she made her way down the steps, Haros in every conceivable color bounced and spun in orbit around her.

"Haro, Haro, Athruun."

Athrun dipped his head in a courteous bow.

"I'm sorry. I'm running a bit late."

"Oh, were you?"

Lacus offered a smile of serene gentleness. To her, the delay likely hadn't registered as anything worth noting. When Athrun somewhat hesitantly extended the bouquet he had brought, she received it with a delighted "Thank you" and lifted the flowers to her face, breathing in their scent. All around her, the Haros careened about in a noisy swarm. He had built each one by hand and given her a new one with every visit, but now that there were so many, the racket they produced was nearly intolerable.

"What are all these Haros doing?"

"They're greeting our guest. Now, please, this way."

Whether through long familiarity or sheer temperament, Lacus replied with effortless calm and set off deeper into the house. Athrun trailed after her, sidestepping the Haros as they launched themselves around his ankles.

"But... I'm sorry. At this point, haven't they become more of a bother?"

A faint pang of regret touched him at the realization that he had simply gone on building and gifting them without much thought, all because Lacus had once told him, "I like it." He said as much, but Lacus turned a radiant smile his way.

"I think they're especially worked up because it's you visiting. It really has been such a long time since you last came to the house."

"I'm sorry."

Sensing the faintest thread of gentle reproach for his long absence, Athrun murmured an apology, and Lacus regarded him with quiet surprise. She had surely intended no rebuke at all, of course. Yet it was precisely that innocence that deepened his contrition all the more.

The two of them made their way down a long corridor and out into the garden behind the mansion. A boxy little robot trundled up near their feet, and Lacus addressed it as "Okapi."

"Would you take these flowers to Alice for me? And ask her to bring tea as well, please."

The way she spoke to even a utility robot as though it were a person, that had not changed one bit since those earlier days. She placed the bouquet onto the robot's cargo bed.

This Okapi was, in a sense, where the two of them had started. The robot, which Lacus said had been with her since she was a child, had already been quite old by then, and during one of Athrun's visits, it had let out a strange noise and gone completely still.

When he asked what had happened, it turned out that Lacus had climbed on top of it just before, and the strain had finally given its aging components their last push into failure. When Athrun had asked, "Why would you do something like that?" her reply, "Because I used to do it when I was little," had been so perfectly, characteristically Lacus. One would think that weighing the change in her own body against the robot's load capacity would have made the problem self-evident.

But when he saw how genuinely distressed she was over her “dear old friend from childhood,” Athrun had offered, tentatively, that perhaps he could try to fix it.

And indeed, when she watched her “friend” restored to its former “health,” Lacus had been overjoyed, gazing at Athrun with undisguised admiration. In that version of Lacus, Athrun had glimpsed a warmth that lay beyond the “Lacus Clyne” he knew from screens.

That said, their relationship had scarcely advanced beyond where it stood back then. The only real change was that he had given her a pet robot of his own design, moved by the tenderness Lacus showed even toward a dated utility machine, treating it as though it were alive. And when she received the Haro, her delight had far exceeded anything Athrun had anticipated, and it seemed she treasured it still, even now.

After drifting through the garden for a time, the two of them settled into a gazebo. Yet even when they tried to speak, the Haros swarming and chattering around them with their relentless “Haro, Haro” made any real concentration impossible. Then Lacus retrieved a pen from a storage compartment built into the table.

“Navy, come here.”

She apparently distinguished the vast number of Haros by their colors. At her summons, a navy-blue Haro hopped up onto her lap with a small bounce and chirped, “Haro, good.”

“Today, let's give you a mustache.”

With a few squeaky, brisk strokes of the pen, Lacus sketched a curling mustache onto the Navy Haro, then released it with a gentle pat.

“Now, the one with the mustache is It.”

At the sound of her voice, every last Haro went bounding off across the garden in pursuit of the navy one bearing its freshly drawn disguise.

Once he had watched them scatter, Athrun spoke.

“I'm sorry I couldn't make it back for the memorial ceremony.”

February 14th, one year after Bloody Valentine, a national ceremony had been held in remembrance of the victims of Junius Seven. Lacus, both as the Supreme Council chairman's daughter and as the representative of the memorial delegation, had urged him to attend. And yet, in the end, Athrun and the others had been unable to return from the front.

But Lacus shook her head softly.

“No. I prayed on your behalf, for your mother.”

The words landed sharp and sudden against his chest, and Athrun lowered his head.

“Thank you.”

He had lost his mother during Bloody Valentine. And yet, rather than offering prayers for her, he had been out on the battlefield, producing fresh deaths. It was not as though he harbored no uncertainty about the path his life had taken. And yet, Lacus stood and poured the tea herself, filling Athrun's cup from the pot that Okapi had delivered.

"When I heard you had come home, I so looked forward to the day I might see you. Will you have time to stay a while on this visit?"

"Well, that's... My leave schedule is only provisional, after all..."

Athrun gave a vague, noncommittal answer. Lacus was always so openly glad whenever he came to see her, far more than he felt he warranted. It frustrated him that he could barely sustain any kind of easy conversation, and beyond that, the guilt weighed on him that even the opportunities to try had grown so scarce of late. He wanted badly to promise her another visit, but the fear of breaking that promise held him back, and so he found himself unable to offer any definite reply.

A small bird sailed in over the glimmering sea and landed on the table of the gazebo. When Lacus crumbled a cookie into fine pieces for it, the bird edged closer with the faint tap-tap of its tiny claws and helped itself to the offering. Then, almost as though thinking aloud, Lacus murmured,

"It seems like more and more people have been enlisting lately. Several of my friends have volunteered and gone off as well..."

Seeing a look of sorrow settle across her face, so unlike her, Athrun found himself helpless to respond and turned his gaze aside.

Nearly all of ZAFT's forces were volunteers. Having witnessed what befell Junius Seven, Coordinators were not the sort of people who wavered when it came to defending the lives they had built. That was what gave ZAFT its renowned morale and its abundance of exceptional soldiers.

And yet Lacus looked pained.

"I feel as though the war just keeps growing larger and larger."

"That may be true... in reality..."

Athrun murmured quietly.

He had enlisted with the resolve to fight so that the war might end even one day sooner. And yet, doubt.

"Come to think of it..."

Lacus spoke in a light, drifting tone, as though sweeping away the heaviness that had gathered between them.

"I wonder what Mr. Kira is doing now?"

At the sound of that name, Athrun's spine went rigid on instinct. Whether she noticed or not, Lacus cocked her head to one side.

"Have you seen him since then?"

In Athrun's mind, the image surged back, the Strike hurtling headlong toward the blue face of the Earth.

Kira...

"He's on Earth now, I expect. Safe... I think..."

Athrun answered, folding his own hope into the words. He could not tell Lacus, who seemed, for reasons he could not quite fathom, to feel such a natural closeness toward his best friend, that Kira was deep inside enemy territory, in circumstances where no one could say what the next day would bring.

"The two of you were friends from childhood, weren't you? That's what I heard."

From whom? Of course. From Kira.

During the time Lacus had been held aboard the Archangel, Kira had evidently told her about Athrun. And now here was Athrun, sitting with Lacus, speaking to her about Kira.

"Yes... We grew up together all that time, practically like brothers..."

Athrun trailed off. The memories of those luminous days welled up inside him, threatening to undo the person he had become. In those times, war had felt like something belonging to a dream. Kira had been there, and so had his mother.

"I told him about the Haros."

Lacus went on, her voice perfectly tranquil.

"And when I did, he smiled so happily and said of you, 'So he's the same as ever'..."

Athrun fixed his gaze intently on her face. As though she were reflecting Kira himself from that very moment, her expression had opened into a radiant, delighted smile.

"He said his Birdy had been made for him by you, too."

"Birdy," yes. He had forgotten entirely. The bird-shaped robot he had given Kira on the day they parted... because Kira had wanted it...

Athrun's eyes drifted to the small bird picking at cookie crumbs on the table, but at what Lacus said next, his head came up sharply.

"It seemed Mr. Kira still treasures it a great deal."

"He... still has it...?"

"Yes. He said, 'I'll show it to you next time.' I'm sorry I never had the chance to see it..."

"I... see..."

A warmth bloomed through his chest, and in the same breath, something tightened there until it was almost more than he could bear. Part of him wished he had never heard any of it. It would have been easier not to know that Kira, too, still remembered Athrun, that he must surely ache at the fact of their being enemies now...

Even though the next time they faced each other, Athrun would have to pull the trigger...

Lost somewhere deep within his own thoughts, Athrun could not react for a moment to the words Lacus spoke next.

"I... like him, you know..."

Athrun looked up, stunned. Lacus was gazing out across the sea. If there had been the slightest hint in her profile that she was teasing, Athrun might have felt some measure of relief. But the face she turned toward the distance wore an expression of happiness beyond anything he could name.

And so Athrun could not bring himself to ask what she truly meant by those words, and only stared at her profile in quiet bewilderment, wondering what shape her "like" had really taken just now.

He and Lacus had come together from the very start as fiancés chosen by their parents. On his side, it was not as though some other girl occupied his heart, and Lacus showed no indication of questioning the arrangement. Yet



if someone were to ask him whether what he felt for her was love, Athrun would likely have answered, "I don't know."

If asked whether he liked her, then yes, he liked her. She was someone he could respect, someone who stirred in him the desire to protect her. He had no objection to building a life at her side. But what about Lacus?

With a quiet thread of loneliness running through him, Athrun wondered.

When the time came for him to leave, Lacus tried to hold him there, visibly crestfallen.

"You really ought to stay and have dinner with us..."

She said it with a small, childish pout.

"Once the Council session ends, Father will be coming home too. He said he'd like to see you."

"I'm sorry," Athrun apologized, his expression uneasy.

"While I'm here, there are a number of things I need to see to... since I can't come back very often."

"I see... In that case, I shouldn't keep you any longer."

Lacus sagged visibly, wilting under the weight of her disappointment, and Athrun blurted out in haste.

"I-if I can find the time, I'll come again."

"You really mean that?"

All at once, a bright smile broke across her face. It was a gentle, lovely thing, as unspoiled as the smile of a newborn. After a moment's hesitation, Athrun quietly leaned closer.

Lacus, who had been watching him in a soft, half-dreaming sort of daze, realized his intent partway through and let her eyes fall. Athrun pressed his lips to her smooth cheek, barely, just grazing the skin, then pulled back at once. That alone was enough to send his heart hammering wildly. Until now, they had never so much as exchanged a kiss in greeting.

"Then, g-good night."

As Athrun delivered his stiff, fumbling farewell, Lacus betrayed not the faintest trace of fluster and simply smiled.

"Good night... Do enjoy your leave."

"Let me be absolutely clear, I am not suggesting that we occupy the Earth, nor that we prolong this war without end!"

The voice booming from the television belonged to Athrun's father, Patrick Zala, and it carried the heat of deep conviction.

"But given how events have unfolded, we have been left with no alternative but to respond accordingly..."

Nicol lay sprawled across the sofa, seemingly at ease, yet his attention stayed fixed on every word the Chairman of the National Defense Committee uttered onscreen.

He was home, his family's house in the PLANT city of Maius. His parents had been doting on him since the moment he arrived, savoring this rare leave, but just now the more pressing matter was getting his father out the door.

"Darling, you're going to be late!"

"Yes, yes. I know."

His father, a quiet man, and his mother, who carried herself with all the poise of someone raised in gentle surroundings, suited each other perfectly, but they were both so unhurried that even their own son sometimes felt a pang of worry on their behalf. True to form, with their departure looming, his mother Romina was drifting through the house without the faintest trace of urgency, murmuring things like, "Oh, where did your father's bag get to?"

"Right here. You set it down just a minute ago."

Nicol lifted the bag from beside him on the sofa and held it out. His mother accepted it with a look of serene, untroubled gratitude.

"Honestly, Nicol, you notice everything. I have no idea how we get by when you're not around."

He'd wondered that himself more than once. This time, clutching the bag against her chest with a resolve that suggested she would not misplace it again, his mother headed toward the entryway. On the television, Patrick Zala pressed on.

"Orb proclaimed neutrality, then betrayed that promise. And now the recent incident in which Miss Lacus was taken hostage... If someone tells us we should simply trust the other side and keep talking, well, under these conditions, that trust is more than anyone can reasonably ask for."

"He's right about that..."

His father, who by all rights should have been halfway to the door, stopped next to Nicol and spoke softly in answer to the broadcast. Yuri Amalfi looked younger than his forty-one years, with a mild face that always seemed to carry a faint undercurrent of concern. A member of the National Defense Committee himself and a mechanical engineering researcher involved in mobile suit development, he aligned with the moderate faction in his politics. Yet even he said this:

"What Zala's arguing is sound. It's Clyne's opposition I can't make sense of."

"Yeah," Nicol agreed, his eyes still on the screen.

"That unit you're piloting, what is it, the Blitz? I reviewed its structural data. Looking at those specifications, it's hard not to feel a certain... alarm."

"I know. Believe me, I feel it more than anyone, I'm the one in the cockpit." He glanced toward the clock. "Father, the time."

"Oh dear. That won't do."

And yet, despite saying so, Yuri showed no discernible haste as he made his way toward the front of the house. Nicol switched off the television and followed to see him off. Romina was already stationed by the door.

"The car's here," she announced.

Still, she betrayed no hurry whatsoever, gazing at her departing husband with undisguised admiration. She, too, had preserved a youthful loveliness that made it difficult to believe she had a teenage son. People often remarked, incidentally, that Nicol took after her.

"Operation Spitbreak... We need to push it through, whatever it takes."

Yuri spoke the name of the offensive Patrick Zala had put forward, the final phase of Operation Uroboros, the broader invasion campaign against Earth, a strike aimed at seizing Panama, which the Earth Alliance Forces clung to stubbornly as their last functioning spaceport.

"Zala's right that we can't afford to let this war drag on forever."

"Commander Le Creuset said the same."

At that, his father paused and regarded him with something complicated in his expression.

"I see... If it passes, then you'll be deploying again."

A beat.

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine."

The directness of it left Nicol a little off-balance. What teenage boy wouldn't feel awkward when his own parents offered thanks or apologies with such unguarded sincerity? In that, at least, he was no different from anyone else his age.

"I'm proud of you, Nicol... Since you've finally come home, if it weren't for a meeting this important, nothing could drag me to Aprilius..."

"It can't be helped. It's your duty as a citizen."

"I'll call tonight."

"Father, the car is waiting."

Nicol was so anxious about his father missing the shuttle that he could barely keep still. Yuri, though, seemed more stung by the composure his son maintained so carefully.

"You know, when you were small, you used to cling to me and cry, 'Don't go, Father', and kiss me before I left."

"That was... I must have been about three."

Nicol delivered this observation with thorough exasperation.

"Darling, if it's a kiss you're after, I'm happy to oblige."

Consoled by his wife, Yuri rallied somewhat and offered one last thing:

"Nicol, while you're home, please just relax. Do whatever makes you happy."

Half-amused despite himself, Nicol accepted the words with real gratitude.

"I will. Have a safe trip, Father."

When his son offered him a smile so open it could only be called angelic, Yuri's whole face brightened at once. He lingered a moment longer, visibly reluctant, and at last stepped out. Romina went downstairs with him to wave him off, and once both of them were gone, Nicol released a quiet sigh and allowed himself a soft laugh. Those two, it was honestly hard to say which of them was the child. But there was no question in his mind: they loved him more than anything else in this world.

Even so, Operation Spitbreak, the deployment of additional forces to Earth, would almost certainly be approved. Following Yzak and Dearka, Nicol himself would likely be sent planetside as well. Under other circumstances, the prospect might have thrilled him. He had always wanted to see Earth. As someone who lived for music, he longed to walk the old cities that still stood

just as they had when the great composers were born. But his journey would not be aboard a sightseeing shuttle. It would be sealed inside a heat-resistant drop capsule and, beyond that, crammed into the cockpit of a mobile suit, and the destination waiting for him would bear no resemblance to the one he dreamed of. The fighting was concentrated in the equatorial regions.

With all of this turning in his mind, Nicol opened a door. Beyond it lay the room he had cherished since he was small: the music room, with its grand piano. Taking his father's words to heart, do whatever makes you happy, he settled onto the bench. Piano keys, he thought, were among the most beautiful things in the world. With an ease that felt as natural as breathing, he rested both hands upon them and began to play his favorite piece.

When the war ends, Nicol thought, his fingers moving across the keys. When the war ends, maybe I should pursue the piano in earnest... His father's research fascinated him, and there were countless other paths he wanted to explore, but after the brutal, barren days he had endured on the battlefield, nothing eased the weight on his heart the way music did. Everything else could come later. He was only fifteen. The years ahead of him stretched on without limit.

By the time his mother returned and peered through the doorway of the music room, wearing a quiet smile, he had forgotten all about the coming operation, lost entirely in the sound his own hands were bringing to life.

"After everything else, you intend to show them that footage too? Just to hammer the point home?"

At the voice from behind him, Patrick Zala looked away from the screen. He had been watching recorded mobile suit combat, reviewing clips, it seemed, for use in the session ahead, on the display of a small conference room within the Council building, a room reserved for closed-door meetings and limited gatherings. Standing in the doorway was Siegel Clyne, the sitting Chairman of the Supreme Council. Patrick betrayed no surprise at the intrusion and answered without hesitation.

"I simply wish to present the facts as they are."

But Clyne countered, "The facts as they are, selected by you, you mean."

He was not wrong. Up to this point, Patrick had done everything in his power to stoke the fears of both the citizenry and the assemblymen, steering them toward the course he had already charted. Though perhaps stoking had been unnecessary. In the aftermath of a war ignited by the Bloody Valentine, and now that the Earth Alliance Forces' secretly developed next-generation mobile suits had come to light, the public mood had lurched sharply toward aggression. The Alliance's unexpected brittleness on the battlefield and ZAFT's hard-won gains had no doubt fed that momentum as well.

"Your proposal, Operation Spitbreak, will almost certainly pass today. Public sentiment has already tipped. There is nothing left that can stop it."

Clyne's voice was laced with bitterness. Fear bred fear, and hatred bred hatred. What had started as a single small stone, once set tumbling down the slope, had swelled into an immense mass, pulling everything into itself, gathering speed with every revolution. And Clyne could only stand and watch it happen.

Patrick responded with stiff, wounded indignation, as if the charge were entirely baseless.

"We are acting by consensus, Siegel. I would ask that you not forget that."

"If you let the flames of this war spread, the hatred will only deepen in equal measure. How far do you people mean to take this?"

Clyne pressed him with every ounce of conviction he possessed. Patrick's face, hard and set as stone, did not shift in the slightest.

"That is exactly why we must push for a swift conclusion! A war that doesn't end in victory has no meaning!"

"And how far must you go before you call it finished? If both our enemies and ourselves have been destroyed, it will be far too late!"

The two men held each other's gaze, neither yielding. Across their faces, images from the screen played in reflected light, shifting and flickering. On the display behind them, a massive warship was splitting apart in flames.

Patrick reached for the panel on the table and killed the playback. The screen went dark. The room's lights rose.

"We Coordinators are already a distinct, new species. There is no reason we must continue to coexist with the Naturals."

At Patrick's declaration, Clyne bore down on him.

"What kind of new species has already reached a dead end? Even with marriage controls in place, third-generation birth rates keep falling!"

Yes. That was the fatal weakness of the Coordinators, those living embodiments of humanity's dream.

Genes rewritten again and again had lost something essential: the capacity to generate new life. These brilliant, beautiful people, with powerful bodies untouched by disease, people who resembled gods in almost every way, lacked a single, devastating thing: a future for their kind.

The irony was staggering. They had been created out of the hope that humanity might surpass itself, and yet no continuation was promised to them.

It was this truth that led Clyne to believe they had no business waging war at a time like this, and it was this same truth that drove Patrick to call for a massive escalation of military force, so the war could be ended before the window closed. Even now, he argued back with the heated stubbornness of a man who took every objection as a personal affront.

"The road we've traveled was never a smooth one! But we overcame it! We will overcome this as well, if we bring the full measure of our collective wisdom to bear!"

Faced with Patrick's relentless, unyielding certainty, Clyne felt a helpless frustration crest inside him and brought his fist down hard on the table.

"Patrick! Life is something that comes into being on its own. It is not something to be engineered!"

"You sound exactly like Blue Cosmos! That kind of thinking, those values, are relics of a dead age, and it's time you recognized them as such!"

Patrick's lip curled in contempt.

"Human beings advance! Always reaching for a better tomorrow!"

"Is that alone what you call happiness?"

But Clyne already understood that nothing he said would reach the man. Convinced of his people's superiority over the old humanity, Patrick would never concede, could never concede, that their very existence might be a mistake. No: it was precisely to fortify that conviction that he needed to defeat the Naturals. To prove that they were not wrong. That they were not an error. And so, as if averting his gaze from the crisis staring him in the face, he clung to the war.

I can no longer stop this man...

The realization settled over Clyne like the weight of defeat itself.

"Chairman Zala, the session is about to begin. Please proceed to the chamber."

A voice summoned through the wall speaker, and Patrick turned his back on Clyne.

"This is the consensus, Chairman Clyne."

He spoke in a voice scraped clean of warmth, driving the reminder home one final time.

"We can no longer discard the power we hold and retreat down the path of evolution to rejoin the old humanity."

Then he walked out. Alone in the room, Clyne clenched his fist until it shook.

"We have not evolved... Patrick."

The words escaped his trembling lips, unbearable, and unanswered.

The curtains had been pulled tight, and in the dimness the room was close with the sound of labored groaning and the rank, suffocating smell of sweat. Someone was thrashing in the tangled bed, racked with pain.

"Kh... ngh... ah!"

A shock of disheveled blond hair showed beneath the coverlet, and even through the bedding the arch of his spine could be seen rising and falling in violent spasms as he fought through the agony. The hand that had been gripping the sheets lifted, trembling, and fumbled blindly along the nightstand. But when a fresh wave of pain seized him, the hand jerked and swept everything from the surface to the floor. Among the objects that clattered down together, a small computer, a handful of writing instruments, a bottle of medication, was a strange silver mask.

The man twisting on the bed reached out, straining for the medicine bottle, but his strength gave way and his whole body tipped sideways off the mattress. In that stark room, furnished with nothing beyond the barest necessities, the sound of his ragged breathing and low, animal snarls filled

the silence. At last he managed to drag the bottle close enough to grasp, wrenched off the cap with hands that shook like an old man's, and bit the tablets straight from the rim.

Gradually, whether because the medication was taking hold, his groans grew less frequent, and the body sprawled limp on the floor went still. But before his breathing could steady itself, his mobile phone rang.

"Damn it..."

He cursed under his breath, forcing himself upright with a groan, and took the call. Yet the voice that answered was so flawlessly measured, so composed, that no one who heard it would have connected it to the man who had been choking on his own agony only moments before.

"This is Le Creuset."

Yes, the occupant of this barren room was Rau Le Creuset. The voice on the other end, oblivious to Rau's condition, spoke without preamble. "It's me."

"Chairman Zala. Your Excellency, at this hour, is the Council not still in session?"

Rau peered through the damp, disordered hair hanging in his face toward the clock as he asked.

"Our proposal passed. A few items remain on the agenda, but they shouldn't take long. Once it wraps up, I'd like to go over the specifics with you in detail, but I wanted you to know at least that much now. Especially since you are the one I'll be entrusting with the real Operation Spitbreak."

Patrick Zala's voice carried a note of elation he could not entirely suppress, the voice of a man certain that every piece was falling precisely where he wanted it. Rau let out a quiet laugh.

"Well then, the next order of business will be the upcoming chairman's election."

"What?"

Caught off guard, Patrick asked it sharply. Rau dropped his voice to something almost conspiratorial.

"There can be no question that Your Excellency will succeed Clyne... so I would advise you to make your preparations without oversight."

By referring to the sitting chairman with no honorific, letting the name fall bare, wrapped in an air of shared confidence, Rau drew from Patrick a laugh bright with triumph.

"Ha ha... If we take this seriously, then Earth is nothing... yes."

The call ended. Rau sagged back against the floor. Beneath his still-labored breathing, a sly, private smile surfaced.

Patrick believed it. Believed that everything was unfolding exactly as he willed. What a pitiful fool.

Without the faintest awareness of who was actually steering him, guiding his hand at every turn, he did nothing but lose himself in sweet, idle dreams.

Coordinators, Naturals, they were all the same. Nothing but fools, every one of them.

"Hmph. Go on, then. Preen all you like... Patrick Zala."

His voice was still weak, barely above a murmur, but the hatred laced through it was cold enough to crystallize the air. Rau spat the words into the dark like venom.

Phase.05

Kuzzey, who had been leading the way, came to a halt outside the cramped space now serving as a holding room and shot Kira a look from the corner of his eye.

"Better if you keep out of sight, Kira. Once I get this open, just stay behind the door."

The words landed strangely, and before Kira could stop himself, he was staring at Kuzzey in confusion. Kuzzey let his gaze drift elsewhere.

"You don't want him losing it again, do you? Sai, I mean."

Something sharp lanced through Kira's chest, and his eyes fell. Sai had been confined to this room, disciplined for launching the Strike on his own and endangering everyone aboard. Apart from the three daily intervals when someone brought him a meal, every thread of contact with the outside world had been severed, and even those meals amounted to nothing more than bread and water. The reality of it pressed down with a bruising weight: they had truly been swallowed into the gears of the military machine.

Even knowing all of that, the notion that Sai, of all people, had done something so reckless still refused to feel real. He had always been the steady one, the thoughtful one, the person who kept the rest of them from being apart.

And yet somewhere beneath all his disbelief, Kira understood that he was the reason Sai had been driven to it. He and Flay had backed Sai into that corner. Kuzzey hadn't spoken the accusation aloud, but Kira was certain the same thought lived behind his silence.

Of course Kira was worried about him, too. None of this had grown from hatred or from any wish to see Sai suffer. But even the simple act of caring, of fretting over his wellbeing, was something Kira no longer had any claim to. That was how deep the betrayal ran, or at least that was what he was being forced to accept.

He drew the card key through the reader, punched in the passcode, and then, exactly as instructed, retreated behind the door.

"Sai, I'm coming in."

Tray balanced in his hands, Kuzzey stepped inside, and Kira, careful not to let himself be noticed, edged forward and peered in from the shadows.

"You holding up okay?"

"Ah... yeah."

Sai sat in the dim far corner with his spine pressed to the wall and his knees pulled tight against his chest. Stubble darkened his jaw in a thin, neglected haze, and without even the chance to wash, naturally, he looked hollowed out, frayed, diminished in a way that only wound the ache in Kira's

chest tighter. This was Sai, always immaculate, always meticulous, gentle down to his bones, a person who almost never so much as raised his voice.

"A whole week's gonna be rough. But rules are rules, you know? Just try to get through it."

Kuzzey made an effort to keep his tone light, the way he always sounded, but in the sealed, cold stillness of that room the forced ease hung in the air without settling, conspicuously wrong. Sai, by contrast, answered with a composure that caught Kira off guard, his voice carrying, if anything, a trace of rueful humor.

"Yeah, I know... I'm all right."

That loosened something in Kira, however faintly. Sai had been placed here rather than in a proper solitary cell because he had evidently settled down, and there were signs in his demeanor that he felt genuine remorse for what he'd done, at least, that was what Kira had been told. Even so, the worry had refused to let go of him. What if Sai did something desperate?

It seemed almost as though Sai himself couldn't fathom how he had ended up in a place like this.

Kira couldn't fathom it either. Why was it that while his friend was enduring something this miserable, he couldn't simply walk through that door and offer him a word of comfort? Why did he have to stand out here holding his breath, pressed into the shadows so he wouldn't be seen?

Because the person who had brought Sai to this point was Kira himself.

He grasped that intellectually, and still, no matter how he turned it over, the truth wouldn't crystallize into anything that felt real. Wretched, he drew back from the gap in the door and let his weight settle against the corridor wall. Then, at the far edge of his vision, something shifted. Kira's gaze snapped toward it on instinct, and he caught a figure retreating into the deeper shadows of the passageway. A beat later, quick, light footsteps pattered away down the hall.

The hair he had glimpsed in that single instant had been a striking, vivid red.

"Flay."

Kira stood rooted there, unable to move.

"The whole region's honeycombed with abandoned mine tunnels."

Sahib dragged his finger across the map and let it settle on a single point.

"And right here, this is the minefield we planted ourselves. If we're turning any of this into a killing ground, it's going to be this stretch."

His finger moved again, scribing a tight circle around the surrounding terrain.

"Their side will come to the same conclusion. There's no point going through the trouble of seeding those mines if we don't intend to put them to work."

Inside the command room at Desert Dawn's headquarters, Sahib and the Archangel's officers leaned in over the map, their faces close together. Mu

listened to the strategy Sahib had outlined, glanced briefly toward Murrue, and spoke.

"You're certain about this? We'll find a way to handle our end, but with the gear your people are working with, you're looking at serious casualties."

Murrue shifted her gaze to the man seated squarely before her. When Sahib answered, his voice came low and deep, rolling like something dredged up from the earth.

"If we bent the knee to the Tiger, served him, worked for his people, then sure, maybe even we'd be guaranteed a quiet life. Like Banadiya. You hear the women say it now and then."

Banadiya, the city that had been offered peace and prosperity in return for submitting to the Desert Tiger. Natarle and Tonomura, who had traveled there to secure supplies, had described to Murrue how vibrant the place was, so alive with energy that the occupation almost seemed like a fiction.

"But a ruler's hand turns on nothing more than a passing mood. How many centuries do you think our people have spent weeping under that?"

A heaviness settled across Mu's expression. Murrue, too, took in Sahib's words with feelings she could not easily untangle. There was no denying that she and those like her belonged to the side that had inflicted suffering on Sahib's people. She herself had never personally harmed them, but the world she came from had, for longer than memory, built its prosperity on the backs of the powerless, those who lacked the means to resist, and had kept them locked in positions of disadvantage.

Yet Sahib continued in a tone so fiercely proud that not even the thinnest thread of weakness ran through it.

"We won't be ruled. And we won't rule over anyone else. That's the only thing we're asking for."

Even still, what strength they possessed. Hardened, unbending, relentless. Perhaps it was this ocean of scorching sand that had tempered people into something like this.

Banadiya, the city that appeared so tranquil, so full of life on its surface, the peace itself was the illusion. Murrue corrected herself.

Even if peace had to be given up for it, even if it meant dying on the battlefield, there were things a person simply could not surrender. Wasn't that the very reason she had committed herself to this war to begin with? Ground down by the relentless rhythm of daily combat, she had nearly lost sight of it.

Had she stood where they stood, she was certain she would have chosen the same path as Sahib and his people. If the war ended in defeat, and the only thing left in her hands to defend her dignity and her freedom was a single rifle, yes. She would fight.

She had no wish to win a war and lord over the defeated. But what meaning was there in meekly raising both hands, accepting the enemy's terms, and clinging to existence for its own hollow sake?

"Once we reclaim the eastern mining district the Tiger's been sitting on, that dream might actually become something real."

A wide grin broke out beneath Sahib's beard.

"We're counting on your firepower over in this sector. That ought to work out just fine for you, too, shouldn't it? No reason to worry on our account."

"Okay. Fair enough."

Mu gave an easy shrug, as though conceding he'd been the one overstepping, and turned a grin on Murrue, nudging her toward agreement.

"Captain?"

Murrue smiled back, faintly surprised to recognize that at some point, without quite noticing, she had grown fond of this man from the desert.

"Understood. In that case, we'd be glad to accept your cooperation for the operation to break through the Lesseps."

"Whoaa!"

"No way! That's fifteen!"

"Are you serious?!"

In a far corner of the Archangel's portside hangar, the boys were tripping over each other's voices in a surge of excitement. Tolle happened to be passing through, and the noise drew him over.

"What's all this about?"

Milly and Kuzzey, clustered around the Skygrasper simulator, swung back to face him.

"Tolle, get over here! You have to see this girl!"

"Wah?! She got another one!"

The figure planted in the simulator seat, hands locked around the control stick as she threaded the Skygrasper through the display, was Cagalli. Lured by the racket, Neumann wandered over too, craning past everyone's shoulders with an expression caught between amusement and genuine surprise.

"She's not bad at all. Now, it's... Cagalli, right? Have you had any experience with aerial combat?"

Cagalli flashed a self-satisfied grin and squeezed the trigger. On the screen, the final enemy craft spiraled down, and the display cut to the end-of-simulation results. The ranked scores appeared, with Cagalli's name perched at the top by a commanding margin. A murmur of impressed sounds rippled through the group, and Cagalli looked entirely delighted with herself.

"I only took, what, two hits?"

"That's still incredible! I got blown out of the sky the moment I set foot on the battlefield."

Kuzzey said it with unguarded enthusiasm, and Milly let out a small, embarrassed laugh.

"Me too..."

"Wait, hold on, you've all had a turn already?"

Tolle pressed closer.

"You're supposed to be soldiers, and that's all you can manage? Don't tell me you've never even pulled a trigger before."

Cagalli hopped nimbly out of the seat.

"At this rate, you won't last five minutes. You are in a war, you realize that? A real one."

She tossed the words back in a needling tone and strode off. Neumann tracked her departure with a lopsided smile.

"She's not wrong."

"Knowing how to fire a gun isn't exactly something to be proud of, you know."

Still watching Cagalli's retreating figure, Milly drew herself up and said it with stung dignity.

"And never having fired one isn't much to boast about either, not when you're serving as soldiers."

Neumann's retort landed with the precision of a well-placed jab. Both Milly and Kuzzey deflated, trading glum glances. Tolle alone seemed unfazed, already gravitating toward the simulator with the wide-eyed look of a kid who had just discovered the most interesting toy in the room.

"My turn? Come on, let me have a go."

"This isn't some gaming console."

Neumann was grinning even as he reprimanded him, and Tolle, who had already slung one leg over the seat, made a show of straightening back up and snapping off a crisp salute.

"Sir! Understood, sir. I will approach this as a training exercise and conduct myself with the utmost gravity!"

"That's the spirit! But if you get shot down, you're going without dinner!"

Tolle let out an outraged "Whaaat?!" at that, but dropped into the simulator seat regardless. The boys swarmed around him, voices rising in encouragement, and within moments that corner of the hangar was loud with noise all over again.

Half-listening to the clamor behind her, Cagalli wandered toward the actual Skygrasper and stood beneath it, staring up at the craft with open, covetous longing. A mechanic caught sight of her and quickly planted himself between her and the machine.

"No, no. Absolutely not. The real thing is strictly off-limits."

Cagalli's expression dipped into a small, disappointed pout.

"I know that!"

But even as the protest left her lips, her gaze never dropped from the sleek white machine gleaming beneath the hangar lights, her eyes bright with undisguised desire.

At the foot of Kira's bed in the unlit room, Birdy hopped in small, restless bounces while Kira lay stretched on his back, motionless, his gaze fixed on the ceiling above him.

"Kira?"

A knock sounded, and Kira snapped upright in a rush. The door swung open, and framed in the doorway stood a silhouette he had long since become far too familiar with.

"Oh, come on, what's all this? Just sitting here in the dark?"

Flay chided him in that honeyed, coaxing voice of hers, flipping the light switch as she crossed into Kira's room with the ease of someone entering her own. Ever since that first night, she had been sleeping and waking in this space. Lately she had even begun carrying in her own things, and the sweet scent of the cosmetics she wore had seeped thoroughly into every corner. That fragrance, once nothing but pleasant to him, felt thick and suffocating today. Kira let his head drop.

"What were you doing earlier?"

At his low, quiet question, Flay paused and turned to face him.

"Hm?"

For a reason he couldn't name, he found himself unable to look at her directly, and averted his face.

"You were outside Sai's room... weren't you?"

The figure he had glimpsed earlier near the storeroom door had unmistakably been Flay. At moments like these, Kira resented the acuity of his own eyesight.

Flay didn't respond right away. Instead she lowered herself beside him and nestled close against his body. Then, abruptly, she murmured:

"Sai's an idiot."

The reply was nothing Kira had anticipated, and the heat of her pressed against him only thickened his confusion. Flay continued.

"He never stood a chance against you... he really is such an idiot..."

The words carried a barb of irritation, yet trailing after them was a quaver of grief that refused to fade.

"Flay."

The instant that undertone reached him, Kira grasped what she truly meant. His whole body went rigid before he could catch himself.

I see...

Perhaps she sensed the understanding move through him, because Flay tilted her face upward to search his. Kira looked away.

"Kira? What's the matter?"

She leaned closer, angling to catch his eyes, but he wouldn't let her. So she pressed nearer still, draping herself across his chest.

"You don't need to worry about anything."

Her sugared whisper grazed the side of his neck, and the fullness of her body bore down warm and tight against him.

"It's all right, Kira... I'll always be right here with you..."

"Flay—"

Kira tried to push her back, but before he could finish Flay's mouth closed over his. She kissed him and in the same motion eased him down onto the bed. Kira shoved at her body as though gasping for air and finally wrenched her away.

"S-Stop it!"

He caught the shock flaring wide in Flay's eyes at his outburst. Kira clamped his own shut, and in the very next heartbeat he was out of the room at a dead run.

"Kira!"

Her voice chased after him.

"No. No!"

This was never what he had wanted.

He ran as though something lethal were behind him, fighting with everything he had to keep the tears from breaking through.

Flay still loved Sai after all.

He had believed this warmth belonged to him now, yet despair drove its teeth deep into his chest. In the dim corridor, Kira crashed against the wall and drove his fist into it. Then his legs gave way, and he slid to the floor.

She never came to love me.

A strangled sound ground its way through his clenched teeth.

"How pathetic. And still I let myself believe it... let myself get swept up in it... and wounded Sai that deeply because of it..."

Why had she given herself to him? Out of pity, most likely. That was the whole of it.

Of course it was.

He was a Coordinator.

Something unnatural. Something monstrous. Something warped beyond the boundaries of what should exist, something Flay despised with every fiber of her being.

Kira folded in on himself and could not move.

He no longer knew what he was meant to trust, or what he was supposed to be fighting for, and yet the need inside him only surged more violently.

What am I supposed to do...?

What would it take for her to love me? What would it take...?

What am I supposed to do now?

Nothing but helpless yearning and aimless questions turned and turned through his mind until he could no longer see the way forward, just like the friend confined to that cramped, lightless room.

"Why in God's name would Gibraltar send us ZuOOTs?!"

Waldfeld hurled the words out with undisguised contempt and slapped the paperwork down onto his desk.

"What, have they run out of BuCUEs?"

"Well..." DaCosta ventured, "apparently they don't have any more to spare."

Inwardly, he shared every ounce of his superior's frustration, but he could hardly fault Gibraltar either. No one could reasonably have predicted that in the span of a mere three days they would lose six BuCUEs outright and see two more rendered combat-ineffective. And all of this under the command of the Desert Tiger himself, no less.

The TFA-2 ZuOOT was a heavily armored ground-combat mobile suit designed for bombardment support, its frame coated in a flat, dusty red. To cope with punishing terrain like the desert, it featured a transformation mechanism that converted its humanoid configuration into a tread-driven

tank mode, but its handling was ponderous to a fault, nothing remotely close to the BuCUEs, whose speed and maneuverability defined their purpose. It was simple enough to grasp why Waldfeld was bitter about the substitution, all the more so now, with the decisive engagement bearing down on them against an enemy that would demand every asset they could field.

"Perhaps those two from the Le Creuset team are supposed to compensate..."

DaCosta cast a glance through the viewing port toward the deck below. From the transport craft that had just touched down on the Lesseps, alongside the red-hulled ZuOOT, two mobile suits of an unfamiliar design were being offloaded. The pair of boys descending the transport's ramp wore the crimson pilot suits that designated them as aces.

Waldfeld let out a thin, derisive laugh.

"More likely they'll just be underfoot. Neither of them has any ground combat experience, am I right?"

"They are from an elite unit, after all."

DaCosta agreed readily enough, though what he truly felt was that they had just been handed a pair of burdensome obligations. Pilots bred within the Le Creuset team would inevitably carry their own pride, and that almost certainly meant they would be difficult to manage. There was every possibility they would disrupt the cohesion of the unit. Then, without any preamble, Waldfeld declared:

"I don't care for this Le Creuset business. The man himself rubs me the wrong way."

"You mean Rau Le Creuset?"

The masked figure Rau Le Creuset was invoked in the same breath as the Desert Tiger, a pilot of such fearsome renown that even wailing children, so the saying went, would go silent at his name. Naturally, DaCosta privately held the view that the man didn't quite measure up to Waldfeld.

Still, it was precisely that near-equal standing that made him wonder whether some old tension lay between the two, and then he deflated inwardly at the rationale his superior offered.

"How's anyone supposed to trust a man who won't let you see his eyes?"

It was a magnificently uncomplicated opinion built on absolutely nothing. Swallowing a sigh, DaCosta caught himself idly wondering whether Rau Le Creuset had any hobbies that involved fanatical coffee rituals or strolling through occupied territory in absurdly conspicuous disguises.

Almost certainly not.

Even so, DaCosta knew in that moment that if someone forced him to choose between serving as Waldfeld's adjutant or Le Creuset's, he would follow his current commanding officer without a heartbeat's hesitation.

Regardless, they made their way out onto the deck to receive the new arrivals from orbit. As the transport lifted off again, the wind kicked up and drove a stinging sheet of fine sand across the open platform.

"Whoa, what the hell is this? This place is miserable."

The blond newcomer raised his voice and threw up a hand against the grit-laden gusts. The platinum-haired one beside him squinted into it with a look of startled disgust. Waldfeld called over to them.

"The desert doesn't mean much until it's actually hitting you in the face."

The two boys turned, blinking sand from their lashes, and peered at the man approaching with that slyly entertained grin playing across his features.

"Welcome to the Lesseps. Andrew Waldfeld, I'm in command here."

Both boys snapped upright instantly and locked into crisp salutes. The platinum-haired one spoke first, his voice clipped and precise.

"Yzak Joule, Le Creuset team, sir!"

Before he could catch himself, DaCosta nearly fixed on the deep scar carved across the boy's face, but redirected his gaze with practiced nonchalance.

"Dearka Elsman, same unit."

The blond one, taller than Yzak, followed with his own introduction.

"Long haul down from orbit, I'm sure. Good to have you."

Waldfeld delivered the greeting with all the warmth of someone remarking on the forecast. Then his gaze settled squarely on Yzak's face, and without the slightest lead-in he said, "When a soldier leaves a wound untreated that could easily be erased, it's because he's made some kind of oath to it... am I wrong?"

DaCosta winced inwardly at his superior's directness. Yzak looked momentarily caught off guard, then turned his face aside with visible affront, but Waldfeld pushed the point further still.

"And looking away when someone says that to you, what does that tell us? That it's a mark of humiliation, maybe?"

Yzak bristled instantly and fired back:

"More importantly, where does the Legged Ship stand right now?!"

The Legged Ship was the designation the Le Creuset team had coined for the Earth Alliance's new warship before its true name, the Archangel, had come to light.

This is off to a wonderful start, DaCosta thought, and allowed himself another quiet sigh. Setting everything else aside, Yzak's tone was hardly appropriate for a subordinate addressing a commanding officer. Waldfeld was equally at fault for goading him, true enough, but from DaCosta's position as adjutant the whole exchange was more than a little grating. That said, if a prod that gentle was enough to make the boy snap at a commander he had only just laid eyes on, then Yzak was clearly volatile by temperament.

The commander in question, however, appeared entirely unruffled.

"That ship is roughly a hundred and eighty kilometers to the west, sitting at a resistance base. We've already dispatched an unmanned recon drone. Care to review the footage?"

He spoke as he walked, unhurried, then tilted his head upward to take in the two X-number machines that had been set down on the deck. Yzak and Dearka, some of their hostility bled away, simply watched him and his infuriatingly casual bearing. Waldfeld murmured, half to himself:

"I see... the same lineage of machines. Very much like that one..."

Gazing up at the mobile suits, Waldfeld wore the expression of a child utterly captivated by something wondrous. Ever since recently, he had seemed almost spellbound by the mobile suit called the Strike, and for reasons DaCosta couldn't quite articulate, that fixation unsettled him.

"Um," Dearka said to his back, his tone offhand, "I'd heard that Commander Waldfeld has already gone up against the Alliance's mobile suits in combat..."

"Hm?"

Waldfeld turned around looking genuinely startled, as though he had forgotten entirely that the two of them were standing there, DaCosta included. Then he rolled one shoulder in a shrug and smiled.

"Ah... yes, that's right. I'm hardly in any position to mock the Le Creuset team's record."

The two boys, apparently reading it as ridicule, went stiff again, their expressions curdling. But DaCosta, watching his superior, a man who carried himself at all times with effortless command, seem almost hesitant, felt his unease sharpen.

Hesitant? This man? Not possible.

A man who waged battle against entire forces as if he were whistling a tune. A man who could go on sipping his coffee with perfect composure while missiles tore through the walls of his shop. There was no conceivable way he harbored anything so fragile as doubt.

DaCosta tried to dismiss the notion with a laugh.

No. Out of the question. No enemy alive could make Waldfeld waver.

The Desert Tiger was incapable of losing.

It simply was not something he could do.

The Archangel's engines had begun sending the faintest tremor through the surrounding rock walls.

On every side, shoulder to shoulder with the fighters, even the refugees from Tassil were throwing themselves into the final preparations for battle. Men hollering over one another, men heaving ammunition onto buggies, men dashing out of the caves and doubling straight back in, men trading hurried goodbyes with their families.

In the thick of that roaring chaos, a woman stopped Cagalli in her tracks.

It was Ahmed's mother.

The desert sun had already started to carve its lines into her skin, but she possessed the kind of striking, luminous eyes so common among the women of this land. Wordlessly, she extended her hand toward Cagalli.

"Huh?"

Cagalli cocked her head, uncertain, and offered her own palm. The woman placed a green stone into it. A rough piece of malachite, pulled from the mines of this region. For a long moment Cagalli could only stare, held fast by the depth of that vivid green. Delicate horizontal bands threaded through it, fine as patterns woven into silk.

"What is this...?"

When Cagalli asked, still not comprehending, the woman replied in a quiet voice.

"My boy found it once, some time ago."

"Ahmed did...?"

Caught off guard, Cagalli moved to press it back into her hands.

"No, you can't. It must have been precious to him, wasn't it?"

"Please, take it," the woman said. "He told me he wanted you to have it."

"Me...?"

Cagalli dropped her gaze to the stone resting in her palm. The color was extraordinary, so vivid it seemed to bleed into her skin.

"They say this stone absorbs misfortune into itself and gives warning when danger draws near... Hold on to it."

Her voice stayed even and gentle as she laid her hand over Cagalli's and slowly folded her fingers shut around the stone.

"You come back alive. Promise me."

Tears flooded Cagalli's eyes, and she gave a fierce, hard nod.

"Thank you..."

When Ahmed's mother stepped away, Kisaka moved to her side.

"What was that?"

"Ahmed... he left it for me."

She couldn't grasp why Ahmed had wanted her to have this stone. But the face of the friend who was no longer here kept surfacing before her eyes, over and over, pulling something painfully taut inside her chest. Ahmed, he had been so young. So alive it seemed to pour out of him. Always drifting over to find her, always striking up conversation, sometimes hauling her out into the open desert. They had stood next to each other, watching the wind-rippled dunes blaze red beneath the sinking sun.

Standing at her shoulder like a shadow, Kisaka lowered his eyes to the stone cradled in her hand and regarded it without speaking. After a silence, he said in a low murmur,

"It's a beautiful stone."

Beyond that, he offered nothing more.

Then Sahib's voice cut sharp above the din.

"Move out!"

The lead buggy jolted forward.

The operation was underway.

Cagalli and the others broke into a sprint toward their own buggy.

"So, they're already on the move?"

Waldfeld posed the question as he stepped onto the Lesseps' bridge, and the operator responded without hesitation.

"Yes, sir! They're advancing to the east."

Eyes locked on the monitor, Yzak burst out with uncontainable excitement, "It's the Legged Ship!"

Waldfeld studied the map.

"Heading for the old Talpatia industrial sector, then... Well, if I were the one commanding their side and looking to punch through here, I'd make exactly the same call."

He delivered the assessment as though graciously conceding the point.

"Commander..."

Catching the expectant look on DaCosta's face as he stood awaiting orders, Waldfeld cocked his head with an expression split between mild exasperation and amusement.

"Mmm... I would have preferred they gave us a bit more time, but so it goes."

"We're launching?!" Yzak cut in, pitching forward, barely able to keep himself in check.

Waldfeld gave a nod and addressed the crew with his orders.

"Lesseps, prepare for sortie! Code Zero-Two! Signal the Petrie and the Henry Carter."

"Yes, sir!"

As the crew surged into crisply coordinated motion around him, Waldfeld crossed his arms and allowed himself a lopsided smile.

"Making a lady take the initiative, not my finest showing."

DaCosta and the rest had grown immune to this sort of thing long ago and let it slide as they always did, but Yzak and Dearka, still unaccustomed to the way Waldfeld conducted himself, could only stare at him in blank bewilderment. Waldfeld turned a sharp grin on them.

"Still, the least I can offer by way of an apology... is to greet her with a truly magnificent fireworks display."

"What's this? You haven't touched your food?"

In the Archangel's mess hall, Mu leaned over Kira's tray from behind and chided him. For some time now, Kira had done little more than push his food around the plate, barely eating a thing.

"Come on, get it down. Here, take this too."

Mu dropped an extra dish he'd carried over onto Kira's tray without ceremony. Kira glanced at it with dull indifference, then went still. It was doner kebab. Mu settled into the seat beside him, bit into the same thing himself, and let out a groan of deep satisfaction.

"Now that's what I call food. Anything sourced locally just hits different."

"Commander... you're still eating?"

Kira asked, half horrified. Mu had already consumed at least double what Kira had in standard rations alone. Simply watching him was enough to turn his stomach. Mu looked genuinely affronted.

"We're heading into combat, in case you forgot. You need fuel in you if you want your body to hold up."

Fair enough. A pilot should eat before a fight, get the blood sugar up. But surely there were limits. Packing in this much, the first heavy G-force would send it all surging right back up, yet Mu, apparently, suffered no such

concerns. Looking perfectly at ease, he held out a container of sauce toward Kira.

"Come on, come on, eat. The yogurt sauce is the way to go."

At those words, another man surfaced in Kira's mind, and his gaze fell.

"The Tiger said the same thing. That the yogurt one was better."

Mu paused with the kebab suspended halfway to his mouth.

"Huh. A man of refined taste, then."

Mu had surely already seen the report that Kira and the others had encountered the Desert Tiger, Waldfeld, but he remarked on it as carelessly as though it carried no weight at all, and took another enormous bite.

The flavors of chili and yogurt bloomed again across Kira's tongue, tangled with the acrid smell of gunpowder he had breathed in afterward. And riding alongside them came the image of that unforgettable enemy commander,

"But you're better off not knowing a thing about the enemy. Forget him as quickly as you can."

Kira, who had been on the verge of sinking into that undertow of memory, was jolted back by Mu's voice.

"Huh...?"

He echoed the word without comprehension, and Mu said around yet another mouthful of kebab,

"When you're about to start trading lives with someone, knowing too much about them just makes the whole thing harder, doesn't it?"

The realization struck Kira, and he went rigid.

That was precisely it.

He was going to have to fight that man now.

Only in that moment did he finally grasp what Waldfeld had been telling him at their parting.

I enjoyed meeting you... whether that turns out to have been a good thing or not, I honestly couldn't say.

Had Waldfeld felt the same thing Kira was feeling now? Had he been regretting the carelessness that let him grow fond of someone he would eventually have to kill?

Are you lonely, then?

In that moment, Waldfeld had looked at Kira with gentle eyes, gentle, and shadowed for some reason by sorrow. Now Kira understood what the man had recognized in him.

Death.

His own, or the other man's.

And how do you determine who wins and who loses? Where do you draw the line and call it finished?

Waldfeld's question murmured in Kira's ear from the depths of memory. He had sworn to himself that he would stop wavering, and yet he could not keep the hesitation from creeping back in.

Destroy every last enemy... and then what?

If he destroyed that man, destroyed Athrun, destroyed every Coordinator alive, would that bring the war to an end?

And after that... what would be left waiting for them?

Kira's thoughts were severed by an explosion, a deep, muffled concussion that rolled through the ship like a subterranean roar.

"What was that?!"

By the time the blast rolled through even the Archangel's living quarters as a low, shuddering thunder, Cagalli and the others had already witnessed the explosion with their own eyes.

As though some unseen hand had swept across the horizon, the entire minefield, every stretch of it visible to the naked eye, detonated in near-unison. A heartbeat later, the massive concussion came barreling through them, the ground shaking underfoot, and columns of black smoke surged upward until they choked out the sky. A wave of shock rippled through the resistance fighters.

Sahib stood tall in his buggy and bellowed,

"Don't panic! We haven't been hit!"

And he was right: beyond the mines themselves, they had sustained no damage. But the psychological toll was devastating.

"They took out that many mines... just like that?" One of the men breathed.

That alone was enough to impress on them the terrifying scope of the enemy's technical advantage. But what cut deeper, far deeper, was the realization that everything they had so painstakingly prepared, every strategy they had devised, had been read completely by the opposing side.

"Damn it...!"

Cagalli clenched her jaw until her teeth ached. The image of the enemy commander she had seen days ago, draped in that absurd, garish shirt, blazed across her mind alongside the faces of the comrades who had fallen.

That clown...?

Because she herself threw every fiber of her being into this fight, Cagalli could only see the Desert Tiger as a man who treated war like a diversion. And in truth, that assessment held. Waldfeld was not someone who fought because circumstances had cornered him, or because bare survival demanded it.

If Ahmed and the others had been killed as part of some game he was savoring, then the cruelty of it was beyond endurance.

And yet, at the same time, the encounter with that enemy commander had branded itself into her memory every bit as deeply as it had into Kira's. He was maddening, absurd, or so she insisted to herself, but there was no pretending away the overwhelming weight of his presence. That only stoked her fury hotter.

Sahib's voice carried to her once more.

"So... the Tiger has finally chosen to bare his fangs for real..."

That was exactly right.

Everything up to this point had been nothing but sport to him.

Cagalli shared the thought completely.

"But today, today I'll push him so far he has no choice but to fight in earnest."

"That's right! Launcher on Unit One, Sword on Unit Two!"

Mu snapped the orders into the internal comm as he pulled on his pilot suit.

"What do you mean, 'why'? Because swapping machines is faster than swapping packs!"

He was referring to the Skygrasper loadouts. If this engagement dragged on, Mu would also need to ferry replacement battery packs out to the Strike. Once that was done, it would obviously be quicker to have a second machine already fitted with the next pack and standing by than to waste time mounting one in the field. After shouting down some dense soul in the hangar, he killed the connection.

Over at the pilot lockers, Kira was rushing through his own change.

"Much as I hate putting it this way... resistance forces like theirs, to be blunt, aren't something we can rely on."

Mu said it without softening it. Kira gave a nod.

"Right."

The enemy would almost certainly commit every last resource at its disposal. Thinking of Waldfeld, Kira worked through the calculus. The man would have seen through it immediately, that they intended to break through the Lesseps by throwing the full weight of their forces into a single push. And if he had, then naturally he would answer in kind with everything he possessed. That was simply who he was.

"You keep it together out there."

Mu cuffed him lightly on the head and broke into a grin.

"Then again... the way you've been fighting lately, I probably don't even need to tell you."

As Mu stepped past him toward the door, a thought surfaced abruptly in Kira's mind.

"Commander... what's a berserker? Do you know?"

Mu turned back, eyeing him quizzically at the unexpected question.

"Berserker'? That'd be one of those frenzied warriors out of legend, wouldn't it?"

"Frenzied... warrior?"

"Yeah. The kind of person who might seem perfectly composed under normal circumstances, but the moment a fight breaks out, something takes hold, they go savage, like an entirely different human being. A terrifying kind of fighter."

A cold tremor sank through the pit of Kira's stomach. Waldfeld's voice returned to him.

No matter if you are a berserker...

A terrifying fighter, me?

The word refused to align with any image Kira held of himself. And yet in the same breath he remembered what he did once battle began. How he

fought. How many enemy machines he had already sent plunging to their destruction.

When he drove a saber through a mobile suit, no blood sprayed. No raw, visceral human sensation traveled back through the control levers and throttles beneath his hands. But every time a beam tore through a cockpit, Kira was undeniably extinguishing a life.

He had forgotten that.

Without even noticing, his heart had been ground down until nothing remained but the imperative to destroy the enemy and shield the people on his side. He had stopped feeling anything at all. The instant he climbed into the cockpit, Kira ceased to be Kira. He became an extension of the Strike, a component of a weapon. And Waldfeld had looked straight through to that truth, a truth Kira himself had never once recognized.

Terrifying, he thought.

Not that Waldfeld had perceived it so swiftly.

That he himself was terrifying.

"Where's this coming from all of a sudden?"

When Kira raised his head, Mu was watching him with a suspicious eye. Had he guessed, Mu, who could be uncannily perceptive at times, where Kira had encountered that word, from whose lips, and under what circumstances? Not wanting to give him cause for worry, Kira answered quickly,

"No, it's nothing... sorry..."

Mu still looked unconvinced, but at that moment Milly's voice broke over the shipwide speaker.

"Commander Flaga, Ensign Yamato, report to your assigned units."

"Oop—"

The instant Mu's attention shifted, Kira slipped out of the locker room. Berserker.

He did not want to become something like that. Forcing down the tremor that threatened to overtake his body, Kira ran for the catapult deck.

"R-radar—!"

Kuzzey choked the word out, his tongue tangling on itself in the grip of panic. A cluster of bright points had materialized on the radar display and were driving straight toward them. Tonomura stepped in.

"Unidentified contacts on radar, assessed as hostile aircraft! Heavy interference, cannot confirm numbers! Bearing one-three-zero!"

Chandra's voice rose in turn.

"Two large heat signatures trailing behind them! Profile matches an enemy carrier and destroyer!"

The Lesseps and her escorts, without question. As if announcing their approach, the combat helicopters had already grown visible to the naked eye. Murrue locked her gaze on them and gave the order to engage.

"Anti-air, anti-ship, anti-mobile suit combat, begin intercept!"

Natarle carried it forward and issued the follow-on command.

"Strike and Skygrasper, launch!"

The land battleship Lesseps, two hundred fifty meters stem to stern, sixty-four and a half meters of hull towering above the sand alone, resembled a fortress set in motion. Concealed beneath the sand at its base was a scale motor, a layered mechanism mimicking overlapping scales that vibrated at micro-fine intervals to liquefy the ground beneath it and, through calibrated adjustments, convert that effect into forward thrust. When it met bedrock, caterpillar treads deployed in place of the system. It was a warship engineered to dominate the desert's punishing conditions with staggering precision. Three twin forty-centimeter gun turrets crowned its bow and stern, five desert-torpedo tubes lined each flank, and thirty-two vertical missile launchers rounded out the armament; its destructive capacity was anything but trivial.

And now that colossal vessel was gliding across the sands toward the Archangel like a rattlesnake closing on its prey.

"You sure the Aile pack is the right choice here?!"

Without turning around, Kira answered Murdoch's sharp question as he sealed the hatch shut.

"BuCUEs need to be outmaneuvered, mobility matters more than raw firepower!"

To Murdoch, the Aile Striker, carrying nothing beyond a beam rifle and sabers, must have seemed dangerously light for atmospheric combat, where beam weapons suffered catastrophic efficiency losses. But Kira had learned in the very first ground engagement just how ravenously the Agni devoured energy, and beyond that, under gravity this oppressive, there was simply no way to swing a blade longer than the mobile suit itself and still match the pace of a nimble BuCUE.

"Skygrasper One, Flaga unit, launching!"

Mu's Skygrasper, the Launcher pack fitted to its rear hardpoints, streaked out ahead of him. Once the Aile Striker had been locked into place and the Strike rolled into launch position, Miri's voice came through on comms.

"Next up, Strike, you're clear to go!"

Berserker...

The word surfaced in his mind for a fleeting instant, but Kira shook his head as though casting it physically aside and shouted,

"Kira Yamato, launching!"

The linear catapult flung him forward, and a combat helicopter filled his view dead ahead. Its Vulcans opened up. Kira threw his shield into position barely in time to deflect the burst, then answered with a volley from the Igelstellung.

If I hesitate, I die!

At the periphery of his vision the helicopter they had just passed erupted into flame, and in the same breath Kira swept the full scope of the battlefield around him. In the distance, the massive land carrier Lesseps was already bearing down with a second ship in tow, while the sky churned with combat

helicopters, Agiles, and VTOL fighters designated Infestuses, massing around the Archangel like a flock converging on wounded prey. Launchers were firing from the resistance buggies below, and one helicopter buckled and fell, but it amounted to nothing more than a drop of water on scorching stone.

Mu's Skygrasper carved through in a vicious turn and tore into an Agile with sustained machine gun fire. In the span of a heartbeat, two helicopters took hits and spiraled earthward trailing ribbons of black smoke. The Hawk of Endymion, it appeared, had surrendered nothing of his edge by coming planetside.

Then the hatches along the Lesseps yawned open, and BuCUEs came pouring out.

The monitor snapped in on them, and Kira counted the contacts with the razor-sharp vision only a Coordinator possessed.

"Four... five of them?!"

Kira slammed the verniers wide and plunged headlong toward the battlefield.

By then, he had already sunk completely beneath the surface of the fight.

"Commander Waldfeld!"

The furious shout rang off the high ceiling of the hangar, and Waldfeld turned. He was already suited up, pilot gear in a blinding orange slashed with black stripes, the helmet adorned with a set of painted fangs in a design that was unmistakably meant to invoke a tiger. Bearing down on him from the rear of the hangar came the young pilots from the Le Creuset team. Yzak's voice cut sharp with indignation.

"This is unacceptable! Why have we been assigned to defensive positions aboard the Lesseps?!"

Waldfeld offered nothing more than a shrug, letting the boy's fury break against him like a wave.

"Well, well. In the Le Creuset team, is it standard practice for subordinates to challenge an officer's orders this way?"

The remark knocked some of the momentum out of Yzak's charge.

"No... but still! We have more combat experience against that ship than anyone—"

"You mean more experience being defeated by it."

It was Aisha, standing at Waldfeld's side, who delivered the cut. She too was dressed for deployment, wearing a pilot suit in pale pink.

"What did you just say?!"

Yzak bristled the instant the words left her mouth.

"Aisha."

When Waldfeld reined her in with a single word, she turned aside with an airy, "My apologies," though nothing in her expression suggested the faintest contrition. Waldfeld returned his attention to the two outsiders.



"Your machines are built for artillery engagement. They won't be able to match the pace of BuCUEs in high-speed maneuver combat."

"That's not—!"

Yzak was still pressing forward when Dearka caught his shoulder and held him back.

"That's enough, Yzak. Orders are orders. Let it go."

Whether his motive was simply to prevent them from pushing any further and earning a mark for insubordination, Waldfeld had already sized the blond boy up as the calculating type, or whether he genuinely saw no profit in continuing the argument, Dearka hauled his partner away. As they retreated, he murmured something low to Yzak, no doubt trying to bring him around to reason. In the chaos of a full-scale melee, after all, nobody would be paying close attention to who was where. And if they distinguished themselves in the fighting, a little disregard for orders could easily be forgiven.

Well. So be it.

"Though what that boy pulled off... isn't exactly the kind of thing just anyone can manage."

Waldfeld said it under his breath as he made his way toward his machine. If those boys possessed the skill to rewrite contact-pressure programs in the heat of combat, then they were welcome to chase all the glory they pleased. As long as they stayed clear of his quarry.

Aisha, who had caught the murmur, let slip a quiet laugh and took hold of the access ladder. As the two of them rode upward toward the cockpit, Waldfeld allowed himself a smile as well.

"Am I letting myself get a bit too wrapped up in this?"

"No," Aisha answered lightly. "But he's still the enemy."

"Yes. I'm aware."

That was precisely what made the anticipation almost unbearable. By some stroke of fortune or misfortune for them both, that boy was an enemy. And because he was an enemy, he was capable of stirring Waldfeld to this degree.

The two of them settled into the cockpit of their beloved machine. Finished in a flamboyant orange, the beast-shaped unit was Waldfeld's custom TMF/A-803 LaGOWE, a heavily enhanced variant developed on the BuCUE chassis. A twin beam cannon rode its back, while a beam saber was mounted in a way that gave the impression of being clenched between the machine's jaws. That saber had been completed using the one stripped from the Earth Alliance's captured Duel as its foundation. Until now, ZAFT's own engineering had not succeeded in miniaturizing beam weaponry to that scale, and so, in a bitter twist of irony, they had ended up repurposing the very innovations from a mobile suit the Naturals had built by following their lead.

In the tandem cockpit configuration, the gunner occupied the forward seat and the pilot the rear. Aisha slid smoothly into the front position. Remarkably, when it came to marksmanship, she was exceptional, skilled

enough to hold her own alongside any pilot in the unit. Given that she too was a Coordinator, perhaps that should not have come as a surprise. But the capacity to read a target, lock it in her sights, and squeeze the trigger without a moment's hesitation, perhaps that, above all else, was a quality uniquely her own as a woman.

"Right, then. The ship's yours, DaCosta."

"Yes, sir!"

On the monitor, DaCosta's expression hovered at the edge of pained reluctance, yet beneath it lay a glint of unmistakable satisfaction. For all his habitual insistence that a commanding officer had no business riding to the front lines in person, it was clear that even to DaCosta, Waldfeld looked most himself when seated in a mobile suit's cockpit.

Waldfeld set his gaze dead ahead.

"Waldfeld, LaGOWE, moving out!"

"Gottfried, Valiant, fire!"

Natarle's command cut across the Archangel's bridge. Heavy salvos thundered toward the enemy ships, but their own vessel was absorbing punishment in return, the hull buckling under a near-constant barrage of impacts large and small.

Beyond the hull, the resistance buggies fought with everything they had, training launchers and bazookas on the combat helicopters slicing overhead in an effort to shield the ship. The bulk of ZAFT's assault was concentrated on the Archangel, the greater threat and the more conspicuous target, while the five BuCUEs were being pinned down by the Strike.

A missile streaking from one of the buggies tore a combat helicopter out of the air. The resistance fighters erupted in triumph, only to be hurled apart an instant later by an incoming missile's detonation.

"ECM and ECCM output up seventeen percent!"

Sai, released from confinement, called out as he tracked the instruments. Then Pal, manning fire control, raised his own voice in report.

"Valiant barrel temperature approaching critical threshold!"

At that, Natarle wheeled sharply toward Murrue.

"Captain! Requesting authorization to deploy the Lohengrin!"

"No!"

Murrue's refusal was immediate, startled and absolute.

"The contamination damage to the surface would be catastrophic!"

"But—!"

"Compensate with Valiant output adjustments and charge cycling!"

Frustration darkened Natarle's face, but Murrue shut her down before she could push the argument any further.

"That is an order!"

"Understood."

Natarle yielded, though not without reluctance. To her ears, Murrue's words undoubtedly rang like noble ideals, softness indulged in the thick of

battle. She was most likely thinking that if the ship went down because of such principles, every one of them would have died for nothing.

Then, amid the pandemonium, the Skygrasper poured concentrated fire into the destroyer, and a vicious beam from the Agni punched clean through a ZuOOT stationed as a gun platform on the deck, burying itself deep in the vessel's hull. A heartbeat later a chain of savage secondary explosions ripped through the ship, and the destroyer bled speed and peeled away.

"We got it!"

The enemy vessel's retreat sent a jolt of elation through the Archangel's bridge.

But then a brutal concussion hammered upward through the ship from astern.

"What—?!"

Tonomura caught himself against his console, swung toward the radar, and drew a sharp breath.

"S-six o'clock, another ship contact?! Enemy vessel—!"

"What?!"

Murrue turned instinctively toward CIC. Six o'clock, dead astern. Natarle clenched her jaw.

"They had another one hidden?"

Yes, of course. Murrue bit down on the same bitter recognition. Their opponent was the Desert Tiger. He was never going to be that straightforward. He had committed one force in plain view, letting them believe they understood the shape of the attack, while a second vessel had concealed itself before the engagement even started, lying in wait to catch the Archangel in a closing vice.

A coordinated salvo from the rear came screaming toward the Archangel.

"Ship guns, on direct-impact trajectory!"

Tonomura shouted, and Murrue and Natarle cried out in the same breath.

"Evade!"

"Intercept them!"

But neither command could be carried out in time, and several missiles found their mark.

"Keh!"

The Archangel pitched violently under the hits and plowed headlong into the ruins of the Talpatia industrial sector. Once, this complex had served as a facility for mining and refining rare metals. Now it sat abandoned to the desert. The half-buried structures, already nearly consumed by drifting sand, were crushed aside beneath the roar of the Archangel's enormous hull, which carved through them and ground to a halt as though wedged into the wreckage.

The moment the Archangel ceased moving, enemy fire converged on her without mercy.

Inside the shuddering ship, Natarle barked commands for desperate resistance.

"Helldart, Korinthos, fire!"

"Th-this is—!"

Tomomura, who had been processing the incoming ship data, suddenly cried out as though struck.

"Confirmed on the Lesseps' deck, Duel and Buster!"

"What?!"

Every officer on the bridge struggled to believe what they had just heard.

All the way out here...?

A spike of dread shot through Murrue, and she shouted toward Neumann in the helm seat.

"Thrusters to maximum! Get us off the ground! We can't bring the Gottfried to bear in this position!"

"I'm trying!"

Neumann shouted back, his frustration raw and undisguised.

"But the hull's snagged on something!"

When they had crashed, one of the Archangel's wings had driven into the steel framework of a ruined building, locking the ship in place. Pinned like that, they could neither dodge incoming fire nor even train the main batteries on target.

Then another enemy round hammered into them, and the ship convulsed under a deafening blast and a shock so violent it felt as though the world were tearing itself in two.

A terrible premonition bled cold through every spine on the bridge.

"Are we going to lose... here... in the middle of the desert?"

In a place like this, unable even to send word to friendly forces, were they simply going to disappear without anyone ever knowing they had been here at all?

The Strike and a BuCUE crossed paths in midair.

A fraction of a second later the Strike touched down, and the BuCUE, split cleanly in two by the beam saber, detonated behind it. Without even a breath's pause, Kira flung the saber still gripped in his hand. It drove itself into the mono-eye of another BuCUE; stripped of its camera, the machine locked up for the barest instant, and Kira finished it with his rifle. The beam punched straight through, and amid a savage cascade of secondary explosions, the last of the enemy units tore itself apart.

Kira had somehow managed to beat back all five BuCUEs, and inside the cockpit he was gasping, dragging at the air.

Then it happened.

The Archangel took bombardment from astern.

"Damn it! The Archangel—!"

Kira spun in alarm, trying to race back and shield her, but a beam lanced at him from out of nowhere, and he barely got his shield up to absorb it.

"What—?!"

He had destroyed every last BuCUE.

When Kira turned to look, what confronted him was an orange machine unlike anything he had ever encountered. It bore a resemblance to a BuCUE,

but rising from its head was a crest reminiscent of a GINN, and flanking its snout gleamed the edges of beam sabers, mounted as if clenched between its jaws. Its movements were unmistakably a class above every BuCUE he had fought until now.

"A commander's unit? Is that him?!"

The face of the enemy commander he had met days ago blazed across Kira's mind.

As beam fire raked toward him without reprieve, Kira wrenched himself behind his shield and answered with his rifle.

"I see. He handles well."

Without lifting her eye from the targeting scope, Aisha remarked in an unhurried tone. At the LaGOWE's controls, Waldfeld replied with open pleasure threading through his voice.

"Doesn't he?"

"He's composed today, but the last engagement was even more remarkable."

That drew a low laugh from Aisha.

"Why do you sound so pleased about it?"

A reasonable question. Because of that boy, Waldfeld had lost ten pilots. Every one of them a capable young man with a life still ahead of him. And yet here he sat, extolling the prowess of an enemy.

Then, almost as though speaking to herself, Aisha said quietly,

"It's hard on you, isn't it, Andy... You've always had a weakness for boys like that."

For an instant, the words pierced Waldfeld clean through the chest.

"Are you lonely, then?"

The boy's face surfaced in his memory, young, unguarded, defenseless in the moment he had lifted his eyes in surprise at that question. Some lingering thread of hesitation compelled Waldfeld to ask, almost against his own will.

"Do you think he'd accept a surrender?"

Aisha answered without the slightest pause.

"No."

Waldfeld smiled.

Of course not.

Anything less would have been a disappointment.

"The Archangel!"

Cagalli and Kisaka brought their buggy skidding to a halt at the sight of the Archangel, jammed into the skeletal ruins of the old factory and locked in place.

"Did they knock out the engines?! She's a sitting target at this rate!"

Kisaka snapped his head around, scanning for the Strike, and in that split second of diverted attention, Cagalli vaulted from the vehicle and bolted toward the Archangel.

"Cagalli!"

Kisaka registered what she'd done a beat too late and moved immediately to follow, but an explosion tore open the ground in front of him and cut off his path, widening the gap between them even further. By the time he fought clear, Cagalli had already thrown herself through a hatch and disappeared inside the Archangel.

When she came tearing into the hangar, Murdoch's eyes went wide enough to fall out of his skull.

"Hey, what the, missy?!"

Without sparing him so much as a look, Cagalli sprinted straight for Skygrasper Unit Two and scaled the access ladder in a blur.

"What do you think you're doing?! Hey, missy!"

"You're going to leave a machine sitting here doing nothing in a situation like this?!"

She hurled the words back at Murdoch's rebuke as she powered up the engines and ran through the instruments.

"I'm taking this out!"

"What did you just say?!"

Not a chance in hell, Murdoch thought, and rushed around in front of the craft as though he meant to block it with his own body. Cagalli sealed the canopy shut and shouted through the external speaker.

"Get out of the way! Unless you want to get blown off your feet!"

The other mechanics, drawn by the uproar, came hurrying over in alarm, only to throw themselves backward at her warning.

"Open the hatch!"

"Oh, for the love of—kids these days!"

Murdoch tore at his hair in anguish over his precious machine, but when Cagalli had already begun lifting the craft off the deck and the jet wash started lashing the air into a storm, he finally caved and roared,

"Open it up for her! And if you wreck my bird, I'll have your hide!"

That was the last thing he managed to get out before the blast doors clamped shut behind her and the jet shield locked into position at the Skygrasper's tail. The instant the catapult launched her forward, the G-force crushed the air from her lungs. It felt as though she herself had become an arrow fired dead straight from the bowstring. Then, only a moment later, the sensation of the horizon unfurling around her in a full three-hundred-sixty-degree sweep made her seize the control stick with both hands in shock.

Cagalli was airborne.

Tense, she moved the stick rigidly at first, and the mass of the Schwert Gewehr mounted on the Sword pack dragged the craft slightly to the right, but the machine answered her inputs exactly as it had in the simulator, climbing cleanly. That alone was enough to steel her nerve.

"Skygrasper Unit Two has launched?!"

"What? Commander Flaga is?"

"Hey! Who's at the controls of Unit Two?!"

Then the Commander Flaga in question broke in on the channel himself, and somewhere on the bridge someone could be heard catching their breath.

Cagalli shouted,

"It's me! Cagalli Yula!"

And without pausing for a response, she rolled hard toward the Lesseps, already under assault from Unit One. The two Skygraspers traced sweeping arcs through the air like hawks stooping on prey and fell upon the massive carrier. Cagalli pulled the trigger. The Vulcans raked fire across the deck and struck the main gun. A heartbeat later it blew apart, and Mu let out a whistle.

"Not bad, missy! Just don't get yourself shot down!"

The stiffness she had shown at the start was already gone. Cagalli handled the craft precisely as she willed it and pulled back into a climb.

The two fighters caught the light as they banked, then plunged toward the second destroyer. Unit One's Agni blazed from its launcher mount; Unit Two fired its anchor, the Panzer Eisen, into the hull, then used the embedded point as a fulcrum to whip sharply around and shear through a gun turret with the sword.

"How do you like that?!"

Cagalli screamed in triumph. This was for Ahmed, for every one of the others who had been killed. She drove the machine as though she meant to repay in a single ferocious burst every indignity they had endured.

But as Unit Two banked away, anti-air missiles streaked up from the destroyer in pursuit and clipped the craft.

"Damn it!"

By luck it wasn't a direct hit, but the missile detonated close enough to damage the Skygrasper's right engine, and black smoke began streaming from the fuselage. Thrust bled away at a sickening rate.

"Damn!"

Cagalli drove her fist into the console in frustration. She had been doing so well!

But almost immediately even that luxury was stolen from her, every ounce of her strength consumed by the dying controls. Wrenching the unresponsive stick back with everything she had, she managed, barely, to wrestle the crippled craft down into a rough emergency landing on the desert floor.

An enemy naval shell detonated near the Archangel's bridge. The blast shorted out the electrical systems, sending showers of sparks erupting from the consoles and tearing screams from everyone around them.

The Archangel remained trapped. For some time now Neumann had been cycling through one thruster after another in a desperate bid to lift the ship, but all it produced was the shriek of metal straining against metal; the hull refused to break free.

Then, by sheer chance, a beam fired from the Buster grazed the ship and obliterated a section of the ruined structure hemming them in.

"It missed!"

The cry that tore from Neumann was closer to a cheer than a report. He hauled on the controls. Shedding loose chunks of wreckage, the Archangel's vast body began to climb.

Murrue gave the order instantly.

"Starboard sixty degrees. Natarle!"

Natarle was already there.

"Gottfried, acquire target!"

Their field of vision opened wide, and there, adrift on the sea of sand, sat the giant carrier.

"Fire!"

The Archangel's primary armament, the twin 225-centimeter high-energy convergent beam cannons, Gottfried Mk.71, roared to life.

The Buster, stationed on the Lesseps' deck, threw itself clear and dodged the line of fire. The dense column of thermal energy punched clean through the Lesseps' aft main turret; a ZuOOT positioned nearby was swallowed by the blast, detonated, and disappeared inside a blooming fireball of cascading secondary explosions.

Black smoke poured from the Lesseps, and the ship ground to a standstill on the sand sea as though it had run aground.

With no attention to spare for the battle raging around him, Kira held his own in an even contest against the LaGOWE.

A beam lanced from the LaGOWE's gunport; Kira caught it on his shield, and the Strike vaulted high into the air. As though it had read the move exactly, the LaGOWE launched itself skyward in pursuit. Kira fired at the enemy machine mid-flight, but it kicked its verniers, slipped cleanly aside, and drove straight at the Strike. A foreleg came crashing down, and the Strike was hurled tumbling away.

"He's strong!"

Kira wrestled the machine upright and, chest heaving, locked his gaze on the enemy. Its power existed on an entirely different plane from the BuCUEs. And its pilot wielded that power brilliantly, boxing Kira in with movements that turned erratic at precisely the worst moments.

Then how do you decide who wins and who loses?

It was as though Waldfeld's question had reached his ears again.

"Where do you call it an end? Destroy every last enemy?"

Was that truly the only conclusion the world would permit? Was that what it meant to fight?

But I...

Still torn, Kira flicked his eyes to the gauges, and went cold.

His remaining power was critically low.

One way or another, there was no time left to waver.

Inside the LaGOWE's cockpit, Aisha caught sight of the Lesseps trailing black smoke.

"This is bad, Andy."

Waldfeld clicked his tongue.

"That damned Legged Ship! After everything we threw at it, it's still in the air?!"

The Archangel, which should have been moments from destruction, had lifted off again, while their own ship was hemorrhaging smoke at an alarming rate. They had no BuCUEs left in reserve. As for the Duel and the Buster, whether they had escaped the burning deck or simply tried to get a jump on everyone else was impossible to say, but both machines were now earthbound. Pitifully, both appeared to be struggling with sand giving way beneath their feet. At this rate they might not have managed even against the resistance buggies.

As the momentum of battle reversed before he could grasp it, Waldfeld clenched his jaw and pressed the LaGOWE forward. He moved to close on the Strike, and took a hit instead, a shot slamming into the foreleg. He jettisoned the ruined section without hesitation.

"Don't lose your composure! You'll be beaten!"

Aisha's voice snapped at him like a reprimand. Waldfeld snarled back.

"I know!"

The instant the Strike brought its rifle up, Aisha's shot found its mark and blew the weapon apart. Just in time, the Strike released the shattered rifle and threw up its shield for cover. The LaGOWE surged into the opening. The Strike drew its beam saber.

For one suspended instant, the two shadows merged into one, then they broke apart.

One of the LaGOWE's beam cannons had been sheared through and detonated. Waldfeld disengaged by the thinnest margin imaginable and landed.

This was roughly where it ended.

He opened a comm channel.

"DaCosta."

"Commander!"

DaCosta, still aboard the crippled Lesseps, appeared on the monitor. His adjutant's face was hollowed with exhaustion and sharpened by the strain of combat, but the instant Waldfeld's voice reached him, his eyes came alive. Seeing that, Waldfeld was struck by how deeply he pitied the man, and every last one of his soldiers.

DaCosta was waiting for the words that would make it right.

If Waldfeld gave an order, everything would somehow fall into place. The tide could still be turned. Of course it could. He was the Desert Tiger.

Feeling the blind conviction of his men settle onto his shoulders, Waldfeld spoke.

"Give the order to abandon ship."

DaCosta's breath caught audibly on the monitor.

"The outcome is decided. Rally the surviving troops, withdraw to Banadiya, and make contact with Gibraltar."

"Comman—!"

He had delivered it all in a single breath, and though DaCosta was already crying out in protest, Waldfeld severed the connection without hearing him out. He felt for them, but there was nothing to be done. They would have to find their own way forward.

Because Waldfeld had discovered something truly worth his attention.

Then he spoke to Aisha in the forward seat.

"You get out too, Aisha."

She glanced back at him, shrugged, and smiled.

"I'd rather die."

The words pulled an involuntary smile onto Waldfeld's face.

Only in that moment did he feel he truly understood what those words meant.

I'd rather die.

"You're a fool too."

When he said it, Aisha answered with a luminous smile.

"Call it whatever you like."

After fixing the smile of the woman he loved in his eyes one final time, he turned his gaze forward.

"Then stay with me."

The LaGOWE shot forward like a bullet.

"Calling Waldfeld!"

Kira opened a comm channel and called out to the LaGOWE, still driving toward him even after losing its beam cannon.

"Not yet, boy—!"

A deep voice he recognized instantly answered through the speaker, roughened now by static.

"Please stop! It's over! The battle's been decided! Surrender!"

The Archangel was safe. The Lesseps and the handful of ships still alongside her were already in no state to continue fighting. By now, the only ones still locked in combat were the two of them.

The LaGOWE launched itself straight at him and tried to tear the Strike apart with the beam saber clenched in its jaws.

"Didn't I tell you? There are no neat rules for how a war comes to an end!"

The words struck Kira with the force of a blow. He wrenched clear of the saber and carved back in passing with the Strike's own beam blade.

"Waldfeld!"

One of the Aile Striker's wing tips was sheared off and went spinning through the air. In the same stroke, one of the LaGOWE's beam sabers and a section of its wing were severed by Kira's blade and went tumbling across the sand. Then, the warning alarm shrieked.

The Phase Shift faded out.

The beam edge of Kira's saber winked out of existence.



Savage sparks erupted from the LaGOWE's back, confirming that the other machine had sustained critical damage as well. But Waldfeld, handling the LaGOWE as though it were still whole, swept it around across the sand and came at him once more without the faintest trace of weakness, despite having already lost a leg.

"What else can we do but fight? So long as we are enemies, this only ends when one of us is destroyed!"

That time, before, he had put his gun away.

But this was the battlefield.

Until one of us is destroyed...

Kira force-ejected the Aile equipment, then cast away the shield as well. The Strike's weight dropped instantly. In the same motion he deployed the Armor Schneider and gripped it in both hands.

The LaGOWE was nearly on top of him.

There was no time left to hesitate.

The Strike absorbed the collision and was flung violently backward, but by then, the knife had already been buried in the LaGOWE's neck.

Kira hit the sand hard and let out a groan.

The LaGOWE still filled his monitor. The single beam saber it had left guttered, then died as though the air itself were drinking it away. The orange machine sank onto the sand with a motion disturbingly like something alive collapsing. Kira stared, eyes wide, at the violent shower of sparks erupting from the base of the knife driven into it.

Waldfeld watched, almost mesmerized, as the woman in the forward seat tore off her harness and rose.

Aisha spun to face him.

"Andy!"

She had to be on the verge of tears. That was what Waldfeld thought.

And once again, he was wrong.

She turned toward him and spread her lovely arms wide. On her face was a clear, luminous smile, almost transparent in its purity.

Waldfeld stood as well and drew her into his arms.

Far too fine a woman for someone like him.

To die alongside a woman like this, really, life was a wonderful thing.

What had she ever seen in him, anyway? Now that he thought about it, he had never once asked...

Before the question could reach his lips, a violent explosion flooded his vision with white and swept everything away, his words, his thoughts, and the beautiful face smiling before him.

An enormous fireball lit the sand sea in a fierce red blaze.

Inside the fallen Strike, Kira could not pull his eyes from the monitor. Tears spilled over and streaked down his cheeks, and the crimson flames wavered and swam before him.

"I..."

He had not wanted to kill.

He was not fighting so that he could kill.

And yet...

The tears kept falling, one after another, soaking his face. It felt as though life itself were draining out of him, carrying away what little strength remained.

There are no rules in war. You can only keep fighting until one side is destroyed.

If that was truly the way of it, then how long would he have to go on taking lives?

And what waited on the other side?

That man had refused surrender and died.

In his final moment, what had he seen?

And beyond all of this, what had he been looking toward?

If Kira could understand that, would it hurt even a little less?

Would he find some way to stop these tears?

"To the Desert Dawn."

Answering the cup Sahib raised, Murrue lifted her own.

"To the future we won."

"Well then... let's go with that."

Mu concluded to no particular purpose, and the four of them, Natarle included, touched their cups together. Natarle took a hasty swallow and nearly choked on the strength of the liquor. Watching Murrue knock back the same drink in a single clean tilt, she stared at her captain in open disbelief, while Sahib laughed with a warmth and ease he had never once shown them before.

Before the rock mountain that sheltered the resistance stronghold, a great bonfire roared, and the people danced through the haze of victory and drink. Watching them, Mu spoke.

"Still, the road ahead's no easier for you."

Cup in hand, he gave a shrug.

"Even with the Tiger gone, ZAFT isn't just going to disappear from this region. They want those mines, don't they? The next wave won't be long in coming."

It was the kind of remark that might have dimmed a victory celebration, but no one present faulted him for it.

Because it was the truth.

Sahib set down his cup and took up the rifle lying beside him.

"When that day comes... we fight again."

As their forefathers had before them.

"We'll keep fighting. Against anyone who would grind us beneath their heel..."

Murrue regarded the proud warrior of the desert with profound respect in her eyes. People fought for every kind of reason. Dreaming that someday a world without war might exist.

These people would never submit.
Not until the day they reclaimed their ancestral land with their own hands.
And she, too, would never submit. No matter what ordeals lay ahead, even if she herself were to fall along the way...

"Father."

Yaru approached and called to him softly.

"The elder says it's time for the prayer to send the warriors on."

They rose. The dead would be sent forward, and the living would reaffirm the purpose they had inherited.

Mu's voice floated out in a quiet murmur.

"So they'll go on fighting... huh..."

A funeral volley cracked through the valley, and the names of the fallen were spoken aloud. The echoes that returned from the cliff walls sounded almost like answers drifting back from the land of the dead.

Murrue raised her eyes to the night sky where the blank rounds burst overhead.

The stars, scattered thick across the heavens, watched the course of their lives with cold, unblinking eyes.

To be continued in Volume.03

Seiji Takeda

Mainichi Broadcasting – Producer

Of all the technologies born in the last century, when science and engineering advanced at breakneck speed, the one that served as the greatest driving force was probably nuclear technology in its many forms, including fission. It came saddled, of course, with that hideous runaway by-product known as the atomic bomb, but risk is the inevitable companion of civilization's progress.

What is expected to pull this century's industries forward in a major way is genome-related technology at the genetic level, yet this too, like nuclear technology before it, carries within it the danger of technology running out of control. Genetic manipulation, human cloning, and other issues surrounding DNA have suddenly taken on a heightened urgency with the arrival of the twenty-first century.

In ***Gundam SEED*** as well, the fundamental structure of conflict is built around the antagonism between the highly capable, genetically modified Coordinators and the naturally born Naturals. The reason for deliberately weaving the problem of genetics into the theme of the anime in this way is that we felt a moment was fast approaching when humanity would be unable to avoid confronting essential questions at the heart of being alive itself: human life in its very substance, the quality of that life, and ultimately what happiness even is. Because it is such an extraordinarily delicate theme, it must be handled with great care, and throughout production we have continued advancing the story only through fierce, unrelenting debate among the director, the writers, and the rest of the creative staff.

Take the Coordinators who appear in the work, for example. They are written with the setting that their birthrate declines with each passing generation. At the same time, one also cannot dismiss the possibility that the ZAFT military could be wiped out by the spread of a virus resistant to certain drugs. Thanks to genetic manipulation, the Coordinators display exceptional adaptability to the environment of their own era, but once that environment changes drastically, there is no guarantee they will be able to respond successfully, because they have already lost diversity at the genetic level. More than that, the possibility even emerges that they could face extinction.

On the other hand, there are many documented cases in which genetic traits that normally appear to be nothing but negative factors in everyday life perform an important role in preserving a species under crisis conditions. Sick-cell blood traits, for instance, found in people who do not contract malaria, are ordinarily a negative hereditary factor that causes anemia, yet

the malaria parasite cannot take hold in them. Likewise, there are many people in Europe who possess genes that make them remarkably resistant to the dehydration caused by cholera or plague; these are genes that survived from eras in the past when such infectious diseases raged with exceptional severity, though in modern daily life they function as little more than a negative factor.

In other words, a world that has lost diversity, like the society of Coordinators to which Athrun and the others belong, may appear wonderful at first glance, but when considered along a long historical axis, it can never promise a truly rich future. Rather, it is a fragile, perilous, unstable existence.

On the Earth today there are many races, religions, nations, ideologies, and many different value systems. A world like that is what ought to be called healthy, and yet human beings inevitably find points of difference and turn them into material for conflict. That is how the sparks of strife are born. If eliminating diversity is dangerous in the extreme even at the level of genetics, then refusing to acknowledge difference in human life and trying to remove it cannot possibly be called the act of a civilized people.

Only by recognizing the ways in which others differ from us, and choosing to live together in spite of them, can a rich world come into view. Perhaps what has been lost in the modern age is precisely that simple truth.

Tragically, the American and British forces have moved ahead with an attack on Iraq, and Japan too has ended up lending its support without any truly full-scale public debate. It is surely obvious that this war is producing new hatred and increasing the number of future seeds of conflict.

Gundam SEED is infused with Director Fukuda's and series composer Morosawa's powerful determination to convey fully the emptiness of fighting, and the futility of the endless chain by which war perpetuates hatred without end. More than an anti-war statement, it carries a fierce message that war can only be ended by not fighting in the first place, that is, only through non-belligerence. I believe that message will reach both television viewers and the readers of this book.

Finally, I close with the hope that this anime may serve as a touchstone for thinking about such issues as runaway science and technology and the reality of war, and I would like to quote the words of George Orwell, who entered the Spanish Civil War as a British volunteer and fought against Franco's dictatorship.

In his reportage ***Homage to Catalonia***, when asked, "Why do you fight?" he answers, "For common decency."

"Common decency" has been rendered in Japanese as "for a humanity that belongs to all," decency being a word that signifies human dignity, human nature, the things required to live as a human being ought to live, and the keyword that stands in, more than any other, for the whole of Orwell's thought.

What ***Gundam SEED*** seeks to convey goes one step further: that if this decency is to be protected, then fighting is not the answer, there can be no method except preventing war from breaking out in the first place.

Unless people come to feel that conflict can never be eradicated so long as we do not seek solutions through dialogue and mutual understanding, it would be impossible to call that conflict ended; if they can take that truth away from this work, then as creators, nothing could make us happier.