

MOBILE SUIT **GUNDAM** ^{シード}SEED



NATION OF PEACE

TRANSLATION BY **ZEONICSCANLATIONS**

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3

MOBILE SUIT
GUNDAM SEED シード

NATION OF PEACE





TABLE OF CONTENTS

Phase.00		015
Phase.01		017
Phase.02		043
Phase.03		062
Phase.04		112
Phase.05		141
Commentary		164

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.

DESERT DAWN

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

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

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 Elsmar: 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.

ORB UNION

Uzumi Nara Athha: The former Chief Representative of Orb. A scandal forced his resignation, but his influence over the nation's affairs remains formidable.

Asagi Caldwell: An officer in the Orb armed forces, one of three young women entrusted with the demanding work of test-piloting the M1 Astray.

Mayura Labatt: An Orb military officer who shares M1 Astray test-pilot duties with Asagi and Juri, the third member of the trio.

Juri Wu Nien: An officer in the Orb military, contributing to the M1 Astray program as one of its dedicated test pilots.

Homura: Uzumi's younger brother, who stepped into the role of Chief Representative after his brothers departure from office.

Erica Simmons: The Chief Engineer of Morgenroete, Orb's state-run defense and technology firm. A woman of exceptional talent, she is one of the driving forces behind the M1 Astray's development.

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

MOBILE SUIT SUPPORT AERIAL MANEUVER CRAFT *Guul*

An unmanned transport aircraft operated by ZAFT for use within the atmosphere. It supports mobile suits that lack flight capability by carrying them on its upper fuselage. This dramatically improves the mobility and operational range of the mobile suits it services.

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)

MBF-M1 M1 ASTRAY

A mass-production mobile suit fielded by the Orb military. It is being built in secret at Morgenroete as the means by which Orb intends to enforce its national sovereignty. Like the X-Numbers, the M1 incorporates OS data fed back from prototypes that were being developed at Heliopolis. However, the machine remains extremely difficult for Naturals to pilot, and it is far from ready for combat deployment.

Overall Height: 17.53m

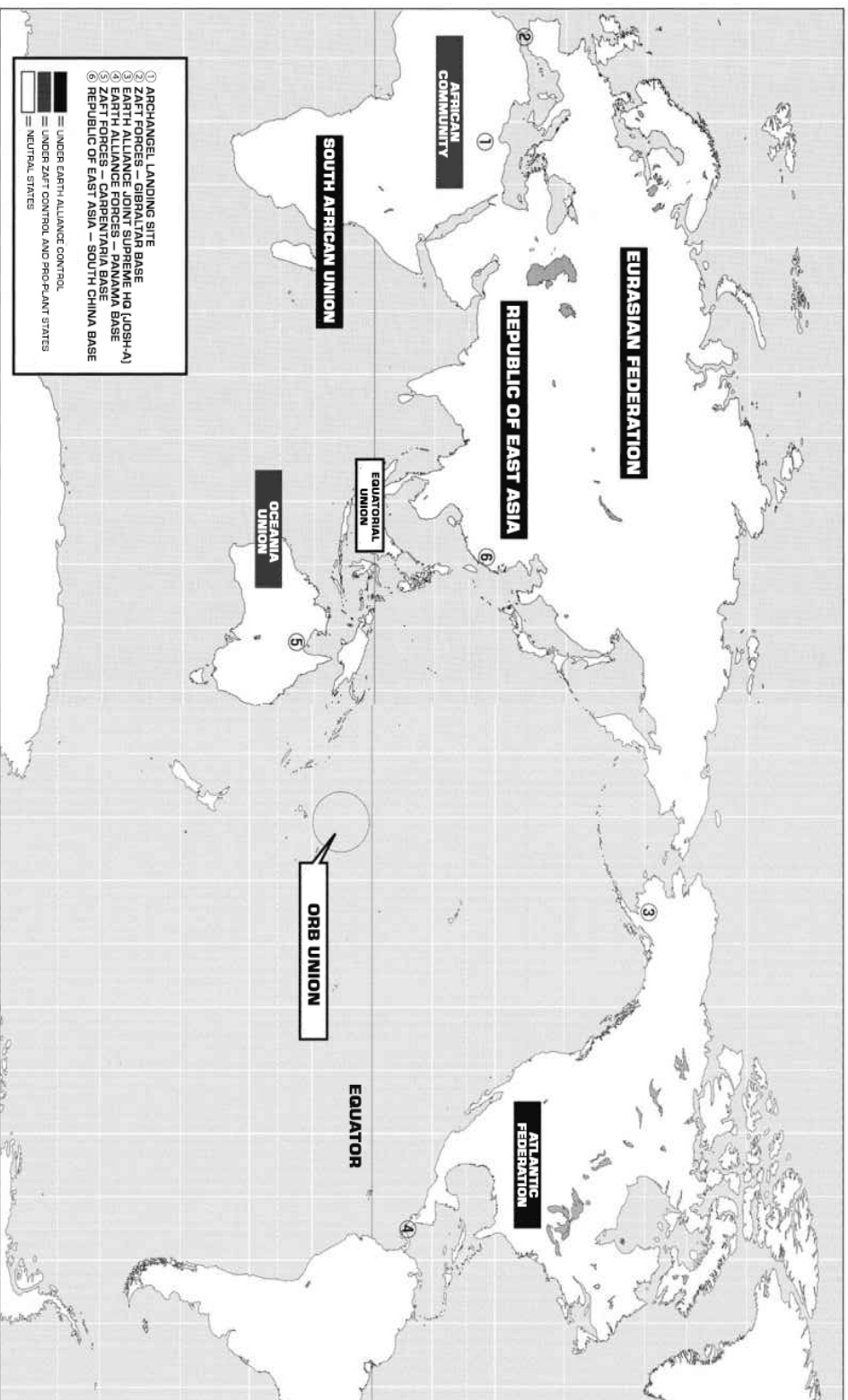
Weight: 53.5t

Armament:

75mm anti-air automatic vulcan turret system *Igelstellung*

Type 71 beam rifle

Type 70 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.

With Lacus safe beside him, Athrun turns to Kira and calls out to him.

"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. Unable to abandon the Strike as it plummets under the pull of Earth's gravity, Murrue abandons the Alaska descent course and chooses an entry trajectory that will recover the Strike. The Strike is secured, but the Archangel's landing zone turns out to be the desert of northern Africa, deep inside ZAFT-controlled territory.

Can a single ship reach Alaska from here?

The Archangel commits to a seemingly hopeless breakthrough. Standing in its path is ZAFT's celebrated commander, Andrew Waldfeld. Guerrilla fighters resisting ZAFT come to Kira's rescue as he struggles in the desert battles. Joining forces with the guerrillas, the Archangel sends a supply team into a nearby town, and Kira, accompanying them, happens to encounter Waldfeld himself. Waldfeld, who holds Kira's abilities in high regard, treats him not as an enemy but as a fellow human being, and poses a question:

How do you think this war can be ended?

Until now, Kira has been too consumed by fending off each successive attack to think about anything beyond survival. The question leaves him at a loss. Without finding an answer, Kira meets Waldfeld on the battlefield once more. Is killing the only way to end a fight? Drawn to Waldfeld even as an enemy commander, Kira defeats him, in anguish, weeping as he does so.

Phase.00

Long before the first mobile suit ever stood upright on a battlefield, the technology that would give rise to it was already at work in loading docks and cargo bays, industrial power loaders, nothing more. No one could have imagined that these crude machines, barely a step above forklifts, fitted with a pair of grasping arms and a set of legs for traversing ground too broken for wheeled vehicles, would someday become the defining weapons of a conflict that consumed the entire Earth Sphere.

What makes a mobile suit so formidable is the sum of its parts: articulated joints engineered for seamless, fluid movement; manipulator hands precise enough to grip and deploy an enormous variety of armaments; and bipedal legs capable of finding purchase on virtually any surface. The engineers of the PLANTs who conceived this machine, what might justly be called the supreme general-purpose weapon, were convinced that whatever platform could dominate combat in space would dictate the outcome of the war itself. Such a platform had to outfly a fighter, match the firepower of a capital ship, and carry armor heavier than anything a tank could offer.

From that ambition, the humanoid weapon was born. These machines rendered obsolete the mobile armors that had until then formed the backbone of every fighting force. In the conflict between the Earth Alliance and the PLANTs, a war in which the Alliance ought to have enjoyed a crushing numerical advantage, they performed with such staggering effectiveness that they upended the entire strategic calculus.

Yet even the engineers who built them had failed to foresee one thing. The weapon they had designed expressly for the vacuum of space proved startlingly adaptable within Earth's own atmosphere. When ZAFT launched its planetary invasion, the campaign designated Operation Uroboros, it fielded purpose-built mobile suits optimized for land, sea, and aerial warfare, deploying them across the surface. Under the conditions imposed by N-Jammers, these machines became not merely useful but indispensable. On the ground, where nuclear fission had been made impossible, batteries emerged as the dominant power source; with the radio spectrum choked into uselessness, long-range strikes became wholly impractical. In that environment, the weapons that seized the advantage were those combining extreme mobility with devastating close-range firepower. An era had arrived in which a single mobile suit could outperform an entire warship.

The Naturals grasped this reality soon after hostilities began. It was precisely that recognition that drove the Atlantic Federation, having captured a ZAFT unit, a GINN, to tear it apart, study every component, and begin developing mobile suits of its own. Nearly simultaneously, Orb, a nation widely acknowledged for its advanced technological capabilities, was

pursuing an independent program along the same lines. In time, the two succeeded in producing a handful of units in collaboration, with Orb effectively coerced into compliance by the Alliance's unyielding demands for cooperation. Before long, however, both efforts collided with the same impassable barrier. The stark truth was that only Coordinators, with their superior reflexes, their explosive reaction speed, their heightened physical capacity and sharpened perceptual acuity, could manage the sheer complexity of piloting these machines.

If the Naturals were to have any hope of standing against such pilots, they needed machines that surpassed every mobile suit in existence. That imperative brought forth armor built on the Phase Shift system, a technology that had until then offered no viable path toward practical deployment, alongside beam weaponry miniaturized to an almost inconceivable degree. And yet, even after producing machines that appeared all but invincible on paper, the fundamental problems remained unsolved, the operating system that governed them, and the pilot who was meant to command them. The hardware had leapt far ahead of the software. In the cruelest of ironies, these weapons only became combat-ready thanks to the abilities of a single Coordinator: Kira Yamato.

For the Coordinators, the emergence of these new units registered as a profound threat. Until that point, ZAFT had fielded virtually nothing in the way of man-portable beam weaponry for its mobile suits beyond the M69 Barrus heavy ion cannon, a cumbersome piece of hardware capable of delivering, at best, a handful of consecutive shots. If practical Phase Shift armor was poised to become standard on the next generation of enemy machines, then developing and deploying beam weapons would become the single most pressing strategic imperative.

That necessity, however, exposed yet another problem: batteries could no longer sustain the enormous energy demands of such equipment. The design philosophy embodied by the GAT-X105 Strike, swapping depleted power packs for fresh ones mid-sortie, represented one answer to that dilemma.

Still, when confronted with these machines, whose limbs mirror the motion of the human body and which move through the vacuum of space with absolute freedom, it is difficult not to feel that humanity has, for the first time in any meaningful sense, ventured beyond the boundaries of the world it was born to. Considered together as a single fused entity, the fragile pilot and the mobile suit, a thing possessing no will of its own, begin to resemble something unprecedented: a new species of spaceborne life, one carrying within it immense and untested potential.

That the ground from which this evolution first sprouted had to be war, however much that has always been the case, in every age, remains nothing short of a tragedy.

Phase.01

Several battleships hung in orbit above Earth.

Among the fleet that had set out from the PLANT homeland and was now closing the distance for its next operation, the Vesalius held its place in formation.

Below decks, Athrun was making his way through the corridors toward the pilot lockers when a voice reached him from behind, bright, still carrying the lightness of youth.

"Athrun."

He turned, and a smile came easily.

"Nicol."

His fellow pilot, a year his junior, fell into step beside him wearing, as he always did, a gentle expression on fine-boned features that bordered on feminine.

"Thanks for the other day."

For a beat, nothing connected. He had to reach back through his memory, and only just managed to land on the answer before the pause grew awkward.

"No... it was a good concert."

At that, a sly look flickered across the younger boy's face.

"You didn't fall asleep, did you?"

The question landed squarely, and Athrun went rigid. He was, regrettably, hopeless when it came to music; lulled by the warmth of Nicol's piano, he had slipped under without the slightest resistance. Granted, it had been an intimate recital in a small hall with fewer than two hundred seats, but had he really slept so obviously that the performer himself had noticed?

"N-No, of course not."

The denial came out too quickly, and the teasing glint in those eyes didn't waver.

"Really? Those seats were incredibly comfortable, you know."

"Ah... right, yeah, they were."

"I just figured you must have gotten a great nap..."

"I wasn't sleeping! I heard the whole thing."

At that uncharacteristically stubborn protest, Nicol let slip a quiet, half-suppressed laugh. Then, without warning, something lonelier settled over his expression.

"Honestly, I wish I could do something more serious with it."

"Not right now..."

Athrun's own face sobered.

"Once Operation Spitbreak wraps up, things will probably be different..."

"Yeah..."

Those words, offered as what small comfort they could carry, drew a smile and a nod from the younger pilot.

"This'll be my first time setting foot on Earth."

"Mine too."

That earned a short, surprised laugh.

"Oh, right."

Both of them were second-generation Coordinators, born in space, raised in space. Children who had never once touched the soil from which their kind had sprung.

Where Nicol's thoughts drifted down toward that unseen world below, Athrun's were pulled, as if by gravity, toward a single fixed point.

Kira Yamato, his closest friend, the one who had grown up at his side since they were small. They had parted ways three years ago, and when they found each other again, it was in the middle of a war. Then, by some merciless turn of fate, they had been set against each other on opposing sides.

Once they had changed into their flight suits in the locker room, the two boarded their respective machines, the Aegis and the Blitz.

"Gibraltar service, clear skies. Temperature 12°, humidity forty-five."

The weather report for their destination crackled across the now-open comm channel. Earth's weather, unlike the PLANTS', did not follow any programmed schedule. Today, at least, the conditions posed no trouble for launch or landing. If you had been born on that world below, you might have called it a perfect day for a descent.

"Atmospheric entry capsule, separating now."

The operator aboard the Vesalius made the announcement, and Captain Ades offered a parting word to Commander Rau Le Creuset.

"Then, best of luck, Commander."

"Thank you, Ades."

The commander's reply came back in that characteristically smooth tone, and a faint shudder passed through the capsule as it broke free of the ship's hull.

Athrun kept his gaze fixed on the monitor. Through the external camera feed, the Earth swelled to fill his entire field of view. His eyes traced the shapes of continents carving through oceans as blue as cut gemstones, and before he was even aware of it, he found himself wondering where, down there, his former best friend might be.

The latest intelligence on the enemy's new warship, the Archangel, which had made its descent to the surface, had already reached them. In a development that defied belief, the unit commanded by one of ZAFT's most formidable ground commanders and pilots, the man known as the Desert Tiger, Andrew Waldfeld, had been defeated. The commander himself was reported killed in action.

"Kira..."

A knot of tangled emotions drew tight in his chest and Athrun stared down at the blue expanse of Earth spread across his screen.

"Whoa, this is incredible!"

"God, I haven't seen Earth's ocean in forever. This is the best!"

Cheers broke out across the length of the deck.

The Archangel was carving a path through the Red Sea. Since touching down on the water, it had been surging forward with the spray peeling cleanly away from both flanks, looking so thoroughly in its element that anyone watching might have believed the ship had been designed for the sea from the start. They had punched through the Lesseps, put the African continent behind them, and were now charting a course through the Indian Ocean, waters bordered by neutral nations, bound for Alaska.

Shortly after they reached open sea, Murrue granted the crew permission to rotate out onto the deck in shifts. Natarle's displeasure at the decision had been predictable as always. But after clawing through such savage fighting and finally breaking out into waters where, at least for the moment, no enemy attack was anticipated, the tension had drained from every face almost of its own accord.

"I don't know, though. It's kind of unsettling."

Kuzzey crept toward the railing with visible reluctance and peered down at the water, his expression openly wary.

"Oh, that's right, you've never actually seen the ocean before, have you?" Tolle said, the realization catching up with him.

"The desert already freaked me out, but... this is worse somehow. The deep parts go really, really deep, don't they?"

Tolle could see the logic in that. Kuzzey had been born on Heliopolis, he had probably never laid eyes on this much water in his entire life. Though if depth was the issue, outer space was a bottomless void. Wasn't that terrifying too? The thought struck him as oddly amusing.

Miriallia flashed a wicked grin.

"Maybe there are sea monsters down there."

Startled exactly as she had intended, Kuzzey's face seized up with genuine alarm, and the other two dissolved into laughter.

After they headed back inside, Kira stepped out onto the now-deserted deck and squinted against the punishing sunlight. This close to the equator the sun was merciless, but the force of the salt-laden wind washing over him felt good. He lowered himself onto the sun-warmed deck plating and fixed his gaze, unfocused, on the far horizon.

"Are you lonely, then?"

Without warning, a particular man's voice surfaced in his mind.

"Then how do you decide who wins and who loses? Where do you draw the line and say it ends?"

Kira pulled his knees in tight against his chest.

Andrew Waldfeld, the man they had called the Desert Tiger, had appeared before them with no warning at all.

And then he was gone.

Kira had killed him.

His knees began to tremble beyond his control. When he could not stand it any longer, he pressed his face into them.

"By destroying every last one of those who stand against you?"

He had wept until he was sure there could not be a single tear left inside him, and yet fresh ones gathered beneath his clenched eyelids all the same.

"But... but...! If I don't fight, if I don't take them down, everyone...!"

He had resolved not to falter. Flay's tears. The shuttle flaring white and burning apart before his eyes. The paper flowers tumbling soundlessly through the vacuum. Each memory cinched itself tighter around his heart, pushing him forward. If he wanted to protect what mattered to him, he could not afford to waver, that was what he had believed he understood.

And yet he had met that man.

Even now the image of that enemy commander, so vivid, so overwhelmingly present, rose before his mind's eye, and with it the words that had thrown everything back into question.

He had never wanted to kill him. To protect what had been placed in his hands, he'd had no other choice.

But had there truly been no other way?

To end a war, did you have to kill every last enemy?

But the enemy was not going to lie down and let themselves be killed, either.

Did it all reduce to slaughtering each other, heaping up mountains of the dead, and calling whichever side was still breathing at the end the winner?

Was that truly the only conclusion waiting on the other side of battle...?

Drawn in on himself, hunched and small, he sat there, and then the door behind him banged open. He startled, scrambled upright, and moved toward the railing as if to bolt. A rough, careless voice called after him.

"What? You were out here too?"

The speaker walked straight up, planted herself at the railing beside him, and leaned over to study his face. The sea wind swept strands of golden hair across his shoulder.

Cagalli Yula, the girl who had fought alongside the resistance.

Her expression shifted with surprise.

"Were you crying?"

The question was so blunt, so completely unguarded, that heat flooded his face, and he turned to walk away without a word.

"Hey, wait."

Her hand caught his arm. She let out a small breath, then slid both arms around him and pulled him close.

"Huh?"

Flustered, he tried to twist free, but she only patted his back the way someone would comfort a child.

"There, there. It's all right..."

He froze, both hands hanging uselessly in the air.

"It's okay... it's okay..."

Cagalli, who was usually so blunt and coarse in the way she spoke, had a voice now that was startlingly soft.

"It's okay..."

The hand moving in steady, quiet strokes across his back stirred, for reasons he could not explain, a memory of his mother. He had gone rigid with bewilderment at first, but before he realized it he was giving in to that touch, his eyes falling shut. Something deep inside him, something knotted tight and grinding against itself, began at last to loosen... slowly... quietly...

When he opened his eyes, she was gazing up at him with sharp attention.

"Feeling a little better?"

"Ah... yeah..."

Held in that close, unflinching stare, he felt his face color again. Then she seemed to register all at once what position they were standing in, and she wrenched herself away in a sudden panic.

"D-Don't get the wrong idea! You're not supposed to just leave a crying kid by himself, that's all! That's all it was!"

A moment ago she had been murmuring comfort in that quiet voice, and now she sounded like an entirely different person, all bluster and fluster. The fact that she was the one who had grabbed him first, and that her own face had turned a vivid red, was so thoroughly ridiculous that he found himself laughing despite the mess he was in.

She really was strange.

There was nothing remotely girlish about her; her gestures and her way of talking were rougher than most boys'. And yet every time he spoke with her, he came away feeling oddly relieved, as though some pressure he hadn't noticed had let up and he could breathe again.

When they left the desert behind, Cagalli had broken from the resistance and chosen to stay aboard the Archangel. More precisely, Murrue and the rest of the senior crew had been baffled and reluctant when she first demanded passage, but she had insisted with such immovable stubbornness that she'd essentially forced her way on board. And trailing behind her, following like a shadow, was the broad-shouldered figure of Kisaka.

The two of them stood side by side now, leaning against the railing.

"You know... you've got some serious issues."

She said it in her usual blunt, rough-edged way, and he turned to look at her.

"Huh?"

She went on, still wearing a sour expression.

"The other day you were all high and mighty, and then you went and hit me on top of it..."

The instant the words left her mouth, the memory snapped back, the things he had said in front of the boy who had thrown himself into a reckless fight and died.

"What can feelings alone possibly protect?!"

"Ah... sorry."

Recalling the person he had been then, a faint unease stirred in him. In that moment there had been no contradiction inside him at all. He had believed that if it meant shielding the people precious to him, it did not matter who he had to kill. Compared to now, in a way, he had known neither doubt nor suffering. And yet when he looked back at the self that had thought that way, the barrenness of that state of mind was so stark it made him recoil.

Ever since the sudden fall from his ordinary life on Heliopolis into the battlefield, he had been changing, more and more, in ways he could not track.

And somehow, that change itself was what frightened him.

"Hmph. Well, whatever."

She accepted the apology with surprising ease, then cut him a sideways glance.

"More importantly, why are you a Coordinator, anyway?"

"Huh?"

He could only stare at her, completely at a loss, and even she seemed to grasp that what had come out of her mouth made no sense.

"Ah, no, that's not what I mean. What I'm asking is, why are you fighting with the Earth Forces if you're a Coordinator?"

He gave a small, rueful smile. This girl really was astonishingly direct, borderline rude, if you wanted to put it that way. And yet, somehow, it didn't feel unpleasant.

"Maybe it is strange. People tell me that all the time..."

"It's not strange... not exactly."

She spoke as though she were still working out what she was trying to say even as the words left her.

"But the whole reason this war happened is because Coordinators and Naturals are at each other's throats, right? So what I'm asking is... don't you have some kind of feelings about that?"

"What about you?"

When he turned the question back on her, her mouth scrunched into an annoyed frown.

"It's not like I have some kind of problem with somebody just because they're a Coordinator!"

"Same here."

"It's just, when there's a war on and you're under attack, then yeah, you fight back..."

"Same for me..."

Perhaps she thought he was making fun of her, because she shot him a hard look. There was something so fierce and total about the seriousness with which she lived that he found a smile rising to his face again, despite everything.

Why are you a Coordinator, anyway?

Nobody had ever asked him that before.

Even though it was a question he had put to himself more times than he could count.

Why was he a Coordinator?

Why was he different from everyone around him?

Why did he have to be hated for it?

It wasn't as though he had chosen the way he was born.

"Coordinators are the same as everyone else... we are..."

He murmured it almost to himself, and beside him Cagalli settled her elbows on the railing and rested her cheek against one palm, thinking.

It was the question he had been turning over in his mind since the war began.

"Are we really that different... so different that we have to split into two sides and try to destroy each other?"

"But you guys can do all kinds of things we can't, right? Just from being born the way you are."

"If we practice, or study, or train the right way, sure. But being a Coordinator doesn't mean you can do everything from the day you're born."

People misunderstood that constantly, imagining Coordinators achieved superhuman feats without hardship or effort of any kind. But what Coordinators actually possessed was only the raw foundation, minds with the capacity to absorb more knowledge, bodies with the potential for greater strength. If someone spent their life idle, never striving, never pushing, then none of that potential would ever bear fruit.

"Well... yeah, I guess that's true."

She nodded, as if the thought had only now fully registered.

"And honestly, looking at you, you're not all that different from the rest of us. You're a crybaby, and kind of dense about certain things."

"Ugh..."

He considered protesting, but given that she had caught him crying not five minutes ago, he had no ground to stand on. Besides, what she was saying was something he himself had thought many times.

"I mean... that's how it is, right? Coordinators feel sad when something's sad, get scared when something's scary, want to protect the people they love, those feelings are the same as a Natural's, aren't they?"

"Yeah... I think so..."

She nodded.

"It's true, we're born after our genes have been modified in all sorts of ways, so we're spared certain terrible diseases, and there are talents, physical advantages, things like that... but..."

He turned and looked at her, the unspoken question clear on his face.

"Wasn't that a Natural's, I mean, wasn't that everyone's dream, originally?"

They had been brought into existence to fulfill humanity's dream. And yet now, the children of that dream were despised and rejected by the very people who had willed them into being. The thought filled him with grief. It made him feel as though they were unwanted children, resented by their own parents.

"Yeah... I guess it was."

She answered softly. Watching her furrow her brow and wrestle with it in such earnest concentration, he felt, just as he had a short while ago, that quiet easing deep in his chest.

Now that he thought about it, he had never spoken this openly about his own existence with a Natural before. Tolle and Miriallia had never seemed to dwell much on the fact that he was a Coordinator, while Sai and Kuzzey, he suspected, had deliberately steered around the subject out of consideration for him. It was only because Cagalli was the sort of person who threw herself at everything headfirst, holding nothing back, that he could talk to her this way without feeling strangely exposed.

"And even so, why —"

He had just started to continue when a voice from behind cut him short.

"Kiraaa, so this is where you were?"

Both of them flinched and turned.

It was Flay.

She had shed her jacket, and in a provocative tank top she stepped out onto the deck, raising one hand to shade her eyes against the sun.

"Whew, it's so hot. I've been looking everywhere for you."

As she spoke she walked right up to him and, as though performing for Cagalli's benefit, wound herself sweetly around his arm.

"If you were going to come out on deck, you could've at least invited me..."

"Ah... yeah, sorry..."

Her full breasts pressed against him through the thin fabric, and he went stiff with self-conscious embarrassment. Somehow she seemed even more forward than usual today. His eyes darted involuntarily toward Cagalli, suddenly painfully aware of her standing there.

Exactly as he feared, she was watching the two of them with flat, thoroughly unimpressed eyes.

"It does feel nice out here, though. But if I stay too long I'll get a sunburn."

She said it right in front of Cagalli, who looked as though she spent every waking hour under the open sky without a second thought, then tilted a coaxing look upward.

"Let's head back to the room in a little while, okay?"

The words laid bare the nature of their relationship, their near-cohabitation, and he felt wretched. It wasn't as though he harbored any sort of feelings for Cagalli. Nothing like that. But standing in front of someone as honest and uncompromising as she was, there was something faintly shameful about whatever it was he had with Flay.

Cagalli gave a short, exasperated shrug, then pivoted cleanly on her heel and showed them her back.

"I'll leave you to it, then. Looks like I'm just getting in the way."

"Ah—"

She walked off without once looking back.

He found himself resenting Flay's presence. He had wanted to keep talking to Cagalli, about so many things.

Then, as his gaze dropped, he caught Flay staring hard at the retreating figure, and something in him flinched.

Because for a moment, it looked as though she were glaring at Cagalli with naked hostility.

"Please, Commander! Let us go after him!"

They had only just touched down at Gibraltar Base and stepped into the briefing room when Athrun and Nicol pulled up short, caught off guard by the sight of Yzak Joule all but throwing himself at Commander Rau Le Creuset with the demand.

"Yzak, you're letting your emotions run away with you."

Rau's tone was measured, gently reproving. But more than the substance of the exchange, what seized Athrun's attention first was the livid scar carved across Yzak's face.

"Yzak, that scar!"

He turned aside with an irritated little snort of embarrassment.

There was no question where it had come from, the wound he had taken in his clash with the Strike before the descent to Earth. From behind him, Dearka Elsman raised a hand in an easy greeting.

"The injury itself healed up fine, apparently. But he's decided he's keeping the scar until he's taken down the Strike."

Rau offered the explanation on Yzak's behalf, and Athrun's breath caught involuntarily.

"We have to stop the Legged Ship from reaching Alaska with that data. Whatever it takes."

The commander continued.

"But that assignment has already been handed to Morassim's unit out of Carpentaria."

At that, Yzak fired back without a beat of hesitation.

"This is our fight, Commander! That bastard is ours to finish, ours, all the way to the end!"

Then Dearka spoke up alongside him.

"I feel the same, Commander!"

Athrun and Nicol both turned to stare. Unlike Yzak, Dearka was not someone who got heated regardless of circumstances, so hearing that kind of force behind his words was genuinely surprising. Catching their looks, he pulled a sour face.

"Hmph! I've had more than my fill of being humiliated by that bastard, too!"

The two of them had been placed under Commander Waldfeld and folded into the operation to destroy the Archangel and the Strike, yet in the end they had accomplished virtually nothing worth the name. Their force had been all but wiped out, and they had been left to swallow the disgrace of letting the enemy ship slip away. They had not managed so much as a single direct engagement with the Strike. Their machines had bogged down in the desert's shifting sands, unable to maneuver properly, while right before their

eyes the Strike, by whatever modifications had been made to it, moved with agility on par with a BuCUE purpose-built for desert warfare, destroyed five of the machines in succession, and even took down the commander's own LaGOWE. Being forced to stand there immobilized, watching the enemy unit withdraw untouched, had evidently cut deep, not just into Yzak's pride but into Dearka's as well.

After hearing them both out, Rau lapsed into a brief, considering silence.

"I can't move personally, not with Spitbreak preparations already underway. But if you feel that strongly about it, shall I turn the four of you loose on your own?"

Yzak answered instantly, fierce resolve burning through every word.

"Yes!"

"Very well. Then Yzak, Dearka, Nicol, and Athrun will operate as a single unit, and command will fall to... yes..."

Without warning, the commander turned his gaze directly on Athrun.

"Athrun. I'm leaving it in your hands."

"What?!"

The words landed so unexpectedly that he went rigid.

Apparently taking no notice of his shock, Rau pressed on in a brisk, businesslike tone.

"I'll arrange for a mothership to be assigned to you at Carpentaria. Begin preparations to deploy immediately."

"Commander... me?"

His confusion ran deeper than simply being placed in command over Yzak and Dearka, small as the unit was.

The real objective of this mission was plain enough: destroy the Strike. And for Athrun, that meant killing the friend who had grown up alongside him since childhood.

Rau alone knew that.

And yet?

As though he could see clean through every thought behind those eyes, the commander allowed himself a thin smile.

"That ship is one with which you share no small number of entanglements. I know this will not be easy... but I have high expectations of you, Athrun. That is all."

Having been told as much, and more than that, as a soldier he could hardly refuse a direct order from his commanding officer in the first place, he fell silent, his expression darkened with open conflict.

Meanwhile, Yzak and Dearka made no effort to conceal their displeasure at being placed under his authority.

"So, 'Team Zala,' is it..."

Dearka let out a derisive little laugh through his nose.

"Hmph! Let's see what you've actually got."

Yzak spat the words with undisguised bitterness and fixed Athrun with a hard, cutting stare.



Then the two of them stalked from the room, their footfalls striking the floor sharp and loud. Nicol and Athrun moved to follow, but the commander's voice stopped him.

"Athrun."

"Sir!"

He turned back, and Rau spoke in a tone that carried the faintest edge of a test.

"You do remember your promise, don't you?"

His face went taut.

The promise.

The one he had made to Rau before, in exchange for a chance to persuade Kira. If persuasion failed... then he had sworn, sworn to this man, that he would shoot down the Strike himself.

"Yes."

The answer came out stiff, and Rau gave a slow nod.

"Then that is enough..."

"Yes, sir... excuse me."

As he turned to go, the commander murmured one final thing, his voice pitched low.

"The Strike, if you do not shoot it down, the next one shot down may well be you."

Athrun stopped dead, a cold jolt lancing through him.

And behind him, watching from beneath the mask, his commander wore a smile that bordered on cruelty in its coldness.

"It's true, the Equatorial Union is technically still neutral, but..."

On the Archangel's bridge, Kisaka stood before a display screen, walking Murrue and the others through a reassessment of their route. He let the thought die unfinished, then slid a dry look her way.

"You do have to admire the Earth Forces, though. They order you to haul yourselves all the way to Alaska on your own, and they can't even be bothered to send supplies."

The remark landed with uncomfortable precision. Murrue's expression hardened, edged with bitterness.

He was right. This ship and the Strike were supposed to be decisive assets, trump cards capable of reshaping the entire war, and yet High Command had sent them nothing. No reinforcements. No resupply. She had sensed the first faint outlines of it during her exchange with Admiral Halberton, but perhaps the people at the top simply did not consider them that important. The Archangel and the Strike had been built in answer to desperate appeals from the front, and yet the brass above them still seemed unable to grasp just how critical they truly were...

"Your safest course would be to avoid engagement wherever you can."

Kisaka studied the map on the monitor and stated what everyone already knew. Natarle pushed back at once.

"But driving straight through the heart of the Indian Ocean puts us in a difficult position too. If something goes wrong out there, we'll have nowhere to fall back to."

If they skirted every zone under ZAFT control, that was inevitably the path they'd be left with. And she wasn't wrong, there was something nakedly vulnerable about crossing open water with nothing at all between them and the sky. But Kisaka only offered a mild shrug.

"ZAFT isn't waging a war of territorial expansion. The middle of the ocean is where their presence will be thinnest."

Then he turned a quietly sardonic smile on Murrué.

"After that, well, it comes down to luck."

She let out a long, weary breath. Whether they were lucky or unlucky, she honestly couldn't say. No one stranded in a place like this could reasonably call themselves fortunate. And yet the simple fact that they hadn't been sunk long ago almost suggested they carried some extraordinary share of fortune after all.

If only it would hold until they reached Alaska Headquarters.

Athrun boarded the transport craft. From the cockpit, the pilots called back to him.

"Sorry about that—had you waiting."

"No, you're fine..."

Still wearing his pilot suit, he settled into one of the rear seats.

Athrun, Yzak, Dearka, Nicol, or, by the unit's new designation, the members of Team Zala, were en route from Gibraltar to Carpentaria. The other three had already departed on an earlier transport, but the aircraft assigned to carry him and his mobile suit, the Aegis, had been held up by a malfunction in its navigation systems.

This was a medium transport rated for only a single mobile suit, which meant its sole passengers were him and the Aegis. It lacked any vertical takeoff or landing capability, but it was responsive in the air and easy on fuel, a surprisingly practical little craft, all things considered.

As he watched the base's landscape begin to slide past and then fall away beneath him, dwindling into the distance, he turned Rau's words over and over in his mind.

"If you don't shoot it down, the next one shot down may be you..."

And it was true, he himself had spoken words not so different.

"The next time we meet, I'll shoot you down!"

And Kira had answered him, his voice raw with anguish.

"Me too!"

Why, how had it come to this?

How had they, of all people, friends closer than any others, ended up here?

Rau had entrusted the entire pursuit of the Archangel to him. Precisely because of that, he could permit himself no trace of leniency. The Strike, Kira, had killed Miguel and scarred Yzak. He understood their hunger to

strike back. More than that, if he allowed Kira to go on like this, more ZAFT soldiers would die or be maimed at his hands. To leave a threat of that magnitude unchecked could alter the trajectory of the war itself.

He knew that.

He knew he had to stop Kira, to neutralize the enemy's new mobile suit.

And if, in the end, Kira truly had to die.

Even as the thought sent a shudder through him, his resolve hardened with terrible clarity.

"Then... it will be by my hand alone."

"No, that's not it! That's not how it works! Passive sonar is basically—"

"No, you're the one who's wrong."

For some time now, Pal and Chandra had been planted in front of the sonar console, locked in a back-and-forth that showed no sign of resolving. Tonomura, the crew member actually assigned to sonar, finally lost patience with the two of them crowding his station.

"Hey, would you keep it down?!"

The sonar array was equipment they had acquired in Banadiya for subsurface search and detection, but since every one of them had trained exclusively as space-force personnel, they were fumbling their way through it with the spec manual and operating guide spread open beside them. Watching the whole display from nearby, Miriallia and Sai wore thin, rueful smiles, while Natarle looked entirely unamused.

"R-Reading on radar!"

Kuzzey's voice cut sharply above the noise, and Murrue's gaze snapped toward him.

"It's probably just another civilian vessel!"

Pal shouted the words even as he scrambled back up toward his post. Chandra dropped into his own seat, took one look at the monitor in front of him, and drew a sharp breath.

"It's fast! Too much interference for a clean identification, but this is definitely not a civilian aircraft!"

So their luck was going to be put to the test immediately, it seemed. Murrue's voice rang out across the bridge: "All hands, Condition Two battle stations!"

What came screaming down at the Archangel from above were ZAFT's atmospheric-deployment mobile suits, the AMF-101 DINN. Built on the GINN frame but stripped down for flight within atmosphere, they carried six broad wings fanned from their backs to generate lift. Their loadout comprised twin chest-mounted six-tube launchers, the same MMI-M7S 76mm heavy assault machine gun fielded by the standard GINN, and an MMI-M1001 90mm anti-air scatter gun. Darting nimbly through the sky, they resembled nothing so much as dragonflies, their slender wings spread wide.

The pair of DINNs caught sight of the Archangel and pressed their attack without a moment's hesitation. Mu's Skygrasper roared from the port-side

deck to meet them head-on. But the Strike, which possessed no flight capability of its own, could do nothing but watch from below. The Archangel answered with its 75mm automatic anti-air Vulcan turrets, the Igelstellung batteries, and volleys of Wombat interceptor missiles.

Then, at that precise moment, Tonomura, still grappling with the unfamiliar sonar rig, registered something through his headphones and sucked in a sharp, startled breath.

"Contact on sonar! Four... no—*three*?!"

"What?!"

Natarle wheeled around.

"At this speed... with this propulsion signature... they're mobile suits!"

His report left the entire bridge stunned into momentary confusion.

From underwater?

And before anyone could even begin to formulate a response to an enemy they could not see, Tonomura clamped both hands over his headphones and shouted again.

"Sudden contact on sonar! Torpedoes this time!"

"Evasive maneuvers!" Murrue barked, but Neumann's reply came back tight and strained.

"We won't make it in time!"

"Full thrust! Get us out of the water!"

At her command, Neumann wrenched the controls back with everything he had.

"Ngh—!"

The enormous bulk of the Archangel began to rear upward, its bow climbing higher and higher. As though tearing itself loose from the ocean's grip, the ship heaved itself ponderously into the air with a metallic groan, trailing a thundering cascade of spray as it peeled free of the surface. In the next instant, the torpedoes ripped through the water directly beneath the hull.

Before a single breath could be drawn, missiles erupted from below the waves and streaked past the ship.

What broke the surface of the ocean was an off-white mobile suit, its streamlined hull shaped almost like a squid.

"Unit identified! UMF-4A GOOhN!"

The amphibious mobile suit GOOhN had been engineered from the ground up to assault bases and warships from beneath the waves, and its armament reflected that purpose. Both arms mounted 533mm seven-tube torpedo launchers, loaded with rocket-propelled torpedoes capable of being fired even into open air. Across its back it carried launcher tubes for 47mm underwater rifle darts shaped like harpoons; buried in its chest sat a phonon maser cannon; and housed in its head, limited to just two rounds, but devastating, were a pair of 1030mm Mark 70 supercavitating torpedoes.

Whenever the Igelstellung batteries beneath the hull or the Valiant guns along the ship's flanks tried to draw a bead on it, the GOOhN would slip

beneath the surface, only to surge up again from some entirely unpredictable angle and resume its assault. Kira had climbed into the Strike and taken position at the open starboard hatch, beam rifle leveled, tracking its movements, but through gritted teeth he understood that from aboard ship, he was utterly powerless against it.

"In the water... if I use the superconducting electromagnetic propulsion... maybe...!"

He spun and ran back toward the hangar.

"Chief Murdoch! The Sword Striker!"

On the monitor, Murdoch blinked back at him in confusion.

"Huh?"

The answer came without hesitation.

"If I cut the beam, I can use it as a physical blade! I'm going into the sea!"

Even as the words left his mouth, he was already reconfiguring the controls. Under normal atmospheric conditions, the superconducting electromagnetic propulsion system functioned by drawing in air and expelling it as thrust, but the same principle ought to hold with water. The Strike was fitted with the Sword Pack. Beam weapons would scatter uselessly underwater, but if he wielded the 15.78-meter anti-ship sword Schwert Gewehr as a solid blade, it should still serve as a viable weapon beneath the surface.

But even so, could he really fight like this?

As if to crush that uncertainty before it could take root, Kira fixed his gaze hard on the path ahead and sent the Strike hurtling from the ship.

The ejected machine plunged into the ocean. A storm of fine bubbles surged up around it, swallowing the frame and whiting out his vision for an instant. The propulsion system performed better underwater than he had anticipated, but the sheer resistance of the water devoured much of the advantage.

Still unsteady, he scanned the pale blue-tinted world that now surrounded him. Even the fierce tropical sunlight barely penetrated this deep; it felt like drifting through a realm of perpetual twilight. The thought that only a single shell of armor separated him from cold, crushing water made it feel as though the cockpit walls themselves were closing in from every side. A dread deeper and more penetrating than anything he had ever known in the void of space washed through him.

Realizing he had been clenching his lungs tight, he forced himself to breathe again, quick, shallow pulls of air.

A white shape streaked across his uneasy field of vision, and before he could track it, a brutal lateral impact hammered into the Strike.

"Keh!"

The streamlined machine had bodied the Strike head-on, then rocketed away on the force of the collision.

Fast!

He squeezed off a burst from the head vulcans in pursuit, but the water bled all velocity from the rounds, and they fell hopelessly short of their target.

The second GOOhN came bearing down on him, and he snatched the Schwert Gewehr free. Absorbing the body blow, riding through the shock, he answered with a single clean stroke. One of the GOOhN's fin-like projections was shorn away and went tumbling, swaying lazily toward the seafloor. Groaning against the strain, he fired the verniers and fought to stabilize the Strike, which the collision had thrown wildly off-kilter.

The first unit looped back and charged again. Twisting aside at the last moment, he latched onto the GOOhN's hull. Enduring the crushing g-forces, dragged through the water in its wake, he tried to drive the Schwert Gewehr through the enemy suit. Then a warning alarm shrieked from the side panel, and his eyes snapped to the lateral monitor. Something hurtling inward filled the screen and then a savage impact rocked the entire machine.

"Kwaah?!"

A torpedo. In that split second of vulnerability, the GOOhN wrenched free of the Strike's grip.

But the torpedo had not come from a GOOhN. One glance told him this was a machine built even more thoroughly for subsurface warfare. Shell-like armor encased its back and shoulders, and its squat yet streamlined frame was engineered for high-speed maneuvering beneath the waves. Its elongated arms terminated in sets of three hooked claws, and its head appeared to recess down into its armored cowling to minimize drag. The overall effect was something strangely simian, almost orangutan-like in silhouette. The Strike's computer ran the data through its cross-reference database and returned a match.

"UMF-5 ZnO?"

A next-generation successor to the GOOhN, purpose-built for underwater close-quarters combat, boasting sweeping improvements in armor, thrust output, and raw power.

The instant the ZnO appeared, both GOOhNs broke off and angled back toward the surface.

They were renewing their assault on the Archangel.

He tried to give chase in a surge of alarm, but the ZnO cut across his path. Raising one elongated arm, it leveled a claw at the Strike as though marking a target. A green aiming laser lanced out, and he wrenched aside just in time. An instant later, the rock formation behind him was gouged apart in a tremendous blast.

"That's..."

He stared, stunned by the sheer destructive force.

A phonon maser cannon, in essence a laser composed of sound, firing phase-aligned phonons at its target. Even Phase Shift armor, which boasted near-total invulnerability to physical projectiles, was every bit as defenseless against this weapon as it was against beam fire.

In that heartbeat of distraction, the ZnO closed the gap all at once. One of its long arms came scything down with a speed that should have been impossible underwater, and the Strike barely twisted clear of the claws. He swung the Schwert Gewehr in answer, only for the enemy to evade with effortless fluidity. Pulling back, the ZnO unsealed the six 533mm torpedo tubes buried in its chest. The torpedoes lanced through the water, each trailing a ribbon of bubbles, and hammered into the Strike.

While that desperate struggle raged beneath the surface, the battle above was every bit as ferocious.

The Skygrasper crossed vectors with a DINN, its vulcans blazing. The mobile suit corkscrewed and returned fire with its 90mm anti-air scatter gun, but the white fighter slipped through the barrage with fluid grace, wheeling nimbly through the air. Then the Agni cannon mounted in its launcher pack thundered, punching clean through the DINN's chest. The machine ignited instantly, and its fragments rained in glittering shards down into the sea.

The second DINN was caught by the Archangel's Valiant, its dragonfly-thin wings shot through. Just as it began its spiraling plunge, a Wombat missile overtook it, and a violent detonation ripped across the sky.

But there was no reprieve. The two GOOhNs, rising from the ocean as if unfurling themselves out of the depths, resumed their bombardment of the Archangel from below. At that moment, a transmission reached the bridge from Mu, who had circled back briefly to the ship.

"A submarine carrier...?"

Murrue echoed the words before she could catch herself.

"Yeah. No matter how you slice it, there's no way they made it all the way out here directly from Carpentaria."

Mu's face filled the monitor. They had been debating where exactly this enemy force had originated.

"We're on the move too, remember. Even if they pushed out here right at the edge of their operational range and managed to engage, they'd never have enough left to make it back."

It was a valid point. Factoring in the battery limitations of mobile suits, it made far more sense to assume a mothership was stationed somewhere in these waters, close enough to avoid detection, than to believe the units had sortied directly from the Australian continent. Murrue turned sharply.

"CIC, can you extrapolate the enemy mothership's position from the mobile suits' approach vectors?"

If reinforcements arrived on top of what they were already facing, holding out would be impossible. If Mu was right and a carrier lurked somewhere nearby, then striking at the source of the attack was the soundest move available to them.

"Just a moment—"

Sai and the others threw themselves into reprocessing the data.

Meanwhile, on the port catapult deck, Cagalli was all but snarling at Murdoch in front of Skygrasper Unit Two.

"I'm telling you, what's the point of leaving a perfectly good machine sitting here doing nothing?! I can fly it!"

"Well, sure, but, you're..."

Naturally, Murdoch refused to sign off on it. Forget being a pilot, she wasn't even military personnel. He could hardly just hand over an aircraft to a civilian girl. And beyond that, if he sent her into combat and she was shot down...

But she would not relent.

"If the Archangel goes down, we're all dead anyway, right?! And if you keep me grounded and we all die because of it, I swear I will come back and haunt you!"

Murdoch crumbled visibly under the onslaught, and from his perch atop Unit One, Mu laughed and called down to him.

"She wins, Chief. Get Unit Two prepped for her!"

"Huh?!"

Murdoch spun around, looking deeply put-upon, and Mu continued,

"We're going after the mothership. The more firepower we bring, the better."

Then the grin fell away from his face, and he turned to address Cagalli directly.

"But this isn't a game, young lady. You chose this, so don't pretend you don't understand what that means."

"It's Cagalli, and of course I understand!"

She fired back, her lips pressed into a defiant pout.

Unit One, outfitted with the Launcher pack, and Unit Two, unarmed, received the projected coordinates for the enemy vessel and launched.

Meanwhile, the assault from below the waterline showed no sign of relenting, and the Igelstellung batteries beneath the hull could not establish a reliable lock on the GOOhNs. The mobile suits breached the surface without mercy and loosed missiles from their arms; every impact sent the ship lurching violently.

"Random evasive pattern!"

Murrue shouted from the command chair.

"Valiant, fire!"

Natarle's order cracked out alongside hers. But attempting evasive maneuvers was nearly futile when the enemy had positioned itself directly beneath them, compounded by the fact that the only armaments they could bring to bear against the sea's surface were the Valiant and the Igelstellung. Frustration honed Natarle's voice to a razor's edge.

"Where is the Strike?! What is it doing?!"

The machine had not resurfaced since entering the water. Presumably, it was still engaged with that other unknown unit.

"Damn it... if only we could get a firing angle with the Gottfried!"

The curse slipped from Sai before he could bite it back. The main batteries, the Gottfried Mk.71 225cm dual high-energy focused beam cannons, packed enormous destructive power, but they were mounted at

the highest points of the ship's port and starboard leg structures, and with the enemy positioned directly beneath them, there was no way to bring that firepower down.

But the instant those words reached her ears, Murrue turned sharply, as though a switch had been thrown in her mind. She faced the helm station at once.

"Ensign Neumann! I need you to barrel-roll the Archangel. Just once!"

"What?!"

At her order, Neumann swiveled back with an expression gone utterly blank, and across the bridge every pair of eyes went wide.

A barrel roll, a full 360-degree rotation around the ship's longitudinal axis, the way a barrel tumbles through the air. That was one thing for an agile fighter craft. But to order a vessel the size of the Archangel to perform it?

"We need the Gottfried on target! Natarle, you get one shot!"

Startled as she clearly still was, Natarle answered in a voice pitched higher than usual.

"U-Understood!"

"Ensign, you can handle this, right?!"

Even Neumann, pressed directly for confirmation, could not entirely mask his disbelief.

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

"This vessel will now execute a barrel roll! All hands, brace for impact! I repeat—"

As Pal's announcement blared through every corridor of the ship, Tonomura, locked on his radar screen, spotted two incoming signatures and shouted over the noise.

"Two GOOhNs, closing fast!"

"Gottfried targeting solution, are we ready?"

Murrue called out, fastening her own seatbelt. Around her, the crew scrambled to strap themselves down, bracing for a maneuver that defied every shred of reason.

"Here we go!"

Neumann engaged the thrusters and hauled back on the stick, and the enormous ship began to tilt with alarming speed.

"Waaah!"

The sudden sideways lurch tore a scream from Kuzzey. As the angle steepened toward vertical, the Gottfried Mk.71 cannons rose into view from either flank. The images on the monitors whirled through a dizzying arc, and then came the moment when the only thing visible overhead was the surface of the ocean.

Then, punching through the water where the ship's shadow fell, the streamlined mobile suits came erupting out of the sea.

"Gottfried, fire!"

Without an instant's delay, Natarle's command rang clear, and the main guns blazed. Twin lances of concentrated light caught both GOOhNs the moment they cleared the surface.

As the spinning horizon rolled back toward level, the crew caught sight of the enemy machines blossoming into fireballs, and still dangling half-inverted in their restraints, they erupted into cheers.

Beneath the surface, the Strike remained trapped in a savage engagement with the ZnO.

Against an opponent that could dive and maneuver with total freedom, the Strike, hopelessly outclassed in underwater mobility, possessed no armament truly equal to matching its speed. Fitted only with the close-combat Sword Striker loadout, Kira had no option but to bull his way in and force the fight to point-blank range. But even the rocket anchor, the Panzer Eisen, which he fired hoping to snare the enemy machine, was batted aside with contemptuous ease by those hooked claws. In the next heartbeat the ZnO closed the gap, and before he could twist clear, the Strike was swatted broadside and driven hard into a rocky shelf along the ocean floor.

"Kuh! What kind of power is that?!"

The groan tore out of him.

Just as the sediment churned up by the collision began to settle, torpedoes came shrieking toward the Strike, and he wrenched clear of them by a margin he could not afford to measure.

The ZnO moved to press straight in behind them, but at that instant, a concussive blast erupted at the ocean's surface. Fire from the Archangel had torn both GOOhNs apart. With its support units annihilated, the ZnO's attention wavered upward, and for the barest fraction of a second, it hesitated.

"There!"

He did not waste the opening. Closing the distance in a single surge, he drove the tip of the Schwert Gewehr forward through the Strike's full momentum, burying it into the ZnO's frame.

But the enemy had wrenched itself aside at the last conceivable instant, and the thrust fell short of a killing blow.

Instead, the ZnO's clawed hand lashed out, locked around the Strike's head, and hammered it down into the seafloor. Enduring the impact, Kira looked back to his monitor, and went rigid.

There, filling the entire screen from the palm unit in the ZnO's grip, the targeting laser was burning green.

"At this range?!"

If it discharged the phonon maser here, at point-blank, there was no surviving it.

He launched an Armor Schneider instantly and buried it in the enemy machine. This time it seemed to have found something critical; a dim, bleeding radiance began to seep from the ZnO's hull.

"Keh..."

He bit down hard on his lip.

For the briefest instant, the memory of the man they had called the Desert Tiger passed through his mind.



Was there someone inside this machine too, someone as vivid, as forceful, as that man had been?

No, even if not, there was still a living being inside it. A person with a will of their own. A life.

"I know that... I do... but still—!"

He seized the tubing around the ZnO's neck, drove a kick upward into its abdomen, and with the rolling motion of a tomoe nage, hurled the entire machine over the rocky shelf behind them.

A heartbeat later, a violent detonation ripped through the water beyond the outcrop, and a churning current carried the wreckage of the shattered machine away in fragments.

Feeling the shock of it reach him even through the cockpit walls, Kira shut his eyes, hollowed out by the weight of what he had done.

The two Skygraspers skimmed low across the water's surface.

"Damn it! Where are you, kitty cat?!"

Hearing Mu's curse crackle through the comm, Cagalli, unfamiliar with the coarse idiom fighter pilots favored, wrinkled her nose.

"Kitty cat...?"

What the two of them were hunting was a ZAFT submarine carrier. By no stretch of the imagination did "kitty cat" conjure the right picture.

Then, something registered on radar. Narrowing her eyes, she picked it out: across the glittering blue expanse of the ocean, a single patch stood apart, a shadow tinged a different color from everything around it.

"Found you!"

Mu's voice exploded over the channel.

"Let's go, young lady!"

"It's Cagalli!"

She shouted the correction back at him even as she threw her machine into a dive on his tail. The hatch on the Skygrasper's underside swung open, and anti-ship missiles dropped free. The first skipped past the vessel's shadow, but the second struck true, and a towering pillar of water blasted skyward.

"Yes!"

Roaring overhead, she clenched her fist in triumph.

"All right, she's coming up! Ready?!"

"Yeah!"

Spurred by Mu's call, she banked her craft hard around. The submarine, scrambling to contain the flooding, was rising to the surface in a rush. Fixed on hitting it the instant it breached, she began bringing her plane in tighter, and then Mu's shout broke through.

"Hey! Don't let your altitude drop that low! You'll get caught in the spray!"

"What? Damn it!"

She hauled back on the stick in a panic. The surfacing submarine flung up a massive curtain of water, and the Skygrasper scraped past it by the thinnest margin.

"Idiot! That's exactly what I just told you!"

At his words, her temper ignited and she fired back.

"Who are you calling an idiot?!"

What broke the surface was a Vosgulov-class submarine carrier, two hundred seventy meters from stem to stern. Four dry tubes for deploying underwater mobile suits lined each flank, while three hatches fitted with vertical catapults sat in a row along the deck. It also bristled with twelve anti-air missile pods and twelve torpedo tubes.

While the two of them were still snapping at each other, the carrier began opening its upper hatches. One by one they yawned apart, and the DINNs visible within looked for all the world like hornet larvae on the verge of hatching.

"Not happening!"

The Agni cannon on Mu's craft spat fire, and the clean lance of light drove into the submarine's deck. It must have found fuel stores, because an instant later a tremendous explosion tore the vessel apart.

"Did we get it?!"

Punching through the billowing wall of blast smoke, she craned back over her shoulder, her voice alight with excitement, and then her breath caught.

Blown skyward as though launched by the smoke itself, a single DINN burst into the open air and snapped its wings wide.

"Damn!"

She wrenched her craft around. Mu had already spotted the surviving enemy and came screaming down on it from above. Refusing to be left out, she closed in as well, pouring vulcan fire at the DINN as she bore down on it.

For an instant she heard a sharp hiss of breath, and then Mu's voice exploded over the comm.

"Quit buzzing around in my firing lane! I'm going to hit you!"

Being dismissed as dead weight sent her temper surging.

"What did you just—!"

She had barely started to snap back when a jolt punched up through her from behind. The DINN's fire had clipped her craft. Wrestling to steady the Skygrasper, she threw a glance rearward. A thin ribbon of smoke was streaming from the damaged section of her fuselage.

"You all right?!"

Mu's voice returned, an edge of genuine alarm in it now.

"It only caught the navigation module! I'm fine!"

The moment she answered, his reply came back as an order.

"Can you still make it back? Then pull out. I'll handle this one!"

"I'm fine! I can still—"

Stung, she started to argue, only for his harsh rebuke to cut her short.

"You wobbling around up here is nothing but a liability! You can work that out for yourself, can't you?!"

The words burned badly enough to make her vision blur with fury, but she choked it down. Because she knew he was right. They had already struck

the enemy mothership; if she lingered in the combat zone with a damaged craft, she would only be dragging him down.

"Fine!"

She ground the word out through clenched teeth, hauled the fighter's nose around, and climbed hard for altitude.

"Hey?"

"Yeah... but who'd be out here?"

Catching the exchange from the transport's cockpit, Athrun felt a prickle of unease and called forward.

"What's going on?"

The pilot answered, brow creased with concern.

"Looks like combat activity up ahead, over the water."

"What?"

He leaned forward in surprise, straining to see, but there was nothing visible through the luminous ocean of cloud blazing white under the sun. This area sat close to neutral territory, true, but it still fell within ZAFT's airspace. Had they been farther east, out over the Pacific, a clash with Alliance forces might have been plausible, but this was not the kind of place where fighting should have been occurring at all.

"If we get pulled into that, we're in trouble... We're not carrying a Guul. If we go down, your machine goes down with us."

The Guul was an aerial support platform that allowed mobile suits without flight capability to engage in atmospheric combat. Even the Aegis, versatile as it was with its mobile armor transformation, could not sustain atmospheric flight without one.

Then, without warning, something tore through the cloudbank dead ahead of them.

The pilot drew a sharp breath and wrenched the craft aside on reflex.

What had materialized before them was a compact fighter. Its sleek fuselage wore white-and-blue livery, an aircraft Athrun had never encountered before.

"Earth Forces?!"

"Damn it! What's one of theirs doing out here?!"

Teeth clenched, the copilot squeezed the trigger. Machine-gun rounds shredded the cloud, and the enemy fighter tipped its wings and slipped back into the white.

"You, get to the mobile suit cockpit!"

The pilot's shout was aimed squarely at him.

"If it comes to it, we jettison the machine!"

"But—!"

The Earth Forces fighter punched through the clouds a second time and bore down on them firing. Battling the controls, the pilot hurled the order at him like a command he had no right to question.

"Go! If we lose the cargo along with the transport, that shame falls on us!"

"Understood!"

It was true. Staying here, he was useless. He spun on his heel, tore out of the cockpit, and threw himself through the hatch into the cargo hold. The instant he dropped into the Aegis's cockpit seat, a nauseating vibration hammered up through the airframe.

They had taken a hit.

Bringing the OS online without a second's delay, he heard the voices from the transport cockpit bleeding through the comm.

"Damn it! We let our guard down because we thought we were in friendly airspace!"

Then came the sickening lurch of the floor falling away beneath him: the transport was losing altitude.

"No good, she's not holding! We're dropping and jettisoning!"

Through the brutal shudder of the failing aircraft, the pilot's voice reached him, and he shouted back.

"What about you?!"

"We'll eject right after! Don't worry about us!"

The pilot was many years older than Athrun, though not quite old enough to be his father. He answered without a trace of hesitation.

"Right!"

These men, too, had likely joined the military of their own will. They were already past the age for piloting mobile suits, the machines demanded the extraordinary reflexes of youth, and as a rule only those under thirty were considered fit to operate them, but they were defending their homeland in their own way.

The transport's cargo hatch groaned open amid the violent shaking. After offering a silent prayer for the safety of the comrades he was leaving behind, Athrun sent the Aegis hurtling out into the open sky.

Phase.02

The slap of water against the hull reached her first, waves washing over metal, and then the heavy, smothering heat forced her eyes open. She lay in the Skygrasper's cockpit. Sun drove straight down through the canopy, cooking the interior like a greenhouse. She gave her head a shake and took stock of her surroundings.

The sea rocked gently in every direction around the machine. Not far ahead, a ribbon of beach stretched out, its white sand blinding in the glare. For a moment she only gazed dully at the swells, then memory of what had happened before the blackout came flooding back, and she bolted upright.

That was it. Damaged, limping back toward the Archangel, she'd stumbled onto a ZAFT transport above the cloud deck. She'd taken it for enemy reinforcements; it had opened fire, and she'd had no option but to shoot back. Her rounds had struck home, but so had theirs, and down she'd gone.

For one drifting heartbeat she caught herself thinking that surviving a crash like that beggared belief, then snapped back to the present and grabbed for the instruments. Switch after switch, nothing answered her touch.

"This is Cagalli, Archangel, do you read..."

She yelled into the radio, but the speaker gave back nothing, not even static. After a long, pointless struggle with the lifeless controls, she surrendered and turned her gaze forward. That beach belonged to an island she couldn't place. There was nothing for it now but to rig a distress beacon and wait things out on shore.

She hauled the emergency pack out from under the seat and started down toward the water. Whether it was the heat or the lingering fog of unconsciousness, her legs felt untrustworthy beneath her. Then her weight shifted all at once, the Skygrasper canted sideways, and she went headfirst into the sea.

"Gah—!"

Arms thrashing on pure instinct, she broke the surface, but the pack tore loose from her fingers and floated out of reach.

Wonderful.

If there was one mercy in the whole mess, it was that the cold seawater had rinsed the sweat off her soaked body.

"Damn it."

With a long exhale, she struck out swimming for the island.

Once she'd dragged herself onto the white sand, she pressed inland. With the pack lost, water was now her problem to solve, food too, if she could manage it. If anyone lived out here, there was a chance of asking for help. At least this wasn't the kind of place that would freeze her to death, and her

sea-drenched clothes were already starting to dry. She likely wouldn't roast within a day or two either, but with the radio dead, rescue could be any distance away in time.

She shoved through the tropical undergrowth and kept moving, only to see the sea flash into view again almost at once, dead ahead.

"So, the island's tiny..."

The words came out flat with disappointment. No need to walk the whole perimeter to confirm it, there were no houses here. Worse, there seemed to be no spring, no stream, nothing. She'd have to devise some way to catch rain. In these latitudes, a squall or two a day was probably a safe bet, she was turning that over while scanning the terrain from a low rise when her breath caught hard in her throat.

There, in the shadow of a rock formation just ahead, stood something so enormous it had somehow slipped past her notice until this instant. The V of the antenna crowning its head, the massive steel limbs, those unmistakable projections rising off its back, a mobile suit!

And not just any machine.

She had laid eyes on this one before.

An X-number, beyond any doubt, one of the units stolen from the Earth Alliance.

Her gaze dropped in a rush to the base of the rocky shelf. A figure in a red pilot suit had just stepped clear of the machine and begun to walk, and the moment she registered it, her hand snapped to her holster.

"ZAFT!"

He must have caught some sound, because his head jerked up and his eyes found her at once. She fired before she'd even decided to.

The gunshot cracked across the whole of the little island. The soldier ducked under the shot with no time to spare, then tore up the rock ledge with unnerving speed and disappeared. She went sliding down the cliff face after him.

The pack he'd dropped still lay abandoned on the beach. Eyes sweeping her surroundings, she edged toward it. Its mouth had spilled open, and a handgun lay in the sand beside it. If he'd left the weapon behind, then perhaps he was unarmed. Some of the tension left her, and she stooped to retrieve it.

And then, a presence at her back.

She whirled, alarm firing through her, and squeezed the trigger mid-turn. The shot went wide of the soldier, who had already devoured the distance between them, and a kick to her forearm sent the pistol spinning away.

"Ah!"

An instant later the world tipped, and she came down hard on the sand. He had her pinned before she could move. Her eyes opened on the gleam of a blade poised above her head.

He's going to kill me!

"Aaaah!"

The scream ripped free before she could choke it back. The knife, already falling, stopped dead in front of her face.

"A girl?"

Trembling from head to foot, she stared up at the face hanging over hers. He was young, her own age, more or less, a black-haired boy gaping down at her in open astonishment. There was something almost guileless in his features; nothing about him looked like a killer in the act.

He seemed to notice, then, that his hand was braced against her chest, and with an awkward, flustered hesitance he drew it slowly away. The breath she'd been holding finally escaped her, and though the shaking hadn't stopped, she hurled her outrage straight at him.

"Y-you have *got* to be kidding me, don't you people ever quit?!"

What met Mu on his return to the ship, fresh from downing the enemy mothership and a DINN, was word that Cagalli hadn't made it back.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you!"

Murdoch's roar carried up to the bridge through the internal comms. Whether his concern ran more toward the girl or the priceless machine she'd flown off in was anyone's guess.

"I could have gone down there myself, you know!"

Pacing, bristling, Mu fired the words back.

"But that's not how it was!"

When he'd broken away from her, Cagalli's fighter had taken damage, true, but it had still been fully capable of flight. At that, Murrue swung around toward Miriallia at the control station.

"Where did we lose track of her? What about the radio?!"

"Nothing, she isn't responding!"

The answer came out rattled.

"The radar interference is brutal too, we could only follow her as far as the edge of the combat zone..."

A fog of confusion and dread settled across the bridge, and then, "Shall we log her as missing in action?"

Natarle posed it in a level voice yet the words drew Murrue's brows together.

"What does that mean?"

Sai murmured the question, and Tonomura, dropping his own voice to match, replied, "Lost during combat. In practice... 'unconfirmed, but presumed dead', that's what it amounts to for military personnel."

Sai and Miriallia exchanged a stunned look. Murrue leveled a hard stare at the question and answered with unconcealed displeasure.

"That would be jumping the gun, Lieutenant Badgiruel. We have no confirmation she was shot down."

She lifted her eyes to Pal.

"Time until sunset?"

"Roughly one hour!"

"You mean to mount a search?!"

Natarle burst out, appalled.

"This is ZAFT territory!"

Brushing past the objection as if it hadn't been raised, Murrue continued.

"Air search will be difficult at this hour. As soon as quick maintenance and resupply are complete, we'll have to send the Strike down to sweep underwater."

"Captain!"

Natarle's voice climbed, and Murrue turned on her, pinning her with a cutting glare before saying, clipped and cold, "Write whatever suits you in your report. Or the log."

Even Natarle had no answer for that; her expression froze over. Murrue simply faced forward again.

By now, the prospect of one more black mark against her name didn't trouble her in the slightest. If her judgment was going to be put on trial, then she had surely piled up error upon error long before this. Her superiors could rule however they liked once Alaska was reached, if it ever was. But that girl, civilian or not, had strapped herself into the Skygrasper by her own choice to help defend this ship.

Too quick to a fight, perhaps, and too reckless by half, but what drove her was clean and honest, without a trace of hesitation in it. Abandoning her without so much as attempting a search, for her or for the aircraft, was something Murrue simply could not do.

Through Natarle's eyes, maybe hunting for someone who wasn't even one of their own soldiers amounted to nothing but wasted hours.

Kira, freshly returned from the kind of underwater fighting he still hadn't grown accustomed to, voiced not a single complaint when the search order came down; only a shadow passed over that fine-boned face of his. In all likelihood he was worried about Cagalli in the plainest, most honest way there was.

"There should be a distress beacon out there too, but with radio conditions this poor, it's worthless."

Natarle said it while studying the map on the monitor.

"The projected area is scattered with small uninhabited islands. She may have come down on one of them."

"Right," Kira answered, reviewing the sector data that had been sent through. Murrue spoke to him then, her tone weighted with something close to pain.

"I hate to ask this of you when you're already spent... but I'm relying on you."

Loading yet another duty onto this boy, already driven far past any reasonable limit, stung her. But no other means of searching presented itself.

"No, I can manage..."

"Even if you turn up nothing at all, return once two hours are up. We'll work out another approach then."

"I'm fine."

There was a wounded edge to the boy's reply, and Murrue answered it with deliberate steel.

"You need rest as much as anyone... *you* do."

The instant the words left her, the expression on Kira's face drained quietly away on the monitor. It was a harsh way to frame it, but there was no alternative. The ship carried one mobile suit, and one pilot to fly it.

"Two hours. Make certain you come back."

Her voice gone hard, Murrue said it again.

"You're actually with the Earth Forces?"

Speaking as though her answer hardly mattered to him, Athrun stripped the magazine from the pistol the blond girl had been carrying and flicked it into the sea.

"No ID tag on you, either... and I've never once heard a scream like that on a battlefield."

The girl flushed scarlet.

"Excuse me for screaming!"

She lay a short way off on the ground, wrists and ankles bound. He opened an emergency pack, dug out the first-aid kit, and pressed a hemostatic pad against the shallow furrow the bullet had carved across his shoulder earlier.

"You're the one who brought down our transport, aren't you? That was your machine on the beach back there."

The question earned an instant volley in return.

"You're the one who brought down *me*!"

"What's your unit? And why were you flying out there alone?"

"I'm not a soldier!"

Pushing herself upright, she protested as if the very suggestion insulted her.

"I don't belong to any unit! You think I wanted to end up somewhere like this, *whoa*!"

She tried to stand with her limbs still tied, lost her balance, and toppled over in a graceless roll. Watching her thrash there on her back, he had to fight down a laugh.

What a strange creature. Trussed up like that and still bursting with defiance, and yet so off-kilter she edged into the ridiculous.

Minutes ago she'd fired on him with a veteran's reflexes, and yet the scream that had escaped her when he pinned her had been, unmistakably, a girl's, and that scream was what had stayed his blade. Not that his hands were clean of killing unarmed human beings.

"Were you part of the attack on Heliopolis?"

The question came out of nowhere, and it jolted him; he looked at her face again. She was staring dead at him, golden eyes sharp as blades.

"I was there. Inside Heliopolis when you people ripped it apart!"

He offered no reply and started toward the Aegis.

Heliopolis, the place where all of it had started. The Earth Alliance had tucked itself inside a neutral colony and built mobile suits there in secret. To take those machines, he had slipped into the colony, and killed a flesh-and-blood soldier with his own hands for the first time. He had crossed paths with Kira again, and that same Kira had gone on to kill one of his comrades...

Destroying Heliopolis had never been his intention. But say that to the girl, and it would sound like nothing more than an excuse.

Settling into the cockpit, he tried the radio once more. He cycled through every channel, but exactly as when he'd first set down on the island, nothing came through except the white hiss of the atmosphere. Then a downward glance caught the same girl, still bound at wrists and ankles, squirming her way toward escape like an inchworm. She'd resent the comparison, no doubt, but the sight was so absurd that a smile had crept onto his face before he was aware of it.

A little while later, thunder grumbled low on the horizon, and a wet wind came pushing in. The sun, already hanging near the sea's surface, slid behind a wall of heavy cloud, and soon afterward, the rain came racing in.

"A squall?"

He gazed outside with something like fascination, startled by how utterly the landscape had remade itself. Rain hammered down in sheets on a sea gone gray, and the wind lashed the palms until their fronds whipped about like mad things. The ground, bone-dry moments earlier, had broken into a lacework of rivulets, muddy water surging across it.

Nothing about it resembled the manufactured rain of the PLANTS. Confronted with rainfall so lavish it verged on wasteful, he felt it strike him fresh: this was Earth.

When his attention returned to her, the girl and her escape attempt had ended in a trench gouged through the sand, where she now lay wedged, unable to move. Rainwater was sluicing in, and she was well on her way to genuinely drowning in it.

"Honestly..."

If she'd only kept still. Resigned, though not quite able to bury a flicker of amusement, he walked the Aegis over, tilted its shield above her like an awning, and climbed down from the cockpit.

"Hey. What is it you think you're doing?"

She had been straining with everything she had to keep her face clear of the water, but at that she glared upward and snapped back in exasperation.

"Are you blind? I can't move!"

Hardly a thing to announce with such conviction. But the spectacle of her flailing about, grimly determined not to drown, was so ludicrous that what rose in him wasn't anger but laughter.

"Then why are you just standing there?! Stop gawking and help me!"

At last she actually asked for rescue, and he, choking back his laughter, extended a hand.

"You do realize you're in no position to be giving orders?"

"Just move!"

Still snapping at him, she was lifted cleanly out of the water and planted back on her feet. Drenched to the skin and plastered with mud like a half-drowned rat, she fixed him with a look of sullen fury, and then a tiny crab came wriggling out of her hair. They both stared at it, dumbstruck, until it scuttled across his hand and dropped to the ground with a soft plop.

He broke into open laughter.

"What's so hilarious about a crab?!"

She howled it in outrage, and he only just kept himself from doubling over. Honestly, this girl, dead serious, no question about it, and yet funnier than any born comedian. Raising both hands, he took a step back and offered, in a conciliatory tone, an earnest apology.

"My apologies. I'm just not used to any of this."

"What, no crabs in the PLANTS?"

With a snort she turned her face away and went hopping off on her bound feet like a child.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?"

Worried she'd land herself in another puddle or ditch, he called after her.

"Perfect timing, I'm rinsing off!"

Face tipped toward the sky, she stood there savoring the natural shower.

For a while, all he could do was stare.

How she appeared to anyone else seemed to concern her not at all. That was probably exactly why she kept doing things that begged to be laughed at, but by the same measure, standing beneath Earth's rain with her face raised to it, she looked like something the planet itself had produced: natural, unadorned, without one particle of pretense. And the rain that had struck him as pure excess only minutes before suddenly bore down on him with a vivid, physical reality.

"So, this is... Earth."

He walked over to her, drew his knife, and sliced through the ropes at her wrists and ankles. She spun around, startled.

As though justifying himself, he said, "Unarmed, there's a limit to how much trouble you can cause anyway."

"What was that?!"

She flared instantly, and he, smothering another smile, observed, "Looks like a crab got into your clothes too."

"What?!"

Anger forgotten, she yanked her clothes up in a panic. A shore crab tumbled straight out. In the same instant came a flash of wet, white skin, very nearly baring the curve of her breasts along with it.

He froze solid, then turned his back on the spot.

Did this idiot have no grasp whatsoever of the fact that she was a girl? There was carelessness, and then there was *this*.

Red to the tips of his ears, he strode away, and promptly missed his footing and dropped into the very same trench.

In a room at ZAFT's Carpentaria base, Nicol drifted about, unable to settle down anywhere while Dearka lounged in a chair with a magazine. Beyond the window the sky burned red, as though someone had steeped it in dye. The day was already draining away.

"Yzak's late."

The words came out with an edge unusual for him, and Dearka, the picture of contrast, replied at his own unhurried pace.

"It hasn't even been fifteen minutes since the last time you said that."

That couldn't be right, yet a glance at the clock startled Nicol with how precisely Dearka had called it. He lowered himself into the seat opposite for a moment, only for the restlessness to reclaim him and pull him back to his feet.

They had rolled into Carpentaria early that afternoon. The transport carrying Athrun had been held up by mechanical trouble, but even so, it should have caught up within an hour of their own arrival. Instead, however long they waited, there was no trace of it, and just as Yzak's temper had wound tight enough to explode, grim news had arrived.

The transport with Athrun aboard had disappeared over the Indian Ocean.

"Hey, enough with the pacing."

Dearka sounded put out.

"I can't concentrate with you orbiting the room."

"Sorry. It's just... when I imagine what Athrun could be dealing with right now..."

Worry made sitting still impossible for him. Dearka, meanwhile, leafing through a gravure spread, gave a self-satisfied little snort.

"For all we know he's on some southern island, having himself an adventure with a princess."

"Dearka! Now is not the time for jokes!"

Just as Nicol's voice rose, the door swung open. In came Yzak, returning from headquarters, where he'd gone to press for any further news.

"Yzak! Anything about Athrun?"

Blowing past the half-finished question, Yzak spread both arms in a grand theatrical sweep.

"Men of Team Zala! Attention, I am pleased to announce the particulars of our illustrious unit's inaugural assignment! A mission of such staggering importance that nothing in existence could outrank it..."

Dearka slid him a sideways look.

"...the retrieval of our esteemed commanding officer!"

The instant the announcement landed, Yzak and Dearka dissolved into the same idiotic laughter. Nicol went rigid with disgust.

There was nothing funny in any of it. Athrun was missing, and the transport he'd boarded along with him. Had it been an accident, or had it been swallowed up in some engagement?

At moments like this, the N-Jammers felt like a curse laid over the world. If communications still functioned the way they once had, they would at least

know the conditions surrounding the crash. Aircraft could be followed on radar. As things stood, they couldn't even pick up a distress signal.

"Well, if his suit fell out of the sky, then it fell out of the sky."

Yzak was still wearing his grin as he said it.

"Apparently headquarters has its hands full as it is. So the word is: go dig up your own captain yourselves."

"Well, well... hardly an inauspicious way to kick things off, is it?"

Dearka contributed his customary sarcasm.

"That said, the sun's nearly gone. Search kicks off tomorrow, I take it?"

At that from Yzak, Nicol burst out, "What?!"

"He's got the Aegis. Even if he did come down, there's not much cause for hand-wringing. It's not as if he dropped through the atmosphere."

Dearka, the very man who had nearly died doing precisely that, offered this absently, eyes still on his magazine.

"Exactly. That's the shape of it. We bunk in the barracks tonight. The mothership should be squared away by tomorrow, so we move then."

Yzak delivered even this in the same half-joking register as always, and Nicol bit down on his lip. And yet, thinking it through, Athrun really should be with that beloved machine of his. If so, then whatever dangers arose, he ought to be able to slip past them. Yzak and Dearka were treating the whole affair as a joke, seizing the excuse to jeer at a rival, but surely that, too, rested on the assumption that Athrun would come through fine.

He let out a breath and turned his gaze to the blazing sunset beyond the glass. Of everything he had seen on first descending to the surface, nothing had stirred him like the color of Earth's sky, yet now even that beauty could not touch him.

Did a red evening sky promise fair weather tomorrow, or rain? Rain would only make the search harder. He caught himself resenting the fickle weather of this planet.

"I keep telling you, I'm *fine*!"

In the Archangel's hangar, the two pilots stood locked in argument.

"I rested, exactly like I was ordered to, and—"

"Fine? What part of this is *fine*?"

Right at the foot of the gangway leading up to the Strike, Mu was all but hauling the boy away as he protested.

"You call that rest? You lay there on standby for an hour, blew straight past the deadline the captain gave you, and never came back when you were supposed to!"

"But!"

Despite the two-hour order, Kira had pressed the search until the battery was drained nearly dry. And for all that, he had come back with nothing, not Cagalli, not even a hint of what had made her vanish. He was frantic. But the moment he tried to sortie again on next to no rest, Mu had planted himself in the way.

"Five more hours and the sun's up. When it is, I'm going out there too..."

Five hours was an eternity; Kira sank his teeth into his lip. While they stood around doing nothing, Cagalli was...!

The truth was, if she was safe, waiting for daylight would hardly matter. And if she wasn't, then no amount of hurry would undo it. But his mind refused to walk down that road. He wrenched free of the restraining hand and made for the gangway once more, only for his shoulder to be caught in a grip that genuinely hurt.

He went still and looked back up into Mu's face.

"It's not as if I come out of this looking any better..."

The words emerged barely above a whisper, pushed through gritted teeth. Something crossed the man's face, a frustration with nowhere to go.

"Commander..."

Kira's eyes fell, shaken.

Never once had he seen this man, always so easy, so unshakeable, wear an expression like that. He was the one who had cleared Cagalli to launch in the Skygrasper, the one who had let her limp home alone after she took that hit. That call had surely rested on what he'd seen her do in the desert battle, but perhaps he regretted it now, and perhaps he was raging at his own uselessness, knowing nothing could be done before dawn. Flippant as his manner always was, he was the most dependable adult Kira had ever known.

A Natural with combat skill no Natural should have owned, and a head that stayed cold when everything else burned.

And now that same man was second-guessing his own judgment, grinding his teeth at his own powerlessness. The realization cooled Kira's head, and at the same time left something wavering loose inside him. It was the kind of disorientation most children meet sooner or later.

One day, without warning, they learn that adults are every bit as unfinished and breakable as they are.

"I know, I'm the one who signed off on it, so maybe I've got no right to say this, but... don't shoulder all of it alone."

Even then, the words came gently.

"She's a tough kid, that one... once there's light, we'll find her. It'll be all right."

"It'll be all right... it'll be all right..."

Across his back, Kira could still feel the ghost of Cagalli's hand, soothing him with those very words. Thinking of that plain, raw kindness that was so entirely hers, he bowed his head and watched the older man's back recede as he walked away.

"Here."

Cagalli found herself staring, almost against her will, at the cup and ration packet being offered to her. When the young ZAFT soldier saw she wasn't going to respond, he set them down beside her feet.

"Signal conditions are awful. Odds are good we'll be here through the night."

With that, he circled the campfire and settled on the opposite side. The two of them sat facing each other across the flames inside a small cave. The fire itself, and the blanket now wrapped around her, had both come from him. Her clothes, soaked from earlier, hung near the flames to dry.

"The radio's dead because of your side, isn't it?"

She said it with a pout.

He hadn't bound her again; if anything, he'd been quietly looking after her the whole time. She couldn't read his intentions, and so she couldn't take that kindness, if kindness it was, at face value.

He lifted his own cup and brought it to his mouth.

"It was the Earth Forces who fired the first nuclear weapons."

The muttered remark dropped her into sullen silence. It was entirely true, and she had no counter to it. Or rather, since she wasn't actually part of the Earth Forces at all, no counter was required of her, but somewhere along the way, fighting ZAFT, moving at Kira's side, she had come to see herself wholly as one of them.

"ZAFT rations are still food."

He called it across the fire.

"Your pack got carried off by the sea, didn't it?"

She had been glaring at him as if to declare she'd sooner starve than accept the enemy's charity, when, with impeccably rotten timing, her honest stomach let out a loud growl.

Had he heard it?

She looked up to find him fighting a laugh, hastily covering his mouth with the cup.

Sharp ears. Naturally, for a Coordinator.

She gave up the act and reached for the ration pack. ZAFT rations were still food; there was no arguing that. Didn't people say you couldn't fight on an empty stomach? She tore the packet open with a crackle and bit in.

He sat quietly, gazing out of the cave. The moon hung high in the night sky, and in the foreground the mobile suit's silhouette cut a hard shape out of the deep indigo. Firelight wavered across the young soldier's profile.

Like every Coordinator, his features were finely made; his hair was black enough to look almost blue, and his eyes were a vivid green-blue, the color of the stone Ahmed had given her.

This quiet-looking boy was the enemy...

He turned back to the fire and fed another branch to the flames, which had burned down low.

Then it hit her, with a small jolt of alarm, she had started to feel something like ease, sitting here, and she raised her voice as if to chase the feeling out.

"H-hey! Shouldn't you be tying me up or something?!"

He looked up, startled. She glared at him.

"If I get hold of your gun, you'll be the one at my mercy. You'll look like a total fool!"

At that his eyes went wide, and then the laughter escaped him before he could stop it.

"What's so funny?!"

She shouted it, affronted.

"No, it's just... you really don't learn, do you?"

He said it through the laugh, but then the laughter cut out all at once, and he looked away from her face.

"If you go for my gun, I won't have any choice but to kill you."

Her breath caught. In a quiet voice, he continued.

"So, don't. Not that. Heliopolis, and now here, you came through alive both times, didn't you?"

"Hmph! Never imagined the day ZAFT would fret over my life!"

She flung it back with manufactured bravado.

Silence settled between them. Something snapped sharply in the fire.

After a moment, the young soldier spoke.

"About Heliopolis... we never expected it to end that way either..."

His gaze went to the mobile suit beyond the cave mouth.

"The Earth Forces' mobile suits Morgenroete was building, taking those should have been the end of it..."

The note of excuse in his voice lit her fuse instantly.

"What good does saying that do now?! Dress it up however you want, you attacked that colony and you *destroyed* it!"

"Orb called itself neutral, and yet it's also a fact that they were building something like that *inside* Heliopolis."

The reply died in her throat. She had nothing.

"We fight to protect the PLANTs. There was no version of this where we let that pass."

"Th-that goes for Earth too! We're fighting because your side came down and started tearing everything on Earth apart—!"

She fought back with everything she had. His words could not be allowed to stand. If she let them, it felt somehow as though she'd be betraying the friends from the desert who had fought beside her and died there.

But at the low words that came next, every word she owned deserted her.

"My mother was on Junius Seven..."

Junius Seven, of course she knew the name. Bloody Valentine, the tragedy of the PLANTs, nuclear missiles fired into them by the Alliance without provocation.

"It was an agricultural PLANT, nothing more! People who had done nothing died in a single instant, children with them! You think anyone could just swallow that in silence?!"

The boy's shout came thick with pain, and she shouted back with equal fury.

"Plenty of my friends died too! In *your* attacks!"

For a while they simply glared at each other. Under her gaze, the face that had been twisted with rage a moment before slowly found its calm again.

"Forget it. There's nothing to be gained hashing this out with you, here."

He said it in the same quiet voice as before, and she turned away with a snort and stood. Cinching the blanket around herself, she wandered out of the cave.

He was right, she'd been thinking the same thing herself. There was no point in unloading her anger onto this boy. He hadn't killed Ahmed and the others. And yet... the hands that had killed them belonged, beyond question, to ZAFT. Torn and adrift, she raised her eyes to the towering silhouette of the mobile suit.

And when she traced how that machine had come to exist in the first place, the familiar ache started up in her chest, needling her the way it always did. No, she was no part of the Earth Alliance, but she was tangled in this affair far more deeply than Kira and the others could ever guess. Deeply enough that when the Strike had risen before her in the desert, she had felt the brush of a fate there was no escaping.

Yes. Remembering how those mobile suits had been born, remembering what had happened at Junius Seven, she could not honestly say the fault lay with the enemy alone. And that enraged her. Straightforward as she was by nature, this murk, this state where nothing divided cleanly into black and white, sat deep in her like a splinter. If she could only say, "You're the one in the wrong," and leave it there, how much lighter everything would be.

But she was too honest with herself to turn her back on the problem with that and nothing more. Letting out a sigh heavy with frustration, she turned to go back inside.

The young soldier sat with his head tipped against the cave wall, eyes shut. Startled, she raised her voice.

"H-hey! Don't tell me you're falling asleep!"

"Mm...?"

His eyes opened and found her.

"No... I'm awake... it's just, straight off reentry, then all this moving around..."

But the words grew harder and harder to follow, then his head dipped with a soft thunk, and his breathing slid over into sleep.

"Hey!"

By falling asleep in front of a prisoner he hadn't even restrained, he was all but insulting her. In other words, he'd already concluded she would never strike back, or that if she tried, she couldn't possibly win.

She looked down at the boy's defenseless sleeping face and let out a sigh.

"Don't sleep with the enemy sitting right here, idiot."

Every trace of tension had melted from his sleeping features; he looked almost like a child. Her eyes lingered on his face for a while, then, without meaning to, dropped to the holster at his hip. The instant she caught herself looking, she wrenched her gaze away. Like a child caught red-handed, she crept back around to the far side of the fire and lowered herself into her old spot.

What a strange one, she thought. Right up to the moment he'd raised that knife over her, he had been as precise and pitiless as a machine. And yet not

only had her scream stopped him from killing her, he had cut her loose and left her free. Granted, she held no value and no standing as a prisoner, not being Earth Forces in the first place, but why leave unguarded someone he'd once been prepared to kill?

Of course, she herself could never stoop to anything as low as killing a sleeping opponent. No, if she was honest, even wide awake, she no longer felt she could kill this soldier at all.

Could it be the same for him? Had he dropped off without so much as guarding himself not out of contempt, but out of trust?

Almost fearfully, she turned her eyes outside. The mobile suit's immense form, washed in moonlight, forced its way into her vision.

Heliopolis in ruins... She and the others had drifted through space in a lifeboat amid the wreckage of that shattered colony. Streets where people had lived out quiet lives, wiped away in an instant and swallowed into the vacuum dark.

And then the desert town, burning itself down beneath pillars of flame. Its people had lived on the barest edge of survival, and still they had fought for their freedom. The body of a boy kicked skyward by a BuCUE, one life, far too young, crushed as thoughtlessly as an insect.

Still wrapped in the blanket, she rose. The young soldier slept on, oblivious even to her approach.

Wake up!

Half of her heart wanted him to sense her, to open his eyes. Open them, and then she could laugh the whole thing off somehow and return to where she'd been sitting... back to that strange, unaccountably comfortable stretch of time, as if none of this had happened...

But he went on sleeping, and she sank soundlessly to her knees beside him and reached out, slowly, with one hand.

"If you go for my gun, I won't have any choice but to kill you..."

The words he'd forced out so painfully returned to her ears, and her hand wavered. In that moment a log burst in the fire with a sharp pop. She flinched, and his eyes snapped open.

On raw reflex she seized the gun, flung the blanket over him, and sprang back.

"You—!"

He barked it, tearing off the blanket that had fallen over his head and locking his stare on her, on the gun now in her hands. With a snap, the blade of the knife in his fist sprang free.

"Sorry!"

Clutching the gun in shaking hands, she shouted, "I'm not trying to shoot you! But—!"

Her face crumpled as though tears were a breath away.

"That thing is going to attack Earth again, isn't it?!"

At her words, something like dismay flickered across his face.

She didn't hate this boy, if anything, strangely, something close to affection had begun to take root in her.



"I know Orb was wrong to build it! I know that! But that thing, that mobile suit, it's going to kill so many people on Earth, isn't it?!"

The faces of her dead comrades streamed through her mind. Almost none of them had managed even to resist. They had simply been killed, by ZAFT mobile suits. If she didn't deal with this machine now, more sacrifices just like them would follow!

He stared at her in silence for a moment, then said, quietly, "Then shoot."

Her heart lurched. Nothing remained on his face of the emotion that had surfaced there seconds before.

"I'm the one pulling that trigger."

He went on in the same flat voice.

"I'm a ZAFT pilot. I can't let you touch the machine. If you insist on this, then I will... kill you."

She stared at him, stunned. Cold sweat slicked the grip in her hand.

Kill her, she had never taken the gun with anything like that in mind. All she had wanted was the upper hand, the power to destroy that machine. That was all, and yet it was not something that could stop there.

The one pulling the trigger was this boy. Destroy the mobile suit, and he still would not stop fighting.

"So long as you're the pilot of that mobile suit, that makes you and me enemies..."

Without warning, words another Coordinator had once spoken came back to her. Enemies...

This was the enemy...?

"So, in the end, must one side truly be destroyed?"

The words of that enemy commander, words that had once seemed self-evident, now bore down on her carrying an entirely different weight.

Did she really have to kill him? All she wanted was to protect, to save the people he intended to kill. And yet he was no different. He too fought so that his own people would not be slaughtered. Both of them wanted the very same thing, and still!

Her fingers clamped down hard around the gun. Then, in the next breath, she hurled it away with all the strength in her arm.

"Damn everything!"

His eyes flew wide, and he lunged at her, just as a deafening blast slammed against her eardrums and she found herself driven to the ground beneath him. A beat later, understanding arrived. The gun she'd thrown had discharged on impact.

"Idiot!"

Sprawled over her, he shouted in fury.

"Who throws a gun with the bolt open?!"

"S-sorry..."

Swept under by the momentum of it all, she could only murmur the apology in a daze. He pushed himself up, wearing a look of drained disbelief, and glared down at her again.

"Seriously... what is wrong with you?"

"Well... I mean... that is..."

She mumbled uselessly into herself. The danger of a gun going off like that had slipped entirely out of her head. If Kisaka, the man who had drilled her on firearms, ever heard about this, he would probably weep.

Still, a slower thought caught up with her, and she looked at him again.

Had he... just shielded her...?

Then she saw it: the side of his pilot suit had torn open, and blood was welling through.

"That—! Is that from just now?!"

At her cry, he glanced down at the wound.

"Yeah. Nothing serious."

"You have to treat it!"

"Leave it alone."

Turning his eyes from hers, he stood and reached for the emergency pack.

"I-I'll do it!"

She scrambled after him and snatched the pack up first. Looking faintly wary, he tugged at the strap.

"I can manage on my own."

"I said I'll do it!"

"It's fine..."

"Enough! Just let me!"

Hugging the pack against herself, she glared at him with eyes beginning to shine wet.

"At this rate the debt just keeps piling up! Let me pay some of it back!"

He blinked at her, a little vacantly, then gave a rueful smile. And then, deliberately, he looked away again.

"Before that... uh... maybe put some clothes on?"

Only then did it register that she was still sitting there in her underthings, and she dropped down in a scrambling flurry.

"D-don't look!"

"I-I'm not looking, that's what I'm telling you."

Without turning around, he answered in a voice pitched strangely high.

"They should be dry by now."

Just as he said, the clothes hung around the fire had dried almost completely. Pulling them on in a hurry, she kept stealing glances his way.

What a strange one. He had taken a wound shielding the very person he'd sworn to kill; he had been cool and exact as a born killer, and yet one glimpse of a girl in her underwear was enough to knock him completely off his axis.

And yet, facing him, she had not been able to pull the trigger in the end.

This was the moment when she, too, stood for the first time before a living, breathing enemy, an enemy her own age, as human and alive as she was.

Birdsong had begun to thread itself through the wash of waves that had murmured on without pause since nightfall.

"That bird keeps a remarkably steady rhythm," Athrun thought, half-submerged in sleep, before snapping fully awake. It was no bird. It was an electronic signal."

The campfire had guttered down to nothing. He bolted past the girl, who lay curled beside its remains still deep in sleep, and stood restless through the handful of seconds it took the ladder to fully extend before vaulting up into the Aegis's cockpit. The sound was bleeding from the radio, a signal had finally broken through. He threw the comm open.

"—s... Athrun... can you hear... respond..."

Through a wall of static, a voice he knew.

"Nicol?!"

The instant he shouted the name into the receiver, the reply came surging back.

"Athrun! Thank God, we're reading your signal right now, we can get your posi—"

"What's going on?!"

The girl's voice cut in from below, and he leaned to look outside. She had woken too, standing at the foot of the Aegis with her fists pressed against her eyes, squinting up at the cockpit.

"The radio's working again!"

He called the answer down to her, but before the words had even settled, a second alert seized his attention, one of the sonobuoys he had deployed offshore was registering an underwater approach. He checked the reading, then descended the ladder back to where she stood.

"My people are sending someone. And something else is moving in from the ocean."

He delivered both pieces of news at once.

"Coming from the direction of your machine."

That meant the island's far shore. She cast an uneasy glance over her shoulder.

"I need to get the Aegis out of sight."

At that, she cocked her head slightly.

"Hm?"

"If there's any way to avoid it, I'd rather not start a battle in a place like this..."

Something in those words seemed to recall her to the reality of what they were to each other. The haze lifted from her face, and she gave a short nod.

"Yeah... I should head back to my machine too. I'll find somewhere to tuck in and see how things play out."

She turned one last lingering look up at the Aegis, something complicated moving behind her expression, then faced him again. A smile surfaced, stiff, a little clumsy.

"Well then..."

It was as though both of them were only now stirring from a shared dream. A boy and a girl with no business ever having crossed paths had passed the same hours beside the same dying fire. And now that dawn had

arrived, each would slip back into the separate world to which they belonged.

"Like Cinderella," Athrun thought, watching her figure shrink into the distance, and the notion was so far removed from anything he would normally think that he nearly laughed out loud. Then again, no one was less suited to the role of fairy-tale princess than that girl. Coarse, heedless, perpetually teetering between fury and the verge of tears, without the faintest concern for how she appeared to anyone around her.

All at once something that felt like reluctance clenched in his chest, and he raised his voice toward her retreating back.

"Hey—*you*!"

She stopped and turned.

"You're really not part of the Earth Forces?!"

"No, I'm not!"

She flung the denial back at him with such artless force that he couldn't help but smile, and then the smile died halfway, frozen in place.

"Even though none of you are military, all of you still..."

For one sharp instant, the face of his oldest friend surfaced unbidden in his mind. Then her voice came hurtling back across the distance.

"It's Cagalli! What about you?!"

Caught off guard, he looked up. She was still standing exactly where she had stopped, watching him. Cagalli, so that was her name. All those long hours together, and they had never once thought to trade names.

"Athrun!"

He called it back to her. She nodded once, pivoted sharply, and broke into a run.

He stood there a while longer, watching until she was gone.

His mind retraced everything that had unfolded since the day before, and it unsettled him to realize how quickly it had already begun to soften, taking on that blurred, bittersweet ache that belonged to memories far older than this one. Had he not thought to ask her name, he might well have let himself believe none of it had ever happened.

Cagalli... huh.

So that it would not slip away, he spoke the name once more within the quiet of his own mind.

Phase.03

"Maybe there's just no way out of this."

It was the same grievance Kuzzey had been circling all day, breathed out once more across the Archangel's mess hall, and this time Sai took it up.

"Look, Alaska is where we're headed. Swinging by Orb would only take us off course."

"And say we did stop there, what then?" Miriallia put in, level-headed as always. "We're enlisted now. They made it clear no one walks away in the middle of an operation."

"But—" Kuzzey pushed back, refusing to let it drop. "None of this was ever the plan. All we signed on for was the trip down to Alaska. If that was really all it was, then I..."

Sai's eyes met Miriallia's, and each released a quiet breath of their own, visibly weary of Kuzzey dredging up, this late in the game, his wish to turn back for Orb. And yet the ship truly was threading waters within reach of home, and once the thought took hold that just a short run south lay everything familiar, perhaps the urge to flee a voyage this perilous, one battle bleeding into the next, was only human.

Passing along the corridor outside, Cagalli caught a fragment of their conversation, and something complicated crossed her face. Beside her, Kisaka spoke her name in a voice that seemed to read her mind clean through.

"Cagalli."

Since then, she had been pulled safely off the deserted island.

At first light, Skygrasper Unit One had lifted from the Archangel, homed in on the distress beacon, and, with the Strike pushing through the water below, located Unit Two where it had come down hard in the shallows.

As a matter of course, Petty Officer Murdoch had delivered a comprehensive dressing-down over the wrecked machine, and Kisaka's rebuke had arrived without a single word. The only person who had greeted her survival with anything close to tears of relief was Kira.

Kind of cute, she had caught herself thinking, just a little.

"I know, all right? So, keep it to yourself! And I haven't breathed a word to those idiots!"

She fired the retort at Kisaka under her breath, cutting off whatever he'd been about to say. He searched her face with a skeptical eye, then murmured, half to himself, "Fine, then."

"It's not as if the thought never crossed my mind, 'if it ever comes to that.'"

"Cagalli."

Now the reproach in his voice was unmistakable, and she rounded on him with a glare.

"Well, what am I *supposed* to do about it?!" she snapped. "I understand the situation, believe me, I do... but I can't get rid of this feeling that this ship, and that guy, cannot be allowed to go down!"

That was the reason she had bulldozed her way aboard the Archangel, all but forcing their hand, while keeping secrets of her own.

Kisaka had protested, naturally. But he understood perfectly well that if he mishandled her, she was entirely capable of smuggling herself aboard alone, and so in the end he had yielded. And in truth, she suspected that somewhere beneath that stony surface, he had taken this ship's side as well.

Not that he was the kind of man who would ever let her glimpse it.

With the truth still under lock and key, she couldn't say how much use she would really be. In the beginning her feelings toward this vessel and the Strike had been tangled things, but by now, the refusal to watch them be destroyed had outgrown everything else.

He was studying her, and across that rough, unreadable face drifted the faintest shadow of something like bafflement. She answered it with a small smile, and said, only half in jest,

"Call it Haumea's guidance."

At the invocation of her homeland's chief goddess, one of Kisaka's eyebrows climbed in open disapproval, and just then Kira appeared at the far end of the corridor, and every trace of the conversation left her as her face broke into a grin.

"Hey."

"Hey."

He smiled back and raised a hand in easy greeting; she smacked the offered palm, and he blinked, startled, then gave a small crooked smile as they slid past each other.

At the mess hall doorway, Kira caught sight of Sai, Miriallia, and Kuzzey, and for a heartbeat his feet stopped. They saw him in the same instant, their conversation guttering out, and both sides glanced aside with the same stiff, uncomfortable air. Feigning that none of it mattered, he made for the drinks dispenser.

"How's Flay doing? The seasickness?"

Miriallia alone rose and came to speak with him. Not long after they'd put out to sea, Flay had begun complaining of nausea and retreated to her bunk. And yet this was a colossal ship, to Kira's senses it scarcely swayed at all. Her nerves, he supposed, simply ran that way.

"Yeah, she got some medicine down... she's still moaning about it, though."

He had offered to help however he could, but Flay's only answer was, "As long as you're here, Kira, I'll be fine."

The words landed on him strangely.

Tending to her had been a disorienting business, and yet some part of him warmed to it. It gave him the feeling, however faint, of being necessary to someone.

Flay didn't love him. He understood that. He stayed with her anyway, because he was terrified of surrendering the warmth she had once shown

him, and because a coward's dread seized him at the thought of dragging the truth into daylight. So long as it went unspoken, he could keep his eyes averted from it, and maybe, just maybe, everything would sort itself out. Maybe, if things simply stayed as they were, what lay between them would ripen into something genuine. That was the lie he permitted himself.

"Well, if you need anything, just say so."

"Yeah... thanks."

Kira collected two drinks and, the exchange with Miriallia finished, moved off quickly, eager to be gone. As he made to slip past behind Sai's chair, a low voice reached him.

"I'm counting on you."

He went rigid, the words jolting through him. Sai's gaze never lifted from the table. Clumsily, Kira managed a nod.

"Y-yeah..."

And he kept walking.

How did everything come to this?

The question surfaced in his mind unbidden.

He could no longer even meet the eyes of Sai and the others, people who were supposed to be his friends, and he was clinging to Flay, who felt nothing for him at all.

Why...?

That was when the alarm tore through the ship.

What had fallen upon the Archangel was the X-series team: Aegis, Duel, Buster, and Blitz.

"Even all the way out here?!"

At the sight of the squad that had dogged them for so long, the same trapped expression clamped down on every face aboard. Mounted on Guuls, the X-series machines carved freely through the sky, circling the Archangel and striking from every quarter.

The Buster loosed its long-range high-energy sniper rifle; the ship slipped the shot by the narrowest margin, but the concussion ran the length of the hull in a shuddering rattle.

They had entered a stretch of sea strewn with small islands. The transparent water caught the sun and flung it back in scattered flashes, burning blue. Into the heart of that tranquil scenery, a battle to the death had come.

Ground down by the crushing firepower the X-series carried, the Archangel was being backed step by step into a corner. Several rounds had already found their mark, and threads of black smoke were beginning to climb from one place after another along the white hull.

The Skygrasper launched; the Strike rose onto the upper deck. The fighter went hunting the Buster, the heaviest gun on the field, to keep it occupied, while the Strike, fitted with the Aile Striker, sighted from the deck on the enemy machines slashing through the air above.

"Igelstellungen Five and Seven are hit!"



"Damage ratio has passed twenty-five percent!"

As the reports of fresh damage came pouring in, Murrue's expression hardened with alarm.

"Aegis and Blitz, closing fast!"

Natarle's order came out raw-edged and loud.

"Ready the Wombat! Target the Guuls, and relay that to the Strike!"

"The Guuls, ma'am?!"

Miriallia echoed, and Tonomura shot back in a rush,

"The platforms the mobile suits are riding to stay airborne!"

"Y-yes, sir!"

Out on the deck, Kira took in the order and turned his face to the sky. The X-series units themselves sat behind Phase Shift armor, true enough, but their Guuls carried no such protection. Strip away their legs, and any machine that couldn't fly on its own would do nothing but plummet. Exactly like the Strike.

All this time he had been fending off the Aegis, which kept angling for the engine block. Then, with no warning, the Duel knifed in between them. Turning the beam aside on his shield, Kira looked coolly down his sights and squeezed the trigger. The rifle's beam drilled clean through the Duel's Guul, and it burst apart. In the same breath the Duel flung the wreck away, drew its beam saber, and threw itself at the Strike.

"He's moving in for CQB?!"

Kira lit his verniers and vaulted skyward, pulling his own saber free as he climbed. Two burning threads of beam-light scored the air, and an instant later the Duel's saber was severed at the hilt, its blade winking out of existence.

Riding the momentum of that downward stroke, the Strike wheeled through a clean arc, and kicked off the Duel's own frame, using it as a springboard to launch itself higher still.

Waiting above was the Blitz, swooping in to shield its endangered comrade. The Strike's second leap defied all expectation; the Blitz had no time to answer it and caught the full body blow head-on. It scrambled to take the impact on its shield, but the collision hammered it clean off its Guul.

Watching the machine tumble toward the water, Kira ran his saber through the Guul it had abandoned, then fired his verniers and dropped back down onto the deck.

"Two to go!"

He raised his eyes to the red machine among the survivors, and his face contorted around the bitterness rising thick in his chest.

"The footage you are seeing shows a battle unfolding at this very moment, a mere twenty kilometers from our territorial waters..."

A newscaster's voice, bright with barely contained excitement, cycled through the same facts again and again. On the screen, a white warship trailed smoke as it wove through evasive turns, mobile suits and fighter craft

swarming around it, while the word LIVE sat fixed in one corner of the frame.

"The government, bracing for any unforeseen development, has already ordered a military deployment and called an emergency summit of the heads of state..."

Along the streets, passersby found themselves halting beneath the giant public monitors, faces tipped upward toward the battle, trading animated remarks. But there was no true weight in any of it. The life-and-death struggle raging just beyond their nation's border might as well have been an exceptionally well-produced film.

The nation was called the Orb Union.

Set squarely on the equator, its ring of volcanic islands was known as the Orb Archipelago, more than twenty island clusters arranged in a circle, like a crown laid on the sea.

A neutral state, it had grown rich chiefly on industry and the operation of its spaceport. This was Yalafath Island, seat of the capital, Olofat: high-rises crowded the shoreline to its very lip, as if to advertise an economic might wildly out of scale with the country's meager land, packed so tight that a single tremor, it seemed, might tip them all into the water. Behind the city rose the soft-shouldered slopes of Haumea, an active volcano, whose geothermal heat fed the industry that had become the engine of Orb's rise.

"...and has lodged forceful protests with both ZAFT headquarters in Carpentaria and Earth Forces headquarters in Alaska, demanding that both militaries pull back from the surrounding waters..."

Elsewhere, other men were watching that same live feed with grave faces, their voices pitched low. A long, narrow table ran through a spacious chamber, people ranged along every side.

This was the nation's seat of government, and those assembled were the chiefs of its member states together with their aides. The man seated at the table's center turned to his left, toward a middle-aged figure whose long hair spilled to his shoulders above a beard.

"Lord Uzumi..."

The bearded man, who had been fixing the monitor with a severe stare, released a single sigh at being addressed and settled back into his chair, unhurried.

"This nation's policy admits no exceptions where armed vessels enter our territorial waters uninvited... Representative Homura."

At those words, a troubled look crossed the other man's rough-hewn features.

"Y-yes... and yet..."

"I confess the live broadcast is not entirely to my liking," Uzumi murmured, almost as if speaking to himself, and only then did Homura seem to grasp the problem, hurriedly beckoning one of his attendants to his side.

This man, Uzumi Nara Athha, had once served as Orb's representative chief. A certain scandal had toppled him from the post and passed it to his

younger brother, Homura; yet as the exchange had just laid bare, the real authority remained in his hands.

With sharp eyes that betrayed almost nothing of what moved behind them, he kept his gaze locked on the image flickering across the screen.

In a corridor shuddering under blow after blow, Cagalli lost her footing and threw a hand out against the wall to steady herself.

"Damn it!"

She drove a fist into the bulkhead and pressed on, regret roiling in her gut. Moments earlier, among the machines swarming the Archangel, she had picked out one unit painted a vivid red. The first time she'd laid eyes on it, it had sat inert, its armor a lifeless steel gray, but even so,

"Athrun!"

The young soldier's face rose in her memory, washed in the light of a campfire.

"Should I have just... pulled the trigger when I had him?"

If she had put a bullet in that man when the chance was hers, the ship might not be fighting for its life now. The thought turned her stomach.

Lurching down the pitching corridor, she sprinted for the elevator to the bridge and threw herself inside.

"Cagalli! Stop, what do you think you're doing?!"

Kisaka had chased her down and seized her by the arm. Writhing, fighting to tear herself loose, she screamed.

"Let go of me! We're going to sink at this rate! This close to Orb!"

The elevator doors slid closed with both of them inside. She hammered at the wall in fury.

"This, I can't just—damn everything!"

This was precisely what she had dreaded, the very reason she had taken up that gun. She and Athrun stood on opposite sides of a war. She had understood, even then, that letting him walk away would lead to exactly this. And still she hadn't been able to kill him. Even now, if he were standing in front of her, she doubted she could bring herself to fire. The need to defend what had to be defended and the hesitation to take a life were grinding her heart between them.

The doors parted, and the taut voices of the bridge flooded over her.

"Orb fleet holding at the territorial line!"

"They've come to save us!"

Hope seeped into Kuzzey's voice at Chandra's report, and Murrue's cold order crushed it in the same breath.

"We're too near their waters! Hard to starboard, fifteen degrees!"

The Heliopolis kids gaped at her, struck dumb. Even Neumann started to object, "But—!" She cut across him, her voice level.

"Come any closer, and they will open fire on us!"

"That can't be right!"

Kuzzey's voice cracked with disbelief. To them, Orb meant home. That their own country's warships might turn their guns on them was a thought

they simply had no room for. But seen from Orb's side, they were Earth Alliance military, and the moment they breached territorial waters, ZAFT or Alliance made no difference at all. Anyone who trespassed on Orb's sovereignty would meet the same answer.

Facing the boys, who still looked at her as though the words refused to register, Murrue pressed the truth on them without mercy.

"Orb is not our ally! In peacetime, perhaps, but under these circumstances—"

Cagalli couldn't stand it a second longer. She burst onto the bridge, shouting,

"None of that matters! Hold your heading and run straight into their waters!"

The crew whipped around at the sound of her voice, astonished. She charged straight for the captain's chair.

"I'll talk to Orb myself! Move!"

"You'll... do what? But—"

Murrue had barely begun her bewildered question when,

"Transmission coming in from the deployed Orb vessels!"

Pal called it out and threw the comm feed onto the main monitor. The picture was grainy, but it showed an officer who looked to be in command of the fleet.

"This is a warning to the approaching Earth Forces vessel and to ZAFT forces."

Cagalli's eyes darted to Kisaka before she could stop them, then she thought better of it and locked her gaze on the screen.

"You are nearing the territorial waters and sovereign airspace of the Orb Union. As a neutral state, we permit no violation of our waters or skies by armed warships, aircraft, mobile suits, or any comparable forces, under any circumstances whatsoever. Alter your course immediately!"

Kuzzey and the others listened, still unable to absorb it, as a serviceman of their own nation delivered those words, while Murrue and the regular crew set their jaws.

"I say again: change course at once! Should this warning go unheeded, our nation will invoke its right of self-defense and fire upon your vessels!"

"F-fire... on us too? No!"

The cry escaped Kuzzey before he could catch it, and Tolle and the others stared, stricken. The rest of the crew took it differently.

"Some neutrality that is. The Archangel came out of an Orb shipyard!"

Chandra spat the words under his breath. Cagalli's shoulders gave a single flinch, but an instant later she was shouting as she raced for the communications station.

"Forget all of that! Take us straight into their waters!"

She ripped the headset off Kuzzey, keyed the mike live, and yelled into it,

"You can watch what's happening out there and still stand by a speech like that?!"

At the sheer audacity of the reply, the officer's eyes went wide on the screen.

"The Archangel is entering Orb territorial waters as of now! And you *will* hold your fire!"

The imperiousness of it made the man glare out of the monitor at her, openly affronted.

"And just who the hell are you?!"

She didn't yield an inch.

"Who the hell are you?! If it's above your pay grade, then patch me through to the government! Get my father—"

For the space of a heartbeat she faltered, and then, at last, she shouted it out.

"Get me Uzumi Nara Athha! I am... I am Cagalli Yula Athha!"

At her side, Kuzzey sucked in a breath through his teeth.

There wasn't a citizen of Orb alive who didn't know the name Uzumi Nara Athha. Who could possibly fail to recognize their own nation's head of state, former head of state, granted, and the patriarch of the storied ruling house of Athha?

And if she was calling that Uzumi "father," then that made her...

On the bridge, where every sound seemed to have been struck dead at once, only Kisaka offered a small shrug, as if to say there had never been any other answer.

The officer on the far side of the monitor had likewise gone blank for several long seconds after her declaration. He swallowed hard, and only once he had shaken off the stupor did words finally come.

"W-what absurd nonsense is this?! As if the princess would ever be aboard a ship like that!"

It was hardly an unreasonable reaction, but Cagalli, her eyes already brimming with furious heat, fired back on the instant.

"Say that again?!"

The officer hurried on.

"E-even supposing, purely for argument's sake, that it were true! No one could act on a claim like that without a shred of proof!"

"You son of a—!"

She was drawing breath to roar at him once more when the transmission cut out without warning. "Hey!" she shouted into the mike, but nothing answered except white static. All the while, the crew could only stand and stare at her, still reeling.

Then, in that instant, a savage upward jolt hauled every one of them back to reality whether they wanted it or not. Perhaps rattled by the prospect of Orb wading in, the Buster had opened up with its rifle in a rapid volley. It clearly meant to break the Archangel before the situation could tangle any further.

The Skygrasper, refusing to allow it, poured a stream of fire from its launcher at the Buster. Like a man swatting at a persistent fly, the Buster swung around and drew a bead on the fighter as it banked away. The shot

went wide, slamming into the sea near the Orb fleet, and a vast column of superheated water flashed to steam in an instant.

Then the Buster came driving in once more, round after round, lining up on the Archangel again. In that moment, the Strike picked it off from the deck. The beam ran the Guul clean through; it erupted in flame, and the Buster plunged nose-first into the sea.

But the final round it loosed as its balance failed struck the Archangel's engines square on.

The ship bucked under the brutal hit and canted hard over. On the bridge, where cries broke from every quarter, Cagalli, still on her feet beside the raised communications station, was hurled clear, and Kisaka caught her from below.

"Engines one and two are hit! Seal the bulkheads, Blocks 48 through 55!"

"Thrust is dropping!"

"We can't maintain altitude!"

The hopeless reports came stacking in from all directions, one on top of another, and Murrue bit down hard on her lip.

Up on the deck, the Strike was still trading furious blows with the last enemy standing, the Aegis.

Kuzzey folded into a crouch with his hands clamped over his head, while Neumann and Tolle wrestled the controls, fighting to hold the faltering ship steady.

Into the chaos of the bridge, Kisaka abruptly murmured to Murrue, "At this stage, no one could blame you if you happened to fall into territorial waters."

Murrue turned to stare at him before she could help it, and Cagalli, too, looked up in surprise. The ghost of humor crossing his blunt, unsmiling features, the man went on,

"Nothing to worry about. The gunners of the Second Escort Fleet are first-rate, they'll see to it."

For a single instant, a look of perfect understanding passed between Kisaka and Murrue. Then she breathed back, "Understood," and turned toward the helm.

"Ensign Neumann! Simulate loss of control and take us down into Orb waters! And no one is to fire on an Orb vessel under any circumstances! Relay that to Commander La Flaga and Ensign Yamato as well!"

The second half she flung toward the CIC, and Neumann and Miriallia answered in the same breath, confusion coloring both their voices.

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

Belching thick black smoke, the Archangel dropped in a deepening tilt and came down in a great splash amid the ships of the Orb fleet.

"They mean to punch straight through?!"

Watching it play out from the Aegis's cockpit, Athrun couldn't keep the astonishment out of his voice. Then the Orb fleet's warning rolled out across every frequency.

"Should this warning go unheeded, our nation will, from this moment, exercise its right of self-defense!"

The instant the message ended, the bombardment opened, and shell after countless shell came hammering down around the Archangel. Pillars of water climbed skyward, one on the heels of another, until the ship's white silhouette had all but vanished behind them.

When he edged nearer the territorial line to see for himself, rounds began arcing toward him as well. Weaving between them, he worked his Guul around and tried to lay his rifle's sights on the ship's half-hidden outline, but as if placed there for exactly that purpose, an attack helicopter slid across his firing line.

"Tch!"

He lowered the rifle, frustration biting. His battery was running on fumes besides. There was nothing left for him to do here.

For one last moment, confusion written across his face, he watched the Archangel where it lay pinned beneath that pitiless rain of fire.

"Kira... I had no idea he'd come this far..."

In the brief span since their parting, the Strike had become a weapon in the hands of a terrifyingly capable pilot. Alone, without so much as a Guul to lend it mobility, it had torn the fighting strength out of three X-series machines.

"Hesitate to shoot, and the one shot next may be you..."

Rau's words settled over him now with the weight of prophecy fulfilled.

"And then there's..."

What had shaken him even more deeply was the exchange between the Orb fleet and Cagalli minutes before. Broadcast across every frequency, their conversation had, naturally, reached his ears too.

Cagalli... Cagalli Yula Athha...?

He had even entertained the possibility of a stranger with the same voice, but no, that voice had belonged unmistakably to Cagalli, the girl he'd passed a night with on that deserted island.

"So, she really was a princess all along..."

The thought pulled a laugh out of him despite everything. Back then, she had struck him as the last girl in the world you'd attach a word as dainty as princess to.

Shaking the mood off before it could curdle into sentiment, he swung his Guul around toward the mothership.

"Very well... a farce of the lowest order, but there's no helping it now."

In the cabinet chamber of Orb's administrative government, Uzumi Nara Athha pronounced it grimly and rose from his seat. The same strained look sat on every minister's face.

For Orb, this went well beyond a simple breach of territorial waters; the complications ran deeper. Granted, the presence of Cagalli, the former representative's only daughter, aboard the offending vessel made everything thornier still, but that was hardly the whole of it.

"The language of the official statement?"

"The second draft is already prepared..."

Prompting the room with the practiced ease of a man conducting himself no differently than in his days as formal representative chief, Uzumi watched the secretary hurry the draft over in both hands, not to the sitting representative, but to him. No one present found anything odd in that. He skimmed the text.

"This will serve. Leave the matter in my hands. As for that ship, and Morgenroete, I will deal with them personally."

He said it for Representative Homura's benefit and turned for the door.

The sitting representative inclined his head, and as if on that cue the assembled chiefs rose and fell to debating the road ahead.

Somewhere among them, one voice carried just far enough to be heard.

"Whichever way you turn it, that ship is nothing but trouble..."

Uzumi stopped cold and turned his head a fraction over one shoulder.

"There is nothing to be gained by saying so now."

The rebuke landed like a nail driven flush, and the chiefs dropped their gazes.

His expression severe, he strode from the room.

"Per your instructions, bring your vessel into dock."

The transmission came from the escort ship guiding them in, the same officer as before, now delivering his orders in stiff, ceremonial tones. After the line to Cagalli had been cut, the bridge on his end had doubtless dissolved into pandemonium as they checked with the government and untangled everything that followed.

Flanked fore and aft by escort vessels, less a guard than a watch, Murrue and the others were closing on one of the islands of the Orb archipelago. A colossal hatch, disguised as a sheer face of rock, swung wide, and seawater surged into the gap. The Archangel eased slowly through. Beyond the hatch lay a dock buried in the heart of the island itself.

"Onogoro belongs to the military and to Morgenroete. Not even satellites can see into this place."

Kisaka offered it as he made his unhurried way up toward the captain's seat.

Murrue pinned him with a sharp look.

"Are you finally going to tell us who you are?"

A faint smile crossed his face; then he drew himself up smartly.

"Orb Army, 21st Special Airborne. Colonel Ledonir Kisaka. Though in the present case, I suppose bodyguard has been closer to the truth."

With a wry smile he tipped a shoulder toward Cagalli behind him. The kids had been stealing curious glances at her all this while, and at his words Miriallia let a mutter slip before she could stop it.

"Oh man... so she's actually the real deal?"

"She's your own country's princess, isn't she? How do you *not* know that?"

Tonomura shot back under his breath, and Sai mounted an equally quiet, fumbling defense.

"Well, I mean... sure, the Athhas are the foremost ruling family... but Orb's not exactly a monarchy, you know..."

"I'd recognize the representative on sight, but his daughter...? I've never once laid eyes on her."

Miriallia added her piece as well, and Chandra let out an exasperated, "What a strange country..."

Murrue, meanwhile, was still measuring Kisaka, Colonel Ledonir Kisaka, now, with that same probing stare.

"And how, exactly, are we meant to read this arrangement?"

"Better to put that question directly to the man you're about to meet."

Once more that trace of humor ghosted across his rugged features as he answered.

"The Lion of Orb, Lord Uzumi Nara Athha."

Murrue traded a glance with Natarle, who had just come up from the CIC.

"And we're supposed to take an announcement like this at face value?!"

Yzak's shout came as he slammed the printout onto the table.

The pilots of Team Zala, Athrun among them, had gathered in the briefing room of the Cousteau, a Vosgulov-class submarine currently lying submerged off the Orb coast. What Yzak held was Orb's official statement on the fate of the Archangel.

"The Legged Ship has already departed Orb waters', they honestly expect us to swallow that?"

Dearka chimed in, wearing his usual mockery like a second skin.

"And that's supposed to close the book? Do they take us for fools? Or maybe it's just that our commander's so very young?"

He said it with open scorn and flicked Athrun a glance honed like a blade.

"Dearka!" Nicol snapped in rebuke.

Still, Yzak and Dearka had every right to their anger.

There was no version of events in which the Archangel, mauled as badly as it had been, slipped their surveillance and withdrew from the area. And when Athrun had last had eyes on it, the ship in question was taking the full weight of the Orb fleet's guns. Its condition had been such that no one would have blinked had it gone under. Assuming, of course, that the attack had ever truly been meant as one.

There was history here, too: the Earth Alliance's newly built warship Archangel and the X-series mobile weapons had both come out of Heliopolis, Orb's own colony. A nation that trumpeted its neutrality had used that very neutrality as a screen. Their distrust of Orb ran to the bone because of it.

But Athrun spoke evenly.

"None of that matters."

He dropped his gaze to the document on the table.

"What matters is this: if that's Orb's official answer, then we can stand here shouting that it's a lie until we're hoarse, and nothing will change."

"What did you just say?!"

Athrun looked at the hot-blooded Yzak in a way that seemed designed to rein him in.

"Push this too hard, and it escalates into a diplomatic crisis that drags in the homeland."

Handed an argument he couldn't fault, Yzak choked on his reply for a beat, and then, almost at once, his face bent into a sneer.

"Right... naturally. Cool as ever, Athrun, or should that be Captain Zala?"

"So, what's the plan, then? We say, 'well, fair enough,' and sail home?"

Dearka made no attempt to bury his resentment either. Athrun answered in the same flat register as before.

"We have Carpentaria lean on them. And if that doesn't resolve it quickly, then we go in ourselves. Covertly."

The audacity of it, coming from soft-spoken Athrun, caught every one of them flat-footed. He looked around at his teammates as if daring them to object.

"Does that satisfy you?"

"We'd be investigating the Legged Ship's movements?"

Nicol asked it with real eagerness, and Athrun gave a nod.

"Whatever else it is, the other party remains a sovereign nation. Without hard proof, we can't afford rash moves made on our own judgment alone."

"If we just smash through, the Legged Ship's right there! Isn't that all we need?"

Dearka still wasn't sold, but Athrun's answer came back cold.

"This isn't Heliopolis."

For an instant, the faces of Kira and Cagalli, both bound to that country, surfaced in his mind, but he shoved them down and pressed on.

"And its military isn't built to the same scale."

For a moment, every face in the room looked stung. When the fate of Heliopolis rose in their thoughts, even Yzak and Dearka, forever insisting the blame lay with those who'd aided the Alliance behind a mask of neutrality, seemed unable to escape some more tangled feeling. And there was this besides: Heliopolis had been one colony adrift alone in space. This was an independent nation on Earth's surface, one even the Earth Alliance handled with care.

"I don't need to lecture anyone on how advanced Orb's military technology is, do I? Neutral on paper, but what sits behind that front is impossible to gauge. It's a dangerous country to misjudge."

And indeed, they knew the caliber of Orb's military technology firsthand. The very mobile suits they piloted had been built by Morgenroete, Orb's state-run manufacturer.

Yzak, who had been stewing in sullen silence, at last threw up both hands in surrender.

"Fine. I'll play along."

When it came down to it, he was far too sharp to be handed a sound argument and fight it on raw feeling alone. Even so, he made sure to plant one final barb on his way out.

"Me, I'd have charged straight in. But that's Chairman Zala's son for you!"

Dearka still looked far from satisfied, but with even Yzak, the one who begrudged Athrun most, talking that way, he must have read which way the wind was blowing. He trailed after Yzak in silence as the other man headed for the door.

"Well, infiltration might turn out to be fun, at that..."

At the threshold, Yzak glanced back with a taunting grin.

"Get a little lucky, and we might even catch a glimpse of him, the Strike's pilot."

The words drew a shadow swiftly across Athrun's face. Seeming not to notice, Yzak and the others filed out. Only Nicol lingered, watching that expression with puzzled concern.

"Strange, isn't it, ending up in Orb like this."

Aboard the Archangel, now berthed at Onogoro Island, Tolle said it with a seriousness that was rare even for him.

"Yeah..."

Miriallia nodded along, her own expression no less conflicted.

Ordered to hold on standby, the kids had settled around their usual table in the mess hall. Kira happened by just then for a drink, and overhearing them, found his own thoughts drifting the same way. Being back on home soil, though for him and Kuzzey, both space-born, even calling it "home" felt like a stretch, loosened something primal in them, a relief that bypassed thought entirely and settled straight into the bones. And yet, the moment they remembered what they had become, that nagging sense of wrongness refused to lift.

"So... in a situation like this, what actually happens?"

Kuzzey ventured it, tentative.

"Do you think they'd let us go ashore... or anything?"

"Go ashore?"

Sai had already started in, faintly exasperated at an argument they'd litigated once before, when Kuzzey rushed to head him off.

"No, I get it, we can't just quit. But, I mean... shore leave, maybe? Something like that?"

"I wouldn't call the odds zero."

The answer came from Neumann, who'd been propped against the counter, listening.

"The ship needs time in for repairs regardless."

"See?!"

Kuzzey brightened instantly.

"That said, this is a hard country to deal with. Frankly, it's remarkable they even let us in the door like this... so it all comes down to Orb. We won't know a thing until the captain and the others are back."

Neumann took care to deflate any easy hope before it could inflate. There was something odd about hearing your own country described from the outside that way. Kira collected his drink and, without wading into the conversation, began quietly slipping out.

Then he caught Miriallia's murmur, low and subdued.

"Mom and Dad... they're here, aren't they?"

Word was that the other civilians who'd escaped Heliopolis had all been repatriated to Orb proper. Miriallia and the rest had adjusted to shipboard life and mostly wore a cheerful face, but underneath it all they were still just teenagers. Parents could smother you when they were always at your elbow, but take them away, and of course the ache of missing them set in. Something close to sympathy crept into Neumann's voice.

"You'd like to see them?"

No one said it aloud, but the answer needed no saying. He gave Tolle's shoulder a light pat and offered, more gently than was his habit.

"I hope you get the chance."

Kira left the mess hall without a word. His own parents were most likely somewhere in this country too.

Once they had simply been threads in the ordinary weave of his days; now, when he tried to hold them in his mind, they felt almost like citizens of some other nation. That last morning, his mother had scolded him for sleeping in, the way she always did, and he, conveniently forgetting that failing to get up had been nobody's fault but his own, had grumbled right back and bolted out the door without so much as really looking at her face.

A morning indistinguishable from a hundred others.

And before that day was out, everything he could never have imagined had happened to him.

When he thought of his parents, what moved in his chest was something slightly different from what the others carried for theirs. He missed them, of course, ached for them the same as anyone. He wondered how they were getting on, and figured they were surely worrying over him in turn.

But, when the door to his quarters slid open, what met him was Flay sitting on the bed, clicking through one monitor channel after another, Birdy perched at her side as though keeping her company in front of the screen.

For some reason the sight struck him as unbearably desolate. Perhaps it was because the monitor showed nothing but static. She looked like a child who couldn't sleep, sitting up long after every station had signed off for the night.

"Flay."

He held a drink out to her. She switched the monitor off and accepted it with a quiet, "Thanks."

"Trying to get a look outside?"

He settled beside her as he asked, and her answer came back vague.

"No. Not really."

"How's the seasickness?"

"Mm... a little, still."

For some reason he had the sense she was angry, and he found himself reaching for anything that might lift her spirits even slightly.

"Apparently there's a chance we can go ashore."

"Really?"

She still sounded far away. He looked at her, taken aback.

"You have a house in Orb too, don't you?"

"We do, but... there's no one in it. My mother died when I was small, and now my father too..."

The words hit him square in the chest, and he went quiet. That father was the man Kira had failed to protect. He had let the only family she had left die.

She released a small breath, then gently rested her head against his shoulder. She hadn't been angry at all. This was grief. The particular ache of coming home to find no one waiting.

He couldn't even find words to comfort her. All that was left to him was to sit there, nearly holding his breath, keeping still at her side. Pain was the thing that bound them. Leaning into each other as if clinging to the simple warmth of another body, the two of them looked like nothing so much as small children who had lost their way.

"As you are aware, Orb is a neutral nation."

The middle-aged man seated across from her spoke in a voice of stern gravity. Uzumi Nara Athha, former Chief Representative, and Cagalli's father.

"Yes, sir."

Murrue nodded, spine rigid.

Kisaka had already briefed her that the man no longer held the representative's office, yet the sheer weight of his presence bore down on her all the same. His bearing and speech were polished and unhurried, his appearance distinguished; there was nothing domineering in him, no visible trace of disdain, and still, simply sitting before him, she felt herself being outmatched.

"So, this was the man they called the Lion of Orb," she thought, and found her posture straightening on its own.

Orb was a constitutional monarchy: the Chief Representative stood as head of state, but sovereignty rested with the people, and policy was argued and settled in the legislature. Even so, the authority of the leading chief remained enormous.

In its origins, Orb had been a nation forged from the union of several tribes, and among the chieftains who spoke for them, it was the house of Athha, by a wide margin the most powerful, that had governed and held the country together generation upon generation. The people's great fortune was that, taken in the broad view, and across a history that long, exceptions had not been entirely absent, the Athhas had ruled well.

Under their stewardship, an island chain that had once been little more than a paradise of the southern seas had climbed to this level of economic

success, becoming a power neither the Alliance nor ZAFT could afford to write off.

"On the record, your ship was chased off by our military and has withdrawn from our territorial waters."

"Yes..."

Unable to read Uzumi's intentions, or Orb's, Murrue chose her answer with care.

They had been called to a room within Orb's military headquarters on Onogoro Island for a meeting that officially wasn't happening. The Archangel's side was represented, as always, by Murrue, Mu, and Natarle. Orb's side consisted of a single man: the former Representative Chief himself.

Without warning, Mu spoke up from beside her.

"You didn't pull us out of the fire just because your daughter happened to be on board, did you?"

A thin, wry smile touched Uzumi's mouth.

"Do you suppose I would set the fate of a nation on the scales against the life of one spoiled brat of a daughter?"

"My mistake."

Mu ducked his head slightly, in that easy manner of his that left you guessing whether he meant a word of it. Uzumi showed no offense, though his expression drew a fraction tighter.

"If that were the whole of it, the matter would almost be simpler..."

Murrue and the others waited to see where he was heading, and he went on, half as though talking to himself.

"The business of Heliopolis... the children of this nation swept up in it, who ended as volunteers... the battlefield exploits of the X-series machines, of which one hears so much..."

Every one of those subjects was a wound for Murrue to hear named. Yet there was no accusation in his voice. He stayed measured, almost remote. Which only gave the next words more force.

"For a long while, I weighed whether it might be better to save the people alone, and let that ship and those machines go to the bottom where they lay."

She felt Natarle go rigid at her side.

"Even now, I cannot say with certainty that the choice we made was the right one."

At that, Murrue's head bowed before she could catch herself.

"I'm sorry... For Heliopolis, and for the children, I know I have no standing to say it, but speaking as one person... I am truly sorry."

Beside her, she could feel Natarle's gaze on her, openly displeased. And in one sense, she was right to be. Someone in an official capacity did not apologize lightly. An apology was an admission of fault, a concession that they, and by extension the force they served, bore responsibility. But Murrue found she couldn't bring herself to care.

Nothing said inside this room would ever see daylight.

The truth was simply this: she wanted to apologize to this man. She wanted him to know that the disasters they had brought down on Orb caused her real anguish.

"It is all right. The fault was not yours alone. This was, after all, also a matter of our own internal affairs..."

Uzumi answered in the same even tone as before, and then a shadow crossed his face.

"We hold to our neutrality because we wish to make enemies of neither Naturals nor Coordinators..."

He continued.

"But a will like that cannot be carried through without strength. And the moment one possesses strength, that strength itself draws the knives..."

It was true. In the world as it now stood, any nation that hoped to keep an independent footing needed the military and economic muscle to hold foreign interference at arm's length. Nor was the assault on Heliopolis the only danger of its kind, there had to be others out there, watching with hungry eyes for any opening to strip Orb of its wealth and power.

Uzumi turned his gaze on them and let a faint smile show.

"Though I suppose soldiers such as yourselves have little use for talk of this sort."

"No... I believe I understand what you mean, Lord Uzumi..."

Murrue answered, working it through even as she spoke.

Now that she considered it, Orb was one of the vanishingly few nations on Earth where Coordinators were permitted to exist at all. Elsewhere they had been hounded out, cast off, driven into space, but here they could live among Naturals free of persecution or discrimination, leading unremarkable lives side by side with them. It was why Kira, back on Heliopolis, had never needed to take any particular pains to conceal what he was.

This was a nation of peace, a place where Naturals and Coordinators might genuinely have joined hands instead of tearing one another apart.

But under the world's present conditions, that peace could not stand on its own. Even this country had to buy its tranquility with overwhelming military force, and that fact alone said everything.

Even now, while they sat in this room, Alliance soldiers were being cut down by ZAFT mobile suits. The assault on Panama, the last foothold left to them, drew closer by the day. And if Panama fell, what then? With no energy source capable of sustaining that vast population, would they be stranded on Earth, condemned to watch their own innocent civilians starve?

There were pieces of what Uzumi was saying that Murrue honestly wished she could agree with. Truly there were.

And yet...

"Even so, we..."

She pressed her lips into a hard line.

Silence held for a moment. Then Uzumi drew himself up slightly and spoke again, the ghost of a smile at his mouth.

"Be that as it may, there remains the principal reason we did not send your ship to the bottom, and I must lay it before you."

Murrue's head came up sharply. The gentleness had drained from his face. His eyes, abruptly keen as a hawk's, held her fast as he said:

"Orb requests the combat data the Strike has accumulated to date, together with technical cooperation with Morgenroete from its Coordinator pilot, Kira Yamato."

After the meeting, back aboard the Archangel, Natarle exploded.

"I am against this! This country *cannot* be trusted!"

Wearing the expression of a woman running on empty, Murrue looked back at her. The three of them had gathered in the captain's cabin to pick over the meeting just concluded. Mu lifted his shoulders in a shrug.

"Sure, you can say that. Then what's the plan? We all hop off here and swim to Alaska?"

"That is not my point!" Natarle bit out. "My point is that repairs demand compensation, and this is the price!"

"I hear you, but even so..."

Mu scratched at his head, not looking particularly troubled by any of it.

In return for the Strike's data and Kira's technical assistance, Uzumi had pledged to extend them, to borrow his own wording, "considerable convenience."

But the Strike's data was, for all practical purposes, classified material of the highest grade, hardly the sort of thing one handed across a border. Then again, recall which country had developed the Strike in the first place, and the whole question turned delicate indeed.

If she was honest, though, it was the second condition that sat heavier on Murrue's mind.

"But even if we pay what's asked, will that actually be the end of it?"

She spoke while still turning it over.

"He never said it in so many words, but there's no chance ZAFT isn't leaning on them already. And they're sheltering us anyway. You understand what that means, don't you?"

It meant they held something whose value couldn't be counted out in money.

This was a neutral state, which meant it could stand openly with neither ZAFT nor the Alliance. Let Orb tilt visibly toward one side, and the other became its enemy on the spot. And all of this came directly on the heels of the truth about Heliopolis breaking into the open.

By any ordinary logic they should have been desperate to avoid provoking ZAFT, and still they were shielding this ship. For an act like that, a very steep price could be demanded with a perfectly straight face.

Something that plain could not possibly be lost on Natarle. And yet dissatisfaction stayed written on her face. Perhaps she genuinely didn't see it. Perhaps, by her lights, any human being born on Earth naturally fought ZAFT, and so it was equally natural that Orb owed its allegiance to the Earth Alliance.



She squared her back with pointed precision, looked down at Murrue with contempt she barely troubled to hide, and said, in a formal tone whetted by anger,

"If that is your decision, Captain, I lack the authority to overrule it, but when we reach Alaska, I fully intend to see this matter raised as a formal issue!"

Then she stood, walked out without a backward glance, and the door sealed behind her.

"This matter too, huh?" Mu murmured in her wake.

Despite herself, Murrue's mouth curved into a small, bitter smile.

What a thing to say.

And yet he wasn't wrong. The ledger of failures already stacked against her was probably long enough to have cost her the ship several times over. At this point one more hardly mattered, which did nothing to make it weigh less.

Mu regarded her with something close to sympathy, then, as if determined to add another stone to the load on her chest, said, "Feel sorry for the kid, though..."

"Yeah..."

She nodded, her expression dark.

Strip away the polite language, and what they were about to do was sell Kira off, piece by piece. It would cut him open all over again. And they had already heaped more onto his shoulders than anyone had a right to ask.

A small, gnawing ache twisted through her stomach. She felt like the meanest kind of human being alive, as though she scarcely deserved to keep drawing breath.

"There, there, none of that..."

With a groan of self-disgust she let herself slump forward onto the desk, and Mu patted her back in consolation.

"Kindly stop that, Commander."

Still folded over the desktop, she muttered it into the wood.

"That's sexual harassment."

"Oh? Is it, now?"

His voice came back blank with genuine surprise.

Honestly, he had to stop. She was the captain. Perhaps not much of one, perhaps a failure of one, but the captain nonetheless, the person whose job it was to stand unshaken and give the crew nothing to fear, whatever came.

If he was kind to her at a moment like this, she might actually start to cry.

At that very hour, in one of the ship's cabins, a pitched battle of a wholly different sort was raging.

"I told you, it's fine! I'm going exactly like this!"

"It is absolutely nothing of the kind! While these eyes of mine can still see, I will not allow Your Highness to stand before the public in that state!"

"Then why on earth do I have to squeeze into something this suffocating?!"

"Suffocating? Suffocating! This is dress befitting Your Highness's station in the world!"

That quarrel, together with the sounds of desperate thrashing and what was unmistakably a physical wrestling match, came spilling out of the cabin Cagalli had been occupying, and crew members passing in the corridor found it impossible not to loiter by the door and eavesdrop.

After the commotion had run on a good while, she finally seemed to concede defeat and went quiet; a little later, the door slid open.

At the sight of the figure who stepped out, the crew went rigid with astonishment.

Small wonder.

To people accustomed to her rough edges and her usual uniform of grubby jacket and cargo pants, the elegant young woman standing there now, hair arranged, wrapped in a refined gown fit for any evening reception, might as well have been a stranger.

Face like a thundercloud, Cagalli emerged from the room, and when the maid who had turned her out in full ceremony reached for her hand, she wrenched it free.

"I can walk by myself!"

But the big, solidly built maid didn't retreat an inch.

"No, you may not!"

She delivered the scolding flat out and firmly repossessed the princess's hand.

Fearless as Cagalli was, even she apparently understood there was no winning against this almost motherly woman; she abandoned further resistance and began, at last, to walk with grudging decorum.

Naturally, the crew, stuck on standby with nothing better to occupy them, had no intention of missing a show like this. Within moments the corridor was thick with spectators, every one of them goggling at the transformation of the girl they thought they had figured out.

Just then, Kira and Flay happened along, having left their room on the way to the mess hall.

"No way, are you serious?!"

"So, she really was a bona fide princess this whole time..."

At first Kira had only blinked, trying to make sense of the crew's hushed buzz, but when Cagalli appeared beyond the crowd, everything clicked. He himself was far less staggered than the rest, likely because he'd seen her dressed up once before; even so, looking at her now, he caught himself thinking that yes, a princess was exactly what she was. Come to think of it, hadn't Waldfeld once said something in that vein? Something like, "That kind of look suits you perfectly."

But she looked so utterly miserable, pacing along in that enforced gentility, that he very nearly laughed out loud. She spotted him too, and her expression turned blacker still.

"What's so funny?" that was almost certainly the thought behind it.

"Hmph... and what is that supposed to be?!"

The small, venomous mutter came from right beside him, and he turned in surprise.

Flay was glaring at the exquisitely dressed Cagalli as though staring down a mortal enemy. Now that he thought about it, she had looked at Cagalli exactly that way once before. And yet the two had scarcely exchanged a word, nowhere near enough contact to quarrel or breed any genuine grudge, so why?

He couldn't fathom it, and it left him at a loss.

The psychology of women taking each other's measure was, of course, entirely beyond him. Not that Cagalli showed the faintest interest in competing with Flay. And naturally, it was precisely that obliviousness, Cagalli's failure to register her at all, that honed Flay's hostility to a finer edge.

She watched the other girl pass with eyes gone dark, jealous of someone who had turned out to stand so far above her.

And then something dawned on Kira as well.

Of course, Cagalli was a princess of the ruling house. From here on, casual conversation with her would be off the table, more than that, he might never lay eyes on her again.

Watching her figure recede in that fine gown, he was gripped all at once by a helpless loneliness, as if half of himself were being pulled away.

By the next morning, the space around the Archangel had erupted into startling activity. Engineers and laborers dispatched from Morgenroete rolled up in convoys while cranes, forklifts, and every other species of work machine trundled busily back and forth. The whole scene looked like nothing so much as a colony of ants descending en masse on an enormous cake.

Watching it all on a monitor, Neumann, on watch at the time, let out a breath of frank admiration.

"Impressive. I didn't think they'd move on this so fast."

"Yeah... and I am genuinely grateful for it."

But something complicated ran beneath Natarle's reply. Catching that first flicker of temper in her voice, Neumann fought down the instinct to make himself smaller. Even on her best days she was nobody's idea of an easy superior. When her mood soured, prudence was simply good survival.

At just that moment, Murrue stepped onto the bridge.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, ma'am."

Natarle snapped off a grim salute and delivered her report.

"The Morgenroete technicians have arrived and begun repair operations."

"So I see. And Ensign Yamato?"

Murrue put the question as she lowered herself into her seat, and Natarle's expression curdled further, as though she'd bitten into something sour.

"A short while ago he departed for the factory aboard the Strike, under escort."

"Understood. Thank you. Good work."

Even with the handover finished, Natarle made no move to go, and Murrue lifted her eyes to her face.

"Is there something else?"

Registering that her executive officer was glaring at her, Murrue let her own gaze harden in answer.

"Nothing," Natarle said, turning her face aside. "Only that I should like to use this opportunity to carry out a full inspection and overhaul of the ship's internal systems as well."

"Very well. See to it."

At that curt, clipped exchange, Murrue could only watch her go with a look that said, and here we go again.

Neumann had been holding his breath in the charged air between the two officers, and only when the door sealed did the tension finally drain out of his shoulders.

Evidently they had crossed swords over Kira yet again.

Even so, it never stopped amazing him that two women as immiscible as oil and water had managed to keep this operation intact for so long.

Murrue was humane and approachable, the kind of superior most subordinates found easy enough to serve under. But the flip side was that she was also easy to take lightly. Worse, there was a soft spot in her, a habit of flinching in the very instant a captain was required to make the cold, hard call.

On that count, Natarle had no such flaw. Her judgment ran no risk of being fogged by feeling. In exchange, she was stiff and unbending, the sort of officer subordinates might fear but would never love.

And yet, turning it over, perhaps it was exactly because the two were such perfect opposites in temperament, each covering the gaps the other left, that all of them had managed to stay alive this long.

Neumann could only hope, with complete sincerity, that they would go on holding it together just like this, all the way to Alaska.

Kira was walking the Strike forward behind a Morgenroete buggy that led the way. When the gate parted, an elevator waited beyond it, one broad enough for a mobile suit to drive straight aboard. The Strike was borne down into the earth, and when the doors opened again, an enormous factory sector unrolled before him, so vast it verged on feeling deserted. He stared around him, amazed.

"Over to that gantry."

A woman's voice broke suddenly over the radio. Glancing down, he spotted her, apparently the speaker, waving him onward with one arm. He walked the Strike onto the maintenance bed as directed, then climbed down out of the cockpit.

"This place, it's..."

When he spoke, still hesitant and off balance, the woman, in her thirties at a guess, smiled at him.

Her clothes were casual, a short jacket over jeans, but she was unmistakably one of the engineers.

"Here, we can put the Strike back in perfect order. You might say this is the home where it was born."

"I... see..."

Still visibly bewildered, he watched as she said, "This way," and set off ahead of him at a brisk clip.

"Erica Simmons. What I want to show you is over here."

She gave her name and strode on through the factory without once asking for his. Presumably she had no need to ask. Being known by someone he had never met only deepened his unease.

Erica Simmons showed no sign of caring what he made of any of it, she didn't so much as check that he was keeping up. She passed along a dim corridor and through another gate. He hurried after her, and at what waited in the next section, his breath caught hard.

"Gundams?"

Several mobile suits stood ranked before him. Their silhouettes ran so close to the Strike's that for an instant he nearly took them for it.

"This is the real face of Orb, the so-called neutral nation."

The voice behind him was one he knew instantly, and he whipped around as if yanked on a string. There stood Cagalli, back in her usual T-shirt and cargo pants.

"It's hardly that shocking, surely? The Strike came out of Heliopolis. And Heliopolis was Orb too."

Erica said it, sounding amused.

Still reeling, Kira turned his eyes back to the machines. On closer inspection, they weren't the Strike after all. Their base coloring was white, black across the chest, with red worked into the arms and ankles, and from their backs jutted vernier thrusters that recalled the wings of the Aile Striker. Their frames looked sleeker than the Strike's, the product, most likely, of a design that put mobility first.

"The M1 Astray, an Orb military unit, built by Morgenroete."

Erica ran her fingers over a maintenance panel, called up a structural schematic of the machine, and turned it toward him.

"How can..."

He was still struggling to credit what his eyes were telling him, and he faced Erica.

"What does Orb plan to do with these?"

"Do with them?"

Erica blinked at the question, but it was Cagalli who answered.

"They're Orb's defense."

Her gaze had gone hard as she stared at the M1 Astray.

"You know it too, don't you? Orb invades no other nation. It suffers no invasion by any other nation. And it stays out of other nations' wars. This is the strength it takes to make that will hold."



Then Kira noticed, all at once, that her left cheek was puffed and red. Had she gotten into a fight with somebody again?

"That's what Orb is supposed to stand for. No, what it *was* supposed to stand for. Until Father sold it out!"

"What?"

He stared at the words she'd spat. "Father", Former Representative Uzumi, had betrayed Orb?

Erica answered, wearing a look of long-suffering exasperation.

"Are you still on about that? How many times do I have to say it, that isn't what happened. Lord Uzumi had no knowledge that Heliopolis was helping the Earth Alliance develop mobile suits."

"Be quiet!"

Cagalli's shout cut her off.

"You think that excuse holds?! The highest authority in the country!"

At words that hardly sounded as if they could be aimed at her own father, Kira could only blink. She bore down harder.

"Even not knowing, that alone is a crime!"

It was brutal. Certainly, no one entrusted with governing a nation could hide behind "I didn't know," that much Kira could follow. But directed at family, the words verged on too harsh. Then again, perhaps the harshness existed precisely because he was family.

"Father, you traitor!"

When she had first laid eyes on the Strike at Heliopolis, Cagalli had shouted exactly that, looking genuinely shaken. Only now did Kira finally grasp what she'd meant by it.

"Which is why he took responsibility, isn't it?"

Erica came to Uzumi's defense in a tired voice, plainly at the end of her patience, but Cagalli had no intention of hearing it.

"He passed the office to Uncle, and he's still right there with his hands in everything, weighing in on this and that! In the end, nothing has changed at all!"

"It can't be helped. Orb still needs Lord Uzumi."

"What could anyone possibly need from a coward like him?!"

Cagalli spat it out in bitter contempt, and Erica released an exasperated sigh.

"With the daughter he doted on turning out like this, poor Lord Uzumi gets precious little for his trouble. Frankly, no wonder he slapped that cheek."

At that, for the first time, Cagalli looked awkward.

So the swollen cheek was the remnants of a fight between father and daughter. Not that there was the slightest indication the lesson had taken.

Still, Kira thought, watching the two of them go at it with a blank stare, this Erica Simmons seemed remarkably close to the house of Athha.

She turned back to him and smiled brightly, almost as if to needle Cagalli.

"Right then, we'll leave the brat where she stands. Come along."

Once more Erica took point, and they left that section behind. Before following, Kira threw one last glance over his shoulder at the Astrays standing in their silent row, his feelings a tangled mess.

Of course, this had become an era in which mobile suits were flatly indispensable for standing against ZAFT's military strength, not merely the Earth Alliance's. He understood that. But if Orb ever actually put these to use... The instant the picture formed, a heavy knot pulled tight in his chest.

Could it be that things like these were exactly what drew catastrophe down on people? He needed only to remember Heliopolis. Because of the mobile suits Morgenroete had developed, Heliopolis had been ground to dust in space. Who could promise these machines wouldn't summon the same ruin?

Kira and the others rode an elevator deeper still, then followed Erica into a room. It appeared to be an observation booth, its entire forward wall a sheet of reinforced glass. Beyond it stretched a wide testing ground, where three Astrays stood in a line. He walked up to the glass without a word. What now? he was wondering, when Erica spoke into her headset.

"Asagi, Juri, Mayura!"

A shrill, cheerful "Yes, ma'am!" came bouncing out of the speakers, and Kira flinched in astonishment.

"Those are the pilots?"

"Oh, Lady Cagalli?!"

"Hey, she's right!"

"What's this? Back already?"

"Quiet, you!"

Cagalli snapped it, looking blackly affronted. The bright, chattering voices sat so wildly at odds with the machines' appearance that Kira felt almost lightheaded. Erica and Cagalli, though, seemed entirely used to it.

"Who's the boy next to you? He's kind of cute!"

That, apparently, meant him. He recoiled before he could stop himself.

"Lady Cagalli, seriously! Where did you find a boy like that? Sneakier than you look!"

"And here we thought you'd run away from home, turns out it was an elopement—"

"Fools! It's nothing of the sort!"

Cagalli shouted back, scandalized, and the girls shrieked with delight.

"Getting that flustered only makes it look worse!"

"Lucky, lucky! I want a gorgeous boyfriend like that too!"

"You guys are total morons! Cut it out already!"

Cagalli was teetering on the edge of a full-blown tantrum, and with the girls' volley of teasing showing no sign of ever running dry, Erica stepped in.

"All right, all right, that's plenty of reunion. We have a guest."

Even so, Kira thought, wilting a little under the crossfire, he had assumed Cagalli's ease with Erica was something exceptional, but apparently she was on exactly the same footing with these bubbly pilots. Not one syllable of their chatter carried the least deference to her rank. Only yesterday he'd

been convinced he might never speak casually with her again. That worry, it now appeared, had been wholly wasted.

"Wait, the boy is the 'guest'?"

"Aw, and here I thought that against all possible odds, someone had finally shown up willing to take Lady Cagalli off your hands."

"Like that was ever going to happen anyway! Ahaha!"

"Every one of you is going to regret this later."

Cagalli's voice crept out low and homicidal. Kira's attention snagged briefly on their use of that word, *guest*, but then Erica issued her next instruction in a level, composed voice.

"Begin."

The three pilots, each with those unmistakably girlish voices, chorused, "Roger!" and it started.

At first, Kira couldn't work out what he was looking at. The three Astrays creaked as they extended their arms and stepped forward.

At an unbelievable crawl.

They seemed to be running through something like the forms of a Chinese martial art, but at that pace, it looked more like tai chi. And that was being charitable.

Evidently this was no joke but a genuine demonstration. Cagalli's shoulders sagged, and she muttered,

"No improvement, I see."

"Even so, they're nearly twice as fast as they were. We loaded new data into the OS after last time."

Erica's answer only made him stare harder.

"Twice? So before, they were *slower* than this?"

"But if that's the best they can manage, they'd be dead inside a minute, wouldn't they?"

Cagalli pronounced the verdict without a shred of mercy.

"They're useless. They'd be nothing but targets."

"Hey! That's awful!"

The lively voices erupted from the speakers.

"It's the truth, isn't it!"

Cagalli fired back.

"You have no idea how hard this is for us!"

"The enemy won't care how hard it is!"

Her words were cruel, and every single one of them was correct. On a battlefield you could catalog your struggles all day long; the enemy was not going to grade on effort.

"Can't you move even a little sharper than that? Fast enough that flies can't land on you, at least!"

"There are no flies landing on us!"

"Only because there are no flies in the test area."

"What is your problem?! You can't even pilot one yourself!"

"Your words, not mine! Fine, trade places with me, then, let's see it!"

"All right, all right, that will do."

Erica waded into the girls' squabble.

All the same, Kira thought, he finally understood what Mu had meant back then, saying the Natural pilot candidates had been "fighting just to make the things move at all." It drove home, all over again, how badly suited mobile suit operation was to Natural hands.

"But Lady Cagalli isn't wrong."

Erica said it, then turned a smile on Kira.

"Which is exactly why we want to make them stronger. The way your Strike is."

"What?"

The conversation had swung onto him without warning, and he froze, but she went on smiling, speaking as though it were the most self-evident thing in the world.

"What we're asking for your technical cooperation on is OS development for their support system."

"I see..."

Resistance surged up in him all at once.

Of course. Why else would they ever have shown an outsider something like this? This was proprietary information in every meaningful sense, no, beyond that, a secret of state. And Orb was laying it open to him, a soldier of the Earth Alliance, Orb national or not.

Murrue had already walked him through the "terms of exchange" Orb had set. And once he'd been told that the Archangel's fate rode on his shoulders, refusal had never really been on the table.

Would the day ever come, he wondered, when he could stop being "the Coordinator pilot" and simply be Kira Yamato again?

Dawn had not yet broken the next morning; the sun still lay below the horizon, and only a thin crimson stain colored the eastern sky while a blue half-dark drifted dreamlike across the misted water.

Offshore, a small fishing boat rode the swell, its lamp burning. Orb might have built itself into an industrial power, but geography being what it was, fishing had never lost its foothold there, and no one would have spared the little silhouette a second thought. If anything looked wrong, it was only the fisherman himself, line trailing over the side, his eyes flicking again and again to his wristwatch.

Soon enough the hull dipped, just barely. Something had risen out of the sea and closed its grip on the gunwale. The fisherman checked the watch one last time, a grin ghosting across his mouth, and reached down to the wetsuited figure hauling itself aboard.

Three more surfaced behind the first, and with no more sound than the work demanded, they climbed up in clean succession. The lead man was already stripping away his scuba gear, peeling off the cap, and what emerged was wet black hair, features composed and handsome in a way that seemed older than his years, and a pair of keen green eyes.

Athrun Zala's face.

The other three, it hardly needs saying, were Yzak, Dearka, and Nicol.

"Creuset Team. Athrun Zala."

Technically the unit was Team Zala now, but that was the name he gave.

Some of it was simple embarrassment at announcing himself under his own banner; more practically, Creuset's name still opened doors he did not. The fisherman, the ZAFT contact wearing a fisherman's skin, flashed a wolfish grin.

"Welcome... to the nation of peace."

The boat came about and made for the shelter of the islands.

"Where are you taking us?"

Athrun had to shout it over the engine, and the contact bellowed his answer back.

"Onogoro Island. Nine chances in ten, what you're after is sitting right there, assuming it exists at all!"

"That's everything you have?"

He meant word of the Archangel, of whatever it was they'd been sent to unearth, but the man only rolled a shoulder.

"Not a whisper's come my way. Either they've buried it deeper than ever, or the official story was the truth all along."

Athrun answered the shrug with one of his own.

Fine. Seeing for themselves was precisely why they had come.

Nearing one of the islands, the boat cut its speed and slid without a sound into a deserted inlet. Below deck, the four of them changed into the clothing the contact passed around, work uniforms, Morgenroete issue by the look of them. Then came a map of Onogoro, a floor plan of Morgenroete riddled with blank spaces, and a set of forged ID cards.

"Those badges will carry you as far as Factory Area One. Beyond that it's individual-access control, top to bottom. Not something I can crack on this kind of notice."

The contact delivered the briefing, ran a quick appraising eye over their clothes, and shrugged once more.

"Whatever you do, don't get ambitious. I've no appetite for trouble. Better to let the lion go on sleeping."

"The lion?"

Athrun shot him a wary look, then managed a clipped word of thanks. The man had already turned back toward his boat before the sentence was finished. The arrangement stood: he would collect them here again once night fell.

The four turned their faces inland and started walking.

Kira might be somewhere on this island. So might Cagalli. The thought put a tightness in Athrun's chest.

Did he want to find them, or was some part of him praying they were nowhere near this place?

Even he couldn't have said.

Like the Archangel herself, the Strike was being inspected and overhauled at a furious pace. Dozens of technicians swarmed the machine, pulling components, clinging to every surface, a hundred jobs running at once. Kira sat in the cockpit, tuning the OS and the instruments.

"Whoa. You're quick. With the keys, I mean."

The blunt voice dropped on him from overhead without any warning, and he glanced up. Cagalli was leaning out over the cockpit from the catwalk. The instant she registered his face, surprise crossed hers.

"Oh, it's you, Kira. I was trying to figure out who was in there."

"Yeah."

He looked down at himself. He had on the same Morgenroete coveralls as every technician around him.

"Apparently strolling around the factory in a military uniform would've been asking for trouble."

"Can't argue with that."

She seemed to be in fine spirits today. Even so, here she was again, roaming the Astray proving grounds and the Morgenroete floor as though she held the deed to the place. The thought pulled a jab out of him.

"You're an odd sort of princess, you know. Always turning up in places like this."

Her mouth soured.

"Sorry I'm such a letdown. And drop the 'princess.' It's not as if you actually see me that way."

He snorted.

"Well... no, you've got me there."

"Don't laugh! I can't stand being called that, I mean it!"

She said it with something close to genuine discomfort, and he laughed quietly anyway.

Strange, how being around her let him breathe easier. When she'd left the Archangel he had braced himself for the possibility of never seeing her again. He'd never have guessed their paths would cross again this quickly, or this often.

"Still, it finally makes sense now. Why you were inside Morgenroete that day."

At that, she answered with a low "Yeah," and her expression stiffened a little.

"There were rumors that Morgenroete was helping the Earth Alliance build mobile suits at Heliopolis... and no matter how I pressed him, Father wouldn't hear a word of it. So, I went to confirm it myself."

"So that's what it was..."

He nodded.

The connection she'd used to dig into it must have been Professor Kato. Even so, to catch wind of a rumor, start suspecting, and simply march off alone to investigate... reckless, certainly, but the nerve it took was something else entirely.

"I was afraid something like this would happen," she had said back then. She had moved because she feared Heliopolis would be made a target for exactly that reason. He couldn't help a flicker of admiration. She was his own age, more or less, and already she acted with her country's fate on her shoulders. Perhaps that was simply what it meant to be born into the family that ruled it. Until that day, he had scarcely given his own country a moment's thought.

And yet, watching her, he felt he could grasp something of her father too. Uzumi Nara Athha, surely the man carried his people's welfare in his heart no less than she did. She was still furious with him, but,

"But... he honestly didn't know, did he? Your father, Representative Athha, I mean..."

"There are people in Orb who claim that. Claims are all they are!"

Her voice came out low and burning.

"Father won't say a thing. Only that whether it's true or not changes nothing. That every bit of the responsibility is his. Nothing more."

It was the kind of declaration you could read either way. Still, Kira thought there was something admirable in a man who shouldered the blame cleanly and stepped aside. Once people's faith in you is gone, no explanation on earth carries any weight. Maybe that was the reason he'd chosen silence.

But even that posture of her father's was more than she could accept.

Barely above a whisper, she said, "I trusted him."

"Cagalli..."

So that was the heart of it, he realized. What she had wanted was a flat denial. She had needed him to say, "I had no part in that." She spoke of him with an edge, but hatred had nothing to do with it. The opposite, because she loved him, because she looked up to him, the blow this scandal had dealt to her image of him landed all the harder.

She said nothing more. From beyond them drifted the voices of technicians passing by.

"The wear on the electromagnetic fluid sockets is ugly..."

"Same story through the whole drive system."

"It's like the thing's been screaming, the frame's been ridden right out to its limit..."

She tracked them with her eyes until they were gone, then turned back to him with a small shrug.

"Well. There's your answer."

Kira set the keyboard aside, climbed out onto the catwalk, and lifted his gaze to the Strike. The technicians hadn't exaggerated. A machine designed from the start for Naturals had been pushed, wrung dry, and pushed again to the outermost edge of what it could give.

Even at a glance, scars stood out across the whole frame. Phase Shift armor or not, beam fire had grazed it more than once. This machine had come through battle after battle at his side.

"And even then... there was still so much I couldn't protect..."

He said it under his breath, dropped his eyes, and turned away. She fell in behind him. They stopped at a small rest area off the corridor and stood together, drinks in hand.

"So..." He picked the earlier thread back up. "That's how you ended up with the resistance out there? Stormed off in a temper?"

"Father told me I didn't know the first thing about the world. So I went out and looked at it."

She said it as though it were the most natural thing imaginable. Kira had moved beyond exasperation into something closer to awe. Even so, how did that translate into a life of trading fire with BuCUEs in the desert? By any normal logic, when a well-born young lady, however little she resembled one, decides to "see the world," doesn't that mean a study tour through Europe or something in that vein?

But she spoke with real fire.

"Out in that desert, everyone fought with everything they had. There was nothing there but sand, and still they threw their lives into defending that ground..."

Yes. She hadn't taken the comfortable road. She had chosen instead to stand shoulder to shoulder with people struggling under merciless conditions, to look at the world from the same earth they stood on, and to put her own life on the line beside theirs. There was something noble in that, he thought.

Then her face darkened.

"And Orb..."

She stepped out into the corridor and stared through the window at the vast factory floor spread below, where the Strike stood.

"Holding this much power, after what it's already done, and it still tries to keep the PLANTs and the Earth Forces both smiling. Isn't that cowardice?!"

She rounded on him as if throwing down a challenge.

"Is that supposed to be acceptable?! Sitting on the fence like this?!"

But Cagalli was too straightforward for her own good. Anything that wasn't black or white, she simply could not swallow.

He understood why watching people fight ZAFT with such pitiful weapons enraged her. He understood, too, why a homeland that sat rich, thriving, and untouched would fill her with shame.

"Do you want to fight, Cagalli?"

He asked it quietly. The bluntness of it stopped her for a beat.

"I want the war to end. That's all!"

"I see..."

He lowered his eyes.

An end to war, by what road was anyone supposed to arrive there?

Would it end when one side annihilated the other?

Or, would both have to burn down together before it stopped?

If Orb threw itself into the war now and picked a side, the way she wanted, would that finish it?

He didn't believe so.

"But... fighting won't end it either. War, I mean... it just won't..."

He murmured it with a quiet sorrow, and she went still, caught off guard.

The instant the door slid open and those familiar faces came into view, the boys were already in motion.

"Mom! Dad!"

In a room deep inside Orb military headquarters, Tolle and the others found their parents waiting. The small hope Kuzzey had voiced days earlier had, against the odds, partly come true. Going home was out of the question, they couldn't so much as set foot off the island, but a little time with their families had been granted. When Murrue broke the news the day before, Miriallia had already looked on the verge of tears, and now, laying eyes on his mother and father for the first time in months, Tolle felt the sting starting behind his own.

"Tolle!"

As he hurried toward them, his mother pressed a hand over her mouth and broke into sobs. His father got as far as "You..." before whatever filled him choked the rest off, and the sentence died where it stood. The sight of his mother, always so bright, so unshakable, undone by tears sent a painful clench through his chest.

Nearby, Miriallia's mother had her daughter locked in a crushing embrace. Her father, thrown by the sight of his darling girl in uniform, couldn't begin to disguise his joy at having her back in front of him. Sai's parents had come, and Kuzzey's too. Only Kira's were missing, and for that matter, so was Kira himself. That Flay, who had no parents left to come, stayed away was only to be expected, but Kira had apparently declined the reunion outright, claiming work that couldn't wait.

Tolle stood before his parents wearing an awkward expression. There should have been a mountain of things he wanted to tell them. Everything they'd endured since that day. How they'd come through it alive. What their lives had looked like since returning to Orb. What had become of the friends they'd left behind.

But the moment his eyes found his parents, guilt crashed over him so abruptly that he had to blink hard against it. From where he stood now, it seemed they had signed up far too easily. They had shouldered something of this magnitude without a word of discussion with their families. True, there had been neither the time nor any way to ask, but standing before these people who had worn themselves ragged with worry over him, he felt as if he'd committed some unforgivable betrayal.

"I'm sorry... Mom... Dad."

"You'd better be sorry! Honestly, this boy! From the day you could walk, you've never once taken the simple road!"

His mother scolded him through eyes red and swollen with crying, while his father's face worked through something complicated before settling, at last, into a faint smile.

"But you chose it yourself, didn't you?"

Tolle's breath caught; then he nodded, hard.

"Yeah... I did..."

To do whatever was in his power.

He had watched people in danger, people suffering, had watched his friend throw himself into the fight to shield them, and out of that, he had made his choice.

Eyes shining with tears, he looked squarely into his father's and said, "That's right... Dad."

At that same hour, aboard the Archangel, Flay was working through the laundry, sheets, towels, all of it. Unlike Miriallia and the rest, she had no engineering background, no technical skill worth naming, and so the ship's odd jobs had fallen to her. The crew was thin, and everyone was expected to see to their own basic needs, yet the sheer volume of drudgery left over was staggering.

Keeping the soldiers' daily lives running was every bit as vital as facing the enemy, but she resented it all the same. She had been raised as a young lady of quality; at home she had never once touched a washing machine. Cleaning, laundry, hauling trash, wasn't that what maids were for? None of this was what she had enlisted to do.

Then again, she had enlisted in the first place to reel Kira in, so it wasn't as though she'd ever held any real picture of military life. And honestly, what other duty could there be for someone who, the moment combat began, could do nothing but flee to her room and tremble under the covers?

She stacked the dried laundry onto a cart, wheeled it to the various storage points, and started putting everything away. The corridors were nearly deserted. Anyone off duty was snatching what rest they could; a few had pitched in on repairs. Of her friends there was no sign at all. Every one of them had gone off to see their families.

And that fact, too, sat on her like a weight.

"Look at them, practically floating over it..."

She bit down hard on her lip. Right up until they'd left, Sai and the others had been humming with excitement, unable to talk about anything else whenever they gathered. Not one of them had the faintest idea how she felt.

And while they all went off together, she'd been left behind alone like Cinderella, saddled with a servant's chores. The humiliation of it made her wretched. That girl, the Athha daughter, was no doubt at this very moment draped in some gorgeous gown with handmaids hovering at her elbow. That crude, graceless thing got to be the princess, while she had been demoted to the army's errand girl. Why was the world built so unfairly...?

Her work finished, she drifted through the ship a while, then gave it up and headed for her room, Kira's room, strictly speaking. There was nothing aboard to occupy her. No television, no music, no videos. If she asked around, someone might dig up a game or the like, but she looked down her nose at that sort of amusement. What she craved was to shop until her

heart was full, to eat somewhere beautiful, to sink into a bath scented with her favorite oil. The military truly was the most tedious place in existence. And above all, what was she even doing here...?

Scowl still in place, she opened the door and stepped through.

"Welcome back."

The voice snapped her gaze, startled, toward the desk.

Kira sat there in work clothes, a computer open before him. Birdy hopped from his shoulder to the crown of his head, and when it pecked at him, he swatted it off with visible irritation.

"Kira... what are you...?"

She asked it blankly.

Why was he here? Hadn't he gone with Sai and Miriallia and the rest to meet his parents?

But he hardly seemed to register her bewilderment. Eyes fixed on the screen, he said, "Oh, sorry. I'm almost through, can you hang on a bit? Or go ahead to the mess hall if you'd rather?"

At first there had been only surprise. But as the understanding settled through her, degree by degree, her face began to harden.

"Why didn't you go?"

The words came out flinty.

"Huh?"

"Your family came too, didn't they? So why didn't you go see them?"

At the question his eyes dropped, and for a heartbeat his expression fell. Then, just as fast, he assembled something faintly tired across his face and looked back up at her.

"This is running longer than I expected... If I don't push through it before the Archangel has to launch—"

"Liar! You're *lying*!"

She screamed it, both palms crashing down on the desk.

He had stayed behind, for her sake.

"What is this, pity?! From you? Toward me?!"

"Flay?"

Her outburst left his face startled, and wounded. Which only stoked the fire higher.

"Because nobody's coming for me... so you feel *sorry* for me? Is that what this is?"

"Flay... no, that's not it—"

He scrambled upright and reached for her. She struck his hand aside with all her force.

"Don't you dare! Stop it! Why, why should someone like you get to pity me?!"

Pitiful Flay.

Poor Flay, orphaned and alone.

But who was it who had taken her last remaining parent, her father, from her in the first place? Who had dragged her into a place like this?

He was watching her with that pained look again. That same look, the one that never failed to fray something inside her until it screamed. Every time it appeared, it made her want to claw at him. And she could not make herself stop.

"You're the one who's suffering, aren't you?! You're the one who's pathetic, aren't you?!"

His eyes went wide.

"Poor Kira! Lonely Kira! Aching because you have to fight, aching because you couldn't save them, forever on the verge of tears! That's *you*, isn't it?!"

The words were built to cut, shaped as mockery, and yet they tore out of her with the raw force of pure anguish. She hammered her fists against his chest.

"So then... then why does it have to be *me* you pity?!"

Why?

How had everything come to this?

"Fl... ay..."

He breathed it, as though wringing the sound out of himself.

"Please... stop..."

Head bowed, all she could see was his hand clamped on the edge of the desk. His grip was so tight the knuckles had bleached white. The hand quivered faintly, then dissolved from view behind the tears flooding her eyes.

How had it come to this?

She had set out to make him fight, to make Coordinator kill Coordinator, and through that to avenge her father. And she had succeeded. That should have been the end of it. It should have been enough, and still...

His hand rose, trembling, and pressed against her shoulders, as if to open some distance between them.

"We... got it wrong. We were wrong, weren't we? I... we..."

Where had they gone wrong?

Poor Kira.

Poor Flay.

All they could do was cling to each other's warmth, and yet even the mercy of tending each other's wounds was denied them. Her own pride barred the way, and so did her father's death. This thing between them had nowhere to go. It could never arrive anywhere. And even so...

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She poured the feelings she couldn't name into fury and screamed again.

"What is that supposed to mean?!"

She glared up at him through a face slick with tears and met the eyes gazing down at her. He was looking at her with a tenderness that was unbearably sad.

She couldn't stand it.

Shoving him away, she fled the room.

How had things ever twisted into this? Where had it all gone wrong?

She didn't know. She didn't know why the grief of the boy she was supposed to hate cut so sharply into her chest, or why the pity that should have been a humiliation soaked so painfully into her heart.

Because she must never be allowed to understand it.

In another room at Orb military headquarters, one deliberately kept well away from where Tolle and the others were being reunited with their families, the door swung open. The man and woman waiting within rose from their seats. The figure who stepped inside was Uzumi Nara Athha, the former Representative.

"Mr. and Mrs. Yamato, I take it?"

As he crossed toward them, the couple inclined their heads. Kira's parents, Haruma and Caridad.

"And yet we swore we would never meet again..."

Caridad murmured it without raising her eyes, her voice tight.

Uzumi released a long breath.

"Call it fate playing its hand... The children crossed paths on their own. There was no preventing it."

She looked up at him sharply, something close to indignation in her face, but with no grounds to lay the blame at his feet, she dropped her gaze again, stricken.

He motioned toward the chairs, and the two of them sat back down.

"I never dreamed things would arrive at this."

It was Haruma who spoke now.

"Heliopolis falls, and of all places, the boy lands in the hands of the Earth Forces... and now this, on top of everything..."

"Which is exactly why I said back then that we should have gone to the PLANTs with Lenore and the others..."

Caridad gave the old argument voice through her tears, and Haruma quieted her in a low tone.

"Enough. Rehearsing that now serves nothing."

"For Heliopolis... I offer my apology. That failure was ours to bear."

When Uzumi bowed his head, anger flared once more, helpless, in Caridad's eyes, but in the end she only shook her head in silence.

"None of this rests on Lord Uzumi. And apology or no, nothing can be undone now."

"No... What matters is the road ahead."

He regarded the couple with a grave expression.

"That is the reason I asked you here today."

For a long moment the Yamatos said nothing, only trading a glance. But whatever question hung between them had evidently been settled long since, because Caridad soon answered without wavering.

"Whatever happens, that child will never hear the truth from us."

"Not even... about the sibling?"

Uzumi laid the word down carefully, testing, and for an instant shock flickered across both their faces.

"Cruel as it may seem, it is kinder to them both."

Haruma gave the answer, and Uzumi nodded darkly.

"To him most of all..."

A heavy silence settled over the keepers of a shared secret.

At last Caridad lifted her head and spoke, her voice quiet but carrying a resolve that would not bend.

"Everything stays as it was agreed at the very start. And this meeting with you, Lord Uzumi, will truly be the last."

"Understood."

He nodded and stood. The couple rose with him.

As they turned for the door, he spoke abruptly.

"And still, there is something unsettling in the not knowing. The two of them *did* find each other, after all, with neither one the wiser."

The Yamatos halted, caught off balance by the remark, and for a moment Caridad glanced anxiously toward her husband.

But Haruma only shook his head.

"Let's not surrender to talk of destiny. If we lose our footing, the children will feel it in us."

A gentle smile had spread across his composed face, and Uzumi found an answering smile rising on his own.

"Perhaps so."

Then, almost as an afterthought, he asked, "But why was it that he, today...?"

He meant Kira's refusal to see his parents, and Caridad's face shadowed again.

"All he would say was, 'I don't want to see you right now'..."

Haruma laid a hand on her arm in quiet comfort. Never before had they been parted from their only son for so long.

"He's the sort of child who carries his troubles alone, and that's what worries me."

Her concern was a mother's through and through, and after a kind look at her, Haruma said, "We were hardly steady ourselves today. I'll ask whether we might see him before the ship departs."

Uzumi nodded and watched them go with warmth in his eyes, the two of them looking, for all the world, like the most ordinary husband and wife alive.

The following day, at the demonstration held on the same Astray proving ground, Kira was walking them through the modifications he'd made to the OS.

"I wrote a new quantum subroutine, pushed the metabolic speed of the synaptic fusion up forty percent, and restructured the molecular architecture of the ion pumps so they'd conform to the neural junctions of an average Natural."

But the Astray moving beyond the glass made his explanation almost redundant. With the new OS loaded, the machine strode forward and swept

its arms through the air with a fluency that made it hard to credit this was the same unit, with the same pilot, as yesterday.

Erica Simmons let out an admiring breath.

"All of that, in this little time! Honestly, it's remarkable."

Kira's face, though, stayed clouded. Every word of praise only pressed down harder.

Mu, who had ostensibly turned up just to needle people, or so it appeared, was watching the Astray's performance with an interest he couldn't quite hide.

"So, if I climbed into one of those, it'd handle like that for me too?"

"It would, Commander. Care to take one for a spin?"

"Oh? That's a genuine offer?"

He slid her a dry, sidelong look, but Erica simply nodded, utterly unguarded.

What she was proposing amounted to handing a foreign soldier access to what was, for all practical purposes, a state secret, and she didn't seem to give it a moment's thought. Maybe that was just the engineer's temperament: consumed by their own discipline, oblivious to everything outside it.

While the adults carried on, the other two pilots, Juri and Mayura, who had been watching Asagi put the machine through its paces with wide eyes and a running chorus of "That's incredible!", drifted over to Kira the second the demonstration wrapped.

"Hey, Kira, how old are you?"

"Seriously, Juri, you already have a boyfriend! Leave some for the rest of us!"

"What? I only wanted to chat with him a little!"

"Hey, hey, so is there a girlfriend?"

Out of their cockpits they were exactly as loud and irrepressible as in them, and as the two girls closed in, Kira found himself edging backward. Then, from behind him, Cagalli muttered:

"He's taken. And she's gorgeous, too."

"Whaaat?! That's so unfair!"

Mayura groaned, making no effort to hide her disappointment.

"Why is every cute guy already spoken for? Lady Cagalli, weep with me!"

"Why on earth would I weep with you?"

That word, girlfriend, dragged the shadow back across Kira's face. He was still rattled, still stinging, from the outburst Flay had thrown at him.

Her sake hadn't been his only reason for skipping the reunion with his parents, but yes, part of it had been for her. If he stayed close, maybe it would take her mind off things, even a fraction. And beyond that, having taken her father's life, how was he supposed to leave her behind and stroll off to see his own mother and father as though nothing had happened?

But she had thrown that consideration back in his face, whole. His attempt at gentleness had only cut her deeper.

If they stayed near each other, if they went on soothing each other, then perhaps, someday, real love might grow between them. That had been his fleeting hope. His alibi to himself. The alibi that let him stay beside someone who didn't love him, someone he had, in a sense, stolen from a friend.

But if she couldn't accept even his concern, then what foundation was there to build anything on? However much he cared for her,

"No, that's not right either."

He corrected himself, bitterly.

No. The truth was he hadn't loved Flay any more than she loved him. She had merely been the one whose warm arms happened to be there to hold him. He had done nothing but cling to whatever kindness she offered. As long as someone stayed beside him, anyone at all would have served. Wasn't that the real shape of it?

They had been wrong.

Both of them, wrong from the very first.

Stack whatever you like on top of a lie; it never turns into the truth.

He understood that now, at last.

When the OS briefing ended and they filed out of the observation booth, Birdy came fluttering after him, with Mu bringing up the rear. As always the little bird looped circles around him for a while before settling onto his shoulder. Mu, meanwhile, drew level and spoke up.

"Hey, Kira?"

"What is it?"

The answer came out flat and tired, and Mu ducked down to peer into his face.

"So, uh, what's with the long face?"

"I'm not making one."

"You absolutely are."

The two of them boarded the elevator and started the climb to ground level.

"I heard you passed on the family visit, too. How come?"

Even inside the elevator Mu wouldn't let it drop. Kira held his stubborn silence, and Mu fixed him with a look that all but prodded him.

"Kiiira?"

Ground down at last by the man's persistence, he exhaled and muttered.

"Even if I saw them now... I'm military personnel."

"Military or not, you're still yourself. Your parents want to see you, count on it."

Mu had likely read his state and was trying, in his way, to be kind. No one was more attuned to what Kira was feeling. But even that solicitude wasn't kindness pure and simple. It also served the irreplaceable pilot they couldn't afford to lose. Kira knew that. And still, the weakness in him slipped out before he could catch it.

"This is all I do."

"All you do, what?"

"I fight in a mobile suit... and I help build them and keep them running..."

Mu stumbled into silence, and Kira dropped his gaze.

"Because I'm able to."

If anyone else had existed who could do it, he'd have surrendered the role gladly. But the situation had no interest in what he wanted.

As things stood, all he could do was accept his place as an exceptionally efficient instrument for killing. And then, after all that, people expected him to trot off and greet his parents like any ordinary human being. From where Mu stood, maybe that counted as compassion. From where Kira stood, it felt only like contradiction.

"If I see them now... I'm scared I'll say it."

"Say what?"

Mu's brow creased in puzzlement, and Kira raised his eyes and answered.

"I'll ask them... why they made me a Coordinator."

Mu said nothing.

Yes, if he faced his parents now, he was afraid he would cry, would rage, would fling ugly words at them. Afraid he would blame them for something far past changing, even for them.

He had fought, hurt people, killed people... and he refused to add wounding the people he loved to that list.

The elevator doors parted. In the same instant Birdy shot off his shoulder and streaked away.

"Birdy!"

Startled, he took off after it.

The bird flashed its pale green wings, cut a straight line through the factory, and slipped out through a hatch someone had left standing open.

Panic gripped him. They were barred from leaving the grounds.

Officially, they were supposed to have left the country already, so the restriction was hardly surprising. But Birdy had wings. Fences and gates meant nothing to it; it could go wherever it pleased.

"Hey! Birdy!"

Deaf to his calls, the bird climbed higher into the sky. He ran beneath it, straining to keep it in sight, but the stands of trees planted around the facility kept slicing his view apart. If it got beyond the perimeter, he would never find it again, and there were hardly any days left before departure. If Birdy didn't return by then, he would have no choice but to leave it behind.

"Birdy—!"

"This city's peaceful to the point of absurdity."

Nicol murmured it as they moved through the shopping district, and Athrun nodded.

"Yeah. Even after everything that happened in their own waters just days ago..."

"Maybe that's what being a neutral country buys you..."

Onogoro, they had heard, was the island of the military and its industries. The island itself wasn't especially large, but there was no shortage of people flowing through it. Orb apparently claimed the highest population density

anywhere in the South Pacific, and one look around made that easy to believe. The shopping streets lay tranquil to the point of serenity, never mind the battle fought only two or three days earlier.

To Athrun and the others, the people of this country seemed almost dangerously certain of their own peace. Then again, unlike in the colonies or the PLANTs, a punctured hull here didn't spell instant death, and the specter of nuclear attack was kept at arm's length. That easy confidence must have grown from exactly that difference.

"A nation of peace..."

They had split up to comb the island separately, hunting for any thread of information that might lead them to the Archangel. They had walked all day until their legs turned to lead, and still there was nothing, no intelligence, no seam through which to slip into Morgenroete. When Athrun reached the rendezvous point beside the fence ringing the factory district, Yzak and the others had already returned.

"Anything on your end?"

At the question, Yzak shook his head, irritation written plainly across his face.

"Not that I expected them to leave it parked out in the open at the naval harbor or anything..."

Dearka grumbled it.

"A ship that size, though. Hard to picture them tucking it away that easily..."

Even Yzak's sharp features were starting to show the strain.

"No waaay," Dearka groaned, disgusted. "It can't actually *not* be here, right? So, what's the play now?"

Every face turned to Athrun for orders.

"What we need is proof. If the Legged Ship is here, it's here. If it isn't, it isn't. That's the answer we came for."

He gave the reply, and Yzak nodded his agreement. Just then, out of nowhere, a voice hailed them from across the road.

"Excuse me! Which way to Dock Two?"

Three men who looked like visitors had spotted their uniforms and wanted directions. Yzak clicked his tongue and turned aside, half shielding his face. Athrun stilled him with a glance, then forced an awkward smile toward the trio.

"Sorry! We just started here, still haven't learned our way around..."

The three young men moved off, shaking their heads in mild suspicion.

Fair enough. Coming up blank on a question about your own workplace was bound to look odd.

"Honestly... every single one of them wearing that same damned contented face!"

Watching the three walk away, Yzak spat it like a curse.

"There's a war going on right now! What is this place supposed to be, paradise?!"

"But if it is paradise, even just within these borders, isn't that a good thing?"

Nicol tried to smooth him down, blunting the edge.

"Good how?! They build machines like that and then lounge around in comfort while everyone else bleeds!"

"Even so... demanding that people who look happy shoulder other countries' suffering too, that's just us imposing our own view on them, isn't it?"

Nicol delivered it with a cool rationality that sat strangely on his soft, boyish face, and Yzak could only glower himself into silence. Stranger still, Dearka came down on Nicol's side.

"Exactly. Peace is great. The girls here are cute, too. Nice country, all told."

"What do the girls have to do with peace?!"

Yzak's retort was entirely reasonable, but Dearka had already stopped listening.

"No, I'm serious, Natural girls are something else. For real."

"Is there anything in your head besides women?!"

"Enough."

Athrun sliced through the squabble, voice low.

"Keep moving. We stand out enough already, any more and we've got a real problem."

Walking the line of the fence, they dropped into hushed voices, weighing possible ways in.

"Security along the waterfront is airtight... What about jamming the check system?"

At Yzak's question, Athrun shook his head and pulled the data he'd collected on the system up on a handheld computer.

"It's redundant, several layers deep. Physically, it'll be difficult. About what you'd expect, I suppose."

"What a headache... This country is nothing but trouble!"

Yzak's voice climbed again.

"Rather than fighting the system, it'd be quicker to grab somebody with clearance..."

"Sure, but how do we figure out who that is?"

As they went on muttering among themselves, something faint grazed Athrun's ears, and he lifted his head.

"Birdy..."

There it was again, thin, but familiar from somewhere. He glanced around without meaning to, then caught a shadow skimming overhead and looked up into the sky.

"Birdy..."

A tiny shape, no larger than a small bird, wheeled once above them on wings of metallic green. Athrun stood rooted.

"Birdy? It can't be..."

Without thinking, he stretched out a hand. The little bird-shaped robot fluttered down onto it, folded its miniature wings, and tilted its head. He stared at the small creature, eyes wide.

"Birdy."

Everything matched his memory exactly. The chirp, the color of the wings, the build, every piece of it precisely as his own hands had made it.

"Kira was taking such good care of it, too..."

If this bird was here, then that could only mean...

"What've you got there?"

Noticing the little bird perched on his hand, the others pressed in around him.

"Huh. A robot bird. Oh, think it belongs to that guy?"

At Nicol's words, Athrun's head snapped up.

Beyond the fence, a boy in work clothes was running their way. He kept scanning the sky, calling out some name now and then, his face creased with worry.

Athrun's heart began slamming hard enough to shake him. His comrades' voices dropped out of hearing. The world seemed to peel away until nothing remained but himself and the boy racing toward him from the far side.

"Kira!"

Was this coincidence?

Or was Birdy, the little thing he had built himself, the nearest thing to a second self, trying to pull the two of them together?

But toward what end?!

Before he knew it, Athrun had already taken a step forward, as if something were dragging him there against his will.

Kira had been sprinting with his eyes locked on the sky, hunting for Birdy, and only when he came right up against the fence did he register the figures standing there and pull up short.

On the far side stood four boys. They wore work clothes much like his own, caps tugged down low. One of them started toward him.

The moment Kira saw him, he went rigid where he stood.

That quiet carriage.

Black hair showing beneath the brim of the cap.

And resting on his hand, perched there as if by some natural right, the little green bird.

Of course. Those were the hands that had built it.

"It can't be!"

Even as his mind insisted it was impossible, he knew there was no mistaking what his eyes were telling him.

"Athrun!"

As though something were pulling him, Kira drifted toward the fence.

Through the wire mesh, the face he knew so well resolved into full view.

At their first reunion, helmets had stood between them; he had never been able to see that face like this. Athrun was looking straight at him with those vivid green eyes.

Forcing his shaking body forward, Kira took one more step.

His oldest friend stood there, near enough that they were almost touching. Near enough that a reaching hand could have held him. Or near enough that, had a blade been in that hand, it could have been driven home.

Why, why was Athrun here? A ZAFT soldier, standing on neutral Orb soil?

Kira's eyes flicked past him.

The other three looked around their own age. The one standing closest seemed slightly younger. His face was gentle, almost dreamy, soft enough to read as girlish, and he was watching Kira with an easy smile.

Was he ZAFT as well? Were all of them?

They had no idea.

No idea that the enemy they had traded fire with time and again was standing directly in front of them.

"Is this... yours?"

The stiff, formal question yanked Kira back into himself. Athrun, face set in hard lines, was holding Birdy out to him through the fence.

In that instant Kira grasped what his friend was doing. That cool, distant register, so unlike Athrun, was performed for the comrades at his back.

He didn't want them learning who Kira was.

No, he could not afford to let them learn.

And Kira, likewise, could not let them realize who he was. So, he bit down hard on lips that wanted to tremble, then gave a small nod.

"Yeah... thanks..."

He answered in the same flat, detached tone. Speaking that way made it feel as if they truly had become strangers, and he had to fight down the burn of tears. If he broke down crying here, Athrun's companions would notice something was wrong.

The hand loosely cradling Birdy slipped through the gaps in the mesh and reached toward him. Kira extended his own hand with care, and the little bird hopped down into his palm. The memory of the very first time Athrun had placed it there returned with merciless clarity.

"How far have we drifted from that moment?"

He gathered Birdy against his chest, bowed his head, and forced the tears back down.

What he wanted, truly wanted, was to grab that hand and shout: Athrun, Athrun, let's end this! Let's end all of it! Why do we have to keep killing each other?!

But he couldn't. He wasn't even permitted the tears.

"Hey, we're moving!"

A voice called from the far side, and Kira flinched. When he looked up, Athrun was already turning, summoned back by his companions. For a heartbeat, the profile Kira glimpsed belonged to a total stranger.

I'll never see him again.



No, that wasn't right.

The next time they met, they would be required to kill each other.

Before he could stop himself, Kira shouted after him.

"A friend gave it to me once!"

At the words, Athrun spun back as though jerked by a wire. Holding that gaze, Kira pressed on, his voice shaking.

"A precious friend gave it to me. It means everything to me."

There was so much he ached to say, and these were the only words the moment allowed him.

Pain broke across Athrun's face.

For a long stretch the two of them simply looked at each other across the fence. Neither was permitted to cross it. They stood close enough to touch with a half-extended hand, and yet it felt as if light-years yawned between them.

"I see..."

Athrun murmured it and smiled, sorrowfully, the same smile he had worn when they parted three years before.

Why could they never go back to that time? They had once been inseparable, and yet some current beyond any power of theirs to resist had swept them up and deposited them, before they understood what was happening, in this unrecognizable place.

Why? How had it ever come to this?

"Kira!"

Just then, the voice came from behind him, and he whirled in shock.

Cagalli was running toward him through the trees, gold hair streaming.

He snapped his gaze back at once and saw Athrun wheeling away as if in flight. He ran straight back to his companions; they threw a glance in Kira's direction, then cleared out of the area with him.

Without thinking, Kira flung himself against the fence and clenched his fingers into the mesh.

"Athrun!"

That back was already shrinking into the distance. Every stride that opened the gap between them felt like some unforgivable error, and it made him want to scream.

"Don't go! Look back at me, just once more!"

Why, why?! Why is it like this, Athrun?!

The question, one Athrun could never answer, one no one alive could answer, tore through Kira's heart.

Feeling himself coming apart at the seams, he kept his eyes fixed on that retreating figure for as long as it stayed in sight.

Athrun never looked back.

There was no returning now.

The understanding dropped into Kira's chest, cold as stone.

They could never go back to where they had stood three years ago.

Not ever again.

Phase.04

"As things stand, Panama is our biggest concern."

Kisaka said this without looking up from the bridge panels, his voice carrying a measured calm. The unkempt hair he'd once let fall across his face was now pulled neatly back, the stubble scraped clean, his powerful build sheathed in a pressed Orb uniform, the transformation was so thorough he might have been a different man. The soldier, restored at last to the world he was made for, carried himself with an almost surprising gentleness, his hard-edged features belying the quiet intelligence in his eyes.

Beyond the hull of the Archangel, the ceaseless rhythm of repair crews filled the air day and night. A ship that had limped in looking half-dead was knitting itself back together at a pace that bordered on miraculous.

"ZAFT's upcoming Panama offensive has Carpentaria in a state of near-frenzy."

The attack on Panama, the strike against the Alliance's last remaining mass driver, earmarked as the closing act of Operation Uroboros, seemed to have already entered its final countdown. Murrue studied Kisaka's face as he spoke, searching for what lay beneath the briefing.

"How much do you really know?"

The question was carefully aimed, probing the reach of Orb's intelligence networks. She was Alliance through and through, and couldn't quite suppress the impulse to pry loose whatever a neutral nation's privileged vantage point might have gleaned about ZAFT. Kisaka met her with a crooked smile.

"Hard to say. Orb walks a tightrope of its own. We're as hungry for intelligence as anyone, but we'd prefer not to shake a tree with a hornet's nest in it."

He sidestepped her so deftly that Murrue could only return the smile. Naturally he'd keep his cards close. And truth be told, the man had already dealt them far more kindness than they had any right to expect.

"But this should be welcome news for you, shouldn't it? If you're making for Alaska?"

Murrue nodded. He was right. Panama weighed on her mind, but the immediate priority was getting her people to their destination in one piece. And for that narrow purpose, ZAFT pouring its strength into the Panama front was nothing short of a welcome development.

"Even in a worst-case pursuit scenario, once we cross the Tropic of Cancer we're inside Alaska's air defense umbrella. They won't chase us into that."

Neumann said it with a brightness that would have been unthinkable weeks ago. When they'd first made planetfall, the road ahead had been

nothing but fog and uncertainty. Now the path to Alaska stretched out before them in clean, navigable lines. The sheer improbability of it kept catching Murrue off guard.

"It's been such a long road," she began to think, then stopped the thought cold. No. Alaska was still ahead of them, not behind. Until they were safely inside that defense perimeter, sentiment was a luxury she couldn't afford.

"What about that unit that's been shadowing us? Any sign of them?"

Kisaka shook his head.

"No contacts in Orb's coastal waters for the past two days."

"They've pulled back?"

Murrue couldn't keep the surprise from her voice. The dogged tenacity the enemy had shown, hounding them across space from Heliopolis to here, made a quiet withdrawal based on official statements feel deeply out of character.

"There's been considerable diplomatic wrangling behind the scenes, so that's the version we'd like to believe, but..."

Kisaka clearly harbored the same misgivings. What struck Murrue was the sincerity of his concern, not the diplomatic kind, offered at arm's length, but the real thing, plain on his face. A spreading warmth settled in her chest. It wasn't only him. Cagalli and Uzumi, the desert resistance fighters who'd bled alongside them, all of them had given freely, in ways both visible and invisible, and their giving was the sole reason this ship and its crew still drew breath.

"I won't forget," she told herself quietly.

Then Natarle cut in without preamble.

"Is it true that Representative Athha had no knowledge of this vessel or the G-weapons at the time?"

"Lieutenant Badgiruel."

Murrue's voice carried a note of reproach, but Kisaka answered regardless, his tone turning flinty.

"The Minister of Technology acted alone, buckling under pressure from the Atlantic Federation. His ties to Morgenroete were also exposed."

For the first time, the story behind their own ship's existence was laid bare before them, and Murrue and her officers could only stare. Kisaka pressed on, an edge of bitterness sharpening each word.

"We can't stay on the sidelines forever, Orb needs to choose a side.' I understand the man's logic. But the moment you let yourself get pulled onto someone else's battlefield, it's everyday people who get burned. The way Heliopolis did."

At the name of that shattered colony, destroyed, in no small part, because of them, even Natarle's gaze dropped to the deck.

"Lord Uzumi knows full well the odds are against him. That's precisely why he refuses to stop pushing back."

Kisaka spoke with the unmistakable reverence of a man who had given his loyalty absolutely and without reservation. Then his expression softened as he looked at Murrue and the others.

"I imagine it must seem foolish, from where you're standing."

"No..."

Murrue shook her head slowly. Not fighting didn't mean standing idle. In a world like theirs, the choice not to fight might demand more courage than raising a weapon ever could.

"So, where do we stand on repairs?"

Kisaka's tone shifted, turning brisk and practical, as though drawing a clean line under the heavier conversation.

"We've been informed they should be complete by end of day tomorrow."

Natarle's answer drew a quiet smile from him.

"Good. The finish line's in sight. Keep it up."

He turned to go, and behind him.

"Sir!"

"Thank you so much!"

Natarle and Neumann snapped off salutes as crisp as any they'd give their own commanding officers. Murrue felt something soften behind her ribs. She straightened her spine and raised her hand in kind.

"Colonel Kisaka, we owe you more than we can say. Truly."

He returned the salute looking a bit embarrassed, then let out a short laugh and shrugged one broad shoulder.

"Don't mention it. You helped us out plenty. I don't have any family anymore, but, I'm Tasil-born, you know."

His gaze drifted somewhere far away, to some other place entirely. The endless dunes of a homeland he could no longer call his own, perhaps. Or the fleeting, fierce camaraderie of a fight that was already receding into memory.

"I know a single victory doesn't change the bigger picture. I've always known that. But once you've witnessed something with your own eyes... you can't simply turn away."

His homeland of birth, a place that had chosen to raise its fists and fight. And the nation he now served, one that had chosen, with open eyes, to stay its hand. He stood in the narrow space between those two truths, and whatever he found there, he kept to himself.

But the shadow passed quickly. His mouth curled into something between a grin and a smirk.

"And hey, I finally managed to drag our runaway princess back home. If anything, I owe you one."

"Give me a break! What the hell is he thinking?!"

Aboard the Cousteau, Yzak's voice rang off the metal walls like a struck bell. Dearka, draped sideways in his chair with his boots propped on the table and a magazine hanging loosely in his hands, offered a drawl of agreement that was equal parts solidarity and theatrical disbelief.

"He can't be serious. The guy actually let them resupply us?"

During their recent covert foray into Orb, they hadn't turned up so much as a whisper linking anything to the Archangel, and yet Athrun had ordered

the withdrawal. The ticking clock had been reason enough to comply without argument at the time. But back on the ship, Athrun made an announcement that hit the squad like a bucket of ice water.

"The Legged Ship is inside Orb. I'd stake my life on it."

On what evidence, exactly, Yzak and the others had no idea. But Athrun was immovable, and before long he'd laid out his plan: they would lie in wait, operating on the assumption that the Archangel would eventually leave Orb. If the ship was bound for Alaska, these northern waters were the only corridor that made sense. Assuming, of course, that the ship was still there to leave at all.

"Two days we've been rotting out here! If he's wrong, that ship is long gone! Damn it!"

Yzak snarled through clenched teeth and drove his boot into the table leg hard enough to rattle the bolts. Dearka's eyes surfaced from his magazine.

"Hey, if you want to dethrone him, I'm in."

Yzak pinned him with a glare. Dearka met it with a look of unguarded enthusiasm.

"So? Mutiny? A coup?"

It wasn't really needling, Dearka was simply, profoundly bored, and the prospect of helping Yzak shake some sense into Athrun clearly ranked higher on his list of diversions than another page of recycled articles. Yzak exhaled through his nose and batted the idea away with one hand.

"Regrettably, my skull isn't quite that thick."

And yet, what had gotten into Athrun? He was an irritant, yes, and always had been, but Yzak had never denied the man's talent. That grudging respect, though, was built on Athrun's ice-cold composure and razor-sharp tactical instincts, not on hunches, not on wild gambles with nothing backing them up.

"Whatever," Yzak told himself, forcing the restless anger down below the surface where it could simmer without boiling over. Galling as it was, Athrun held the command. Orders were orders.

And besides, if this little ambush came to nothing, he'd have a front-row seat to watch his rival crash and burn. There was, he had to admit, a certain pleasure in that.

Athrun stood alone on the upper deck of the Cousteau, which had risen to the surface to receive its supplies, his eyes resting on a sea so still it barely seemed to breathe. The supply vessel finished its business and peeled away into the distance; Captain Monroe, who had been standing nearby to oversee the transfer, made his way over. On paper, Monroe now fell under Athrun's command, but the seasoned officer had met each order from his absurdly young squad leader with a patient, avuncular grace, due in no small part, perhaps, to the fact that Athrun treated him with the kind of deference a son might show a father.

This time, however, duty and age alike seemed to compel a word. Monroe positioned himself at Athrun's shoulder with studied casualness.

"Still..."

"Yes?"

Athrun raised his head. Monroe kept his face carefully neutral, whatever doubts churned beneath.

"There is a strategy behind this, I trust? Operation Spitbreak draws near. If ours is the only unit with its hands folded, morale won't hold."

Athrun held the older man's gaze without flinching.

"I'm counting on it, sir."

The certainty rolling off him was seamless, airtight. Monroe found no crack to press and settled for a small shrug.

"Fine. Then let's see what you're made of, Commander Zala."

He'd lodged his protest for the record. That would have to do. The captain let out a half-exasperated breath and withdrew.

He had a plan. He simply couldn't share the reasoning, not with Monroe, not with anyone.

Athrun turned back to the water. The sea in these latitudes was among the most transparent on Earth, so glass-clear that the ocean floor lay open like a map. But the staggering beauty of it, those colors that defied naming, slid across his eyes without registering at all.

Who could he possibly tell? I've confirmed the identity of the enemy pilot, the one in the Strike. The Archangel is on that island; there is no doubt. And the pilot is someone I grew up with, my closest friend since childhood, a Coordinator who has turned his back on his own kind and taken up arms for the other side.

The words would have been absurd. Unthinkable. Impossible.

He clenched his fists until the tendons ached, then slowly uncurled them and stared down at his own open palms.

For the first time in three years, he had touched the little robot he'd built with these hands.

"It's something precious... that a precious friend gave me..."

The lips that had shaped those words had been trembling. Kira had been on the verge of tears, as always. Crybaby Kira. Three years ago, at the moment of their farewell, he'd nearly broken down the instant Athrun pressed Birdy into his hands. Athrun had never known what to do with Kira's tears, so even though his own throat had been burning and he'd been the one who wanted to cry, he'd fixed a smile to his face and held it there.

"But you chose the other side of the fence..."

He said it with a mocking edge, aimed partly outward, partly inward. Kira had refused to stand where Athrun stood. Even trembling, even with tears brimming, the choice had been his own. It was always that way. Even when his decisions left him floundering, running to Athrun in tears, the deciding had always been Kira's to do, and no force Athrun had ever brought to bear could bend it.

"Athrun."

A voice behind him pulled him from his sea of memory, and the present rushed back in. He turned to find Nicol walking toward him.

"Resupply's finished?"

"Yeah."

"There were flying fish leaping out of the water over there! Can you believe it?"

Nicol's face shone with the uncomplicated delight of a child discovering something for the first time. He took in every marvel Mother Earth offered with unguarded sincerity, and dutifully reported each one back to Athrun. The shapes of clouds, the way the sea shifted through an entire spectrum of color the moment the sun touched the horizon. Every unremarkable fish, every passing seabird, earned a breathless declaration of wonder. There were times it was frankly exhausting, but something about watching Nicol's face light up never failed to warm a place inside Athrun that little else reached.

"Want to come look?"

"No, I'm all right."

Athrun declined with a half-smile. Something in that smile must have been off, slightly too tight, perhaps, because Nicol's expression shifted, a flicker of gentle worry crossing his features.

"Are you anxious about it?"

"What?"

"It's going to be fine! I believe in you, Athrun, ah, I mean, Commander!"

Nicol threw his whole heart into the words. Athrun felt a stab of alarm, reading too much that probably wasn't there, but the boy was simply gazing up at him with a soft, open smile on that face that hadn't quite finished growing, looking at Athrun the way someone might look at a hero in a storybook. His teammate, one year his junior, had attached himself to Athrun with an almost brotherly devotion, though given how often it was Nicol checking on him, smoothing things over, quietly picking up the pieces, it was an open question which of them was truly the elder. The boy had a dreamy, idealistic streak, yes, but he also possessed a sensitivity to the people around him, stepping in to mediate when tensions flared among the team, noticing when someone was struggling, that was a rare quality in a pilot, let alone an ace.

Turning this over, Athrun found a question rising to his lips almost unbidden.

"Nicol... why did you enlist?"

It struck him, belatedly, that the military was a strange destination for someone built from so much kindness.

"Huh?"

Nicol's large eyes went round at the sudden question.

"Oh, no, never mind. Forget I asked."

Athrun tried to wave it away, but Nicol shook his head and smiled. "No, it's all right."

"I need to fight too.' That's what I thought, the day I saw the news about Junius Seven."

Something heavy pressed against Athrun's ribs. This was a boy young enough to deserve shelter, not a rifle. Everything about his nature argued against the battlefield. And yet duty had called, and he had answered, he had picked up a weapon to protect the people who were his.

"Um, Athrun... what about you?"

Nicol's voice was tentative, almost shy. Athrun let the tension around his eyes ease.

"Same as you."

Nicol broke into a full, radiant smile. Watching it, Athrun found himself wishing he had talked to this boy, truly talked, far sooner than this. If he had, perhaps Nicol was the one person he could have told about Kira. The thought surfaced, he suspected, because that gentle, unguarded smile carried the faintest echo of Kira's face as a small child.

"I'll listen to him more from now on," Athrun resolved in that moment. Yes, a boy who found the world this endlessly astonishing deserved to see more of it. Before they shipped back to the PLANTs, he'd take Nicol somewhere. Ayers Rock, maybe. The Great Barrier Reef. He wasn't entirely sure what they looked like up close, but he was certain Nicol would be beside himself with joy.

If the world ever granted him a day quiet enough for something so simple.

In the white colonial mansion, Cagalli had been tearing through her travel preparations since dawn. She was dressed in the ensemble that reliably sent her attendant Marna into cardiac distress, ballistic jacket, cargo pants, combat boots, cramming the barest essentials of life into a rucksack with the efficiency of someone who had done this before and expected to do it again.

Today the Archangel sailed. Morgenroete had thrown everything it had at the repairs, and the work had been completed late last night, exactly on schedule. Cagalli wasn't part of the official crew. If she took her time, the ship would leave without her and not look back.

The figure at the fence the other day, she was certain now. That had been Athrun. The ZAFT pilot who flew the Aegis had somehow slipped onto Onogoro Island, and there he'd been, of all impossible things, speaking with Kira. The sight had hit Cagalli like a dousing of ice water. A spike of dread, that Kira, oblivious to who he was really talking to, might have let something slip, something critical about the Archangel or the Strike, had sent her running toward them with the fierceness of a guardian who smells danger before she can name it.

Athrun had fled, or so it appeared, the moment he noticed her. When she questioned Kira afterward, he wouldn't meet her eyes. All he said was that the stranger had caught Birdy for him. His eyes were rimmed red, the telltale aftermath of crying. He'd been off somewhere alone, drowning in his own thoughts again. Of course he had.

He always wore that look, the look of someone carrying the entire weight of the world on shoulders too narrow to bear it. And how could he not? He

had been killing his own people, battle after battle, without reprieve. Only now did Cagalli understand what he had been crying about that day on the deck. He hadn't wanted to kill the Desert Tiger. He hadn't wanted to kill Andrew Waldfeld. Just as she hadn't wanted to kill Athrun.

"Then how do you decide who wins and who loses? Where do you draw the line and say it's over...?"

The words of that unforgettable enemy commander drifted back to her.

A knock sounded at her door, and without so much as a pause for her answer, it swung open. Cagalli turned, irritation already sharpening her features. The servants never bothered to knock at all. Only one person in this house knocked and then walked in without waiting.

As expected, her father stood framed in the doorway. Uzumi cast a measured glance over her clothes, over the belongings strewn across every surface, and spoke.

"You mean to go with that ship?"

"Yes."

The word came out clipped, guarded. Cagalli had lost her mother when she was small; her father occupied a singular place in the landscape of her heart. She had respected him, taken fierce pride in him, and he, though he had never once indulged her, had loved her with a depth that needed no softening to be felt. Since Heliopolis, the idol she had built of him had cracked and toppled. But in its place, she had discovered someone far more complicated: a man who was every bit as stubborn as she was, and twice as difficult to outmaneuver.

Uzumi held her gaze in long silence. Father and daughter shared little in the way of physical resemblance, but squared off like this, the kinship between them was unmistakable, two people hewn from the same unyielding stone, neither willing to surrender a conviction, both prepared to fight for theirs to the last.

"Then you would serve as an Earth Forces soldier and make war against the PLANTS? You want to fight that badly?"

The barb in his words found its mark. Cagalli's temper flared white-hot.

"That's not what this is! I don't want to fight!"

"Then what do you want?"

"I want to help them!"

Behind her eyes, unbidden, rose the image of Kira's hunched back, his shoulders shaking as he wept. And then Ahmed's face. And the others. The ones who didn't come back.

"And I want this war over! I want it ended!"

"And your fighting will end it?"

"I, I know I can't do it alone, but—!"

Mid-sentence, her voice broke off as if something had seized her by the throat.

"But fighting won't end it... war doesn't work that way... probably..."

Kira had whispered it in a voice scraped clean of hope. What had he been seeing, in those moments? The boy who had slaughtered fellow

Coordinators to shield Naturals, what shape did the world take through his eyes?

"Where do you draw the line and say it's over? By destroying every last enemy... until none remain...?"

She wrenched herself free of the dead man's voice as though pulling loose from a hand on her shoulder.

"But still—" she cried, fixing her father with a hard stare. But the expression on Uzumi's face stopped her cold.

"If you shoot someone's husband... his wife will hate you."

Cagalli's heart struck her ribs like a fist.

"If you shoot someone's son... his mother will hate you."

Uzumi was looking at her with something she had never seen in his face before, not anger, not authority, but something rawer and far more frightening.

"And if someone shoots you... I will hate them. How can you not see something so simple?!"

What trembled beneath his words was frustration tangled inextricably with a plea. Cagalli shook her head, fighting it with everything she had.

"I know that! But I can't just sit here safe inside this country while—"

Uzumi's voice cracked like a whip across the room.

"What do you imagine you can accomplish with that cheap, self-gratifying sense of justice?!"

The breath locked in Cagalli's lungs. Self-gratifying? Was that really what this was? Was that the word for the fire that had been driving her?

Uzumi looked down at his daughter, set both hands on her shoulders, and shook her, not roughly, but with an urgency that words alone could no longer carry.

"Taking up a gun is not the only way to fight!"

Cagalli's eyes drifted to the bed, to the things she'd thrown there in her haste. Beside the rucksack, a pistol sat in its holster, the metal catching the light with a dull, patient gleam.

Yes. Hadn't she almost understood it herself, that instant she'd stood face to face with Athrun?

That no gun in the world would solve this.

"Learn the roots of war, Cagalli."

Her father's voice, for reasons she couldn't name, met no resistance now. The words fell straight through and settled somewhere deep.

The roots of war.

Where did they lie? If she found them, would she finally discover something she could do, something real, something that mattered?

Would she find a way to spare that crying boy from ever having to kill one of his own again...?

"Father..."

She lifted her face to his. Uzumi looked back at her, his gaze deep and unwavering and old beyond his years.

"You cannot end anything by shooting at each other."

"I'm telling you, I've got this! My sim scores are practically flawless! Let me fly!"

Tolle stood before the Skygrasper, pleading his case with every ounce of conviction he could muster to a skeptical Murdoch and a silent Mu. A few paces back, Kira watched with the uneasy face of someone expecting bad news.

"Well... I won't deny it'd take a load off if we could put both birds up."

Murdoch finally bent, though his tone conceded he was doing so under protest.

"The Strike is at a real disadvantage on the ground, so..."

Tolle had been waging this campaign for days, fighting to be cleared as the second unit's pilot. Every spare moment had gone into the Skygrasper's simulator, hours upon hours logged in its cockpit until the numbers couldn't be argued with.

"But, Tolle!"

Kira's worry bounced off him without making a dent. Tolle was brimming with the particular confidence of someone who has rehearsed success enough times to believe in it.

"All I'd be doing is backing up the Strike and watching the sky! That much, even I can manage!"

Mu, who had been listening with the stony displeasure of a man being slowly overruled, finally broke his silence.

"This an order from Lieutenant Badgiruel?"

"I volunteered!"

The indignation in Tolle's voice was genuine. Mu raked his fingers through his hair, then spoke over his shoulder as he walked away.

"Support only."

Murdoch heard it and turned a deeply suspicious eye on Tolle, probably calculating how many hours of repair work Cagalli's adventures in the cockpit had already cost his crew, and wondering what fresh horrors awaited. But Tolle was oblivious to the mechanic's withering scrutiny. His whole face broke open with delight. Kira, standing beside him, was a study in contrast, the worry hadn't budged.

"Tolle..."

"Would you stop? I'll be fine!"

Tolle drove a companionable fist into Kira's shoulder.

"You and Lieutenant La Flaga are both out there giving everything you've got. I've gotta pull my weight too!"

Kira's expression still wouldn't lighten. Cagalli's disappearance hung over both him and Mu like a bruise that hadn't faded. Once was enough for a lifetime.

But there was no waver in Tolle's voice when he spoke next.

"Look, this is where we are now. I've got to step up. And I know you've got your own stuff to deal with, but... you hear about Sai? He's been hitting the military manuals like a man possessed."

"He has?"

"We're soldiers now, Kira."

Tolle caught the bewilderment on Kira's face and flashed him a grin.

"We signed up for this, remember?"

"Flooding will now commence. Flooding will now commence..."

The warning klaxon tore through the underground dock, and water burst from both flanks of the Archangel in great violent curtains, the sound of it crashing off the cavern walls like thunder trapped underground.

"Transmission from the Orb military: no vessel signatures detected in surrounding waters. Launch will proceed at the scheduled time."

Pal delivered the report crisply, and Murrue nodded.

"Acknowledge and confirm."

"They're actually giving us an escort?"

Sai turned to Tonomura, eyebrows raised.

"Camouflage. The more ships in formation, the harder it is to pick one out of the crowd, and any sensor data can be doctored after the fact."

The water climbed steadily, swallowing the dock in stages, until the Archangel's lower hull vanished beneath the churning surface.

"Former Representative Athha is in the dock. Oh."

Pal's brow creased, and he looked to Murrue with a question in his eyes.

"He's requesting that Ensign Yamato report to the upper deck?"

The message found Kira on the catapult deck. Baffled but obedient, he climbed topside and scanned the dock, and spotted someone sprinting headlong toward the ship from the wharf, uniform and all.

"Kiraaa!"

"Cagalli?"

She was in military dress today. Apparently even she had decided that the ballistic jacket and cargo pants struck the wrong note for a farewell, the thought tugged a small, involuntary smile from Kira as he watched her take the Archangel's gangway at a run. He was glad to see her. A part of him had half-expected her to storm aboard and refuse to leave.

She crested the gangway, chest heaving.

"Cagalli, what—"

She cut him off, jabbing a finger toward the observation booth, still fighting for breath between each word.

"Your parents, up there, they're right there—!"

Kira's head whipped around as though pulled by a wire. The booth held Uzumi, Erica, a handful of officials, and there, pressed to the very front of the glass, two figures he would have known from any distance.

"Ah..."

His mother was leaning into the glass as if she could reach through it, calling his name. She was smiling, a broken, brilliant smile, and the tears on her cheeks caught the overhead lights like small bright scars. His father stood beside her with one arm around her shoulders, composed as ever, raising his free hand in a quiet wave. Kira's own vision blurred.



He had been certain that seeing them would undo him, that the resentment would come pouring out, that he'd say things he couldn't take back. He'd been afraid. But now that he was looking at them, the only things rising in his chest were relief and an aching tenderness.

Cagalli, still gulping air, managed to ask, "Why... won't you just... go to them...?"

For one sharp, unguarded instant, Kira felt the full weight of that question. There was so much to say. Everything that had happened in the space between then and now, every impossible thing –

But the thought completed itself, and he shook his head, a tiny, final motion.

"Can you tell them... I'm sorry? Just for now?"

He couldn't. Not yet.

"Right now, I..."

The words came out fractured, and he pressed his teeth into his lower lip to keep the rest from following.

What would he even say?

"Mom, I saw Athrun. Do you remember his mother? The one you were so close to? She died at Junius Seven. Over a year ago. And now Athrun and I are enemies. We point our weapons at each other and try to kill."

He couldn't say that. Not yet. Too much had happened since he'd last seen them. The person who had left couldn't come back wearing the same face.

Not yet. Someday. When all of this was finished, when the wreckage inside him had been cleared and sorted and understood...

Whether that day existed at all, somewhere in the future, he couldn't begin to say.

Kira fixed his eyes on his parents waving behind the glass and blinked, once, twice, holding the tears at the threshold. Cagalli read something in his silence that satisfied her.

"All right..." she said, the word weighted with a gravity that belonged to someone much older.

Kira turned to face her.

"You take care of yourself too, Cagalli..."

Her face, that impossible combination of bluntness and raw sincerity, disarmed him completely. Everything he might have said scattered and fell short.

"I just... thank you. For everything."

He smiled, stiff and clumsy, and began to turn away. Cagalli's composure shattered. Her features twisted, every line of careful restraint crumbling at once, and she hurled herself forward with a cry of "Kira!", throwing both arms around his neck with a force that had nothing gentle about it.

"Don't you dare die!"

She was half-screaming, half-sobbing, shaking him with a ferocity that no one would ever mistake for tenderness. And Kira nearly broke. It struck him with the sudden, blinding clarity of a light switched on in a dark room, how

much this girl had meant to him across these impossible weeks, how much of his unraveling she had, without knowing it, held together. He swallowed hard, blinked the sting from his eyes, and found a smile.

"I'll be fine..."

He brought his hand to her back and patted it, the way she had done for him once, a small returned kindness, stored without either of them realizing it.

"I'll be okay now..."

He glanced up. In the booth, his parents and Uzumi were peering down at the scene with the wide-eyed, slightly panicked look of adults who have lost the thread of what's happening. Right, she was the princess of this nation. Two teenagers locked in a sudden, desperate embrace under the eyes of both sets of parents was presumably not part of the scheduled send-off. They really don't need to worry, Kira thought, and gently separated himself from Cagalli. What he felt for her bore no resemblance to whatever the adults were imagining. And yet the closeness was real, undeniable, inexplicable. Their personalities couldn't have been more different. Their lives had nothing in common. And still, somehow...

Although, come to think of it, the fact that he could hold her and feel absolutely nothing of that sort probably meant he didn't think of her as a girl at all. Which was, in its own way, possibly insulting.

While he was turning this over, Cagalli, eyes still swimming, looked at his face and jutted out her lower lip.

"What are you grinning about?!"

Kira couldn't help it. He laughed.

He was glad. Truly, deeply glad he'd gotten to see her one last time.

Kira vanished through the hatch; Cagalli stepped back onto the wharf. And then the Archangel's main engines roared to life.

The great forward hatch ground open by slow degrees, parting like a curtain on the world beyond, a sea shrouded in morning mist, luminous and pale, stretching out to meet them. The Orb escort fleet waited in the open water, their silhouettes bleeding softly into the haze. The Archangel eased forward, nosing through the curtain of fog, and began its final voyage.

Athrun came through the hatch of the Cousteau's command center at a run, still shrugging into his jacket.

"Exercises?"

The captain answered by tipping his chin at the data panel.

"Nothing scheduled. They're on a northeast heading. Where's my ship ID?"

The last question landed on the operator with quiet insistence. Monroe wore the mask of a man who had seen too many false alarms to get excited, but beneath the composure there was something else, a glint of anticipation, the look of someone who had placed a private bet on a long shot and now sensed the odds shifting. As for Athrun, there was no bet involved. He already knew.

"Begin combat preparations. Get me that identification as fast as you can."

He changed in the time it took to draw a few breaths and swung himself into the Aegis's cockpit. The others were already seated in their machines, coiled and ready.

"A vessel has broken from the fleet! Ship identified! It's the Legged Ship!"

The words they'd been starving for broke from the command center speakers, and Dearka let out a long, appreciative whistle. Nicol's voice leapt through the channel, bright with vindication.

"You were right, Athrun!"

Athrun was the only one who closed his eyes. It lasted no longer than a heartbeat. When his eyes reopened, the boy who had held Birdy in his hands was gone. What remained was a soldier.

"All units, launch. Today the Legged Ship goes down."

"Signal from the fleet flagship: 'We are now returning to port. We wish you fair seas and good fortune.'"

Kuzzey read it out, and Murrue looked up with a smile that carried both gratitude and the faint melancholy of letting go of a lifeline.

"Reply: 'We are grateful for the escort.'"

Miriallia's gaze drifted to the copilot's seat, the one Tolle had always occupied, now sitting conspicuously empty. She looked away.

Chandra's voice was barely above a murmur.

"Here's hoping we make it the rest of the way in one piece."

There wasn't a soul on board who wouldn't have seconded that prayer.

At nearly the same moment, down on the catapult deck, Kira emerged in his pilot suit. Murdoch's eyebrows climbed his forehead.

"Whoa, kid, what's the hurry? Sensors haven't picked up a thing."

Kira passed the mechanic without meeting his eyes, his voice flat and certain.

"Once we clear territorial waters... ZAFT will attack."

"Come again?"

Murdoch stared after him, uncomprehending, but Kira offered nothing more. He climbed into the cockpit with the closed-off expression of someone walking toward something he has already accepted.

He understood now. The pieces had fallen together with the quiet, terrible logic of inevitability. Athrun and his team had been on Onogoro because they couldn't trust the diplomatic channels. They'd come to find proof with their own eyes that the Archangel was hiding inside Orb's borders. And Athrun had found it, because Kira was the proof, breathing and undeniable. Nothing could have been more conclusive than the face of the friend he'd grown up with. The Archangel would leave Orb. It would sail north toward Alaska. And Athrun would be out there, patient as a held breath, waiting for the moment the ship crossed the line.

The moment came right on schedule. Barely had they cleared territorial waters when the bridge erupted.

"Radar contact! Three, correction, four bogeys!"

Kira's head came up. The next report was one he could have delivered himself.

"Units identified! Aegis, Buster, Blitz, Duel!"

He had come. Of course he had come.

For a single, unguarded instant, Kira saw it again: a hand lowering Birdy gently into his open palm. A hand broader now than at thirteen, the tendons standing out beneath the skin. An adult's hand on the body of someone who should have still been a boy.

"All hands, anti-submarine and anti-mobile suit combat stations!"

Murrue's voice shattered his reverie like a stone through glass, the edge of desperation in it unmistakable.

"We don't need to win, just out run them! I won't pretend it'll be easy, but I need everything you have!"

"ECM to maximum! Smoke dischargers, fire! Both flanks, deploy smokescreens!"

Kira stepped out onto the upper deck. The Strike, loaded with the Launcher configuration, dropped to one knee and reached for the external power cable rising from the Archangel's hull, locking it into the Agni's feed port.

"Conduit connected. Auxiliary power online. Standby complete."

With the ship itself supplying energy, the Agni could fire without limit, a bottomless well of destructive force, fed straight from the reactor.

Kira raised the Agni, settled his aim on the horizon, and waited.

Dark shapes on Guuls resolved out of the distance, four of them, the stolen X-Numbers, closing fast. Smoke canisters arced from the Archangel and burst in the air overhead. Simultaneously, the dischargers on either side of the bridge began vomiting thick curtains of smoke that rolled across the hull, swallowing the ship inch by inch until it became a ghost of itself.

"Don't overthink it. Stay above, keep the Strike covered. That's the whole job."

Mu's sandpaper voice was followed immediately by Tolle's, pitched a half-octave too high.

"Yes sir!"

"Let's go! And keep yourself in the sky!"

The two Skygraspers fired off the linear catapult in rapid succession, one after the other. Mu's Unit One bore the Aile Striker pack; Tolle's Unit Two carried the Sword Striker. Kira watched the second plane slice through the billowing smoke and claw upward into open air, and the knot of worry in his chest refused to loosen.

Tolle clenched his jaw against the G-forces as the catapult flung him forward. The simulator had prepared him for everything except this, the raw, physical weight of acceleration trying to press him through the back of his seat. The instant the wall of smoke fell away and clear sky filled his canopy, the Duel was there, close enough to fill his entire field of vision.

"WAAAAH!"

The scream tore out of him on pure reflex, but his hands, running on a deeper programming than fear, had already wrenched the stick back. The Skygrasper banked savagely, G-forces slamming him sideways, the harness biting into his shoulders. The Duel's beam rifle flashed, but its pilot had been caught just as off-guard by the sudden encounter, and the shot sailed wide.

"Hey, not bad at all!"

Mu's voice punched through the static.

"Strike support is yours! Make it count!"

"Yes sir!"

Tolle's voice broke on the second syllable, and a small, desperate corner of his brain prayed that Miriallia hadn't been listening to that channel when he screamed. He found all four X-Numbers in his display, locked them in his sights, and hammered coordinates into the console with fingers that wanted badly to shake and were only barely being denied.

"Skygrasper to Strike! Tolle here! Do you read?!"

He was shouting into the comm with the intensity of someone who had no idea how loud he was.

"Transmitting enemy coordinates and targeting data now!"

Deep inside the smokescreen, the Strike was blind, cut off from visual contact with the enemy, and with N-Jammers rendering radar useless. But with targeting data streaming down from the Skygrasper overhead, Kira's hands could do the rest faster than thought.

A beam erupted from the heart of the smoke with no warning, a bolt from an invisible source, and scorched past an enemy unit close enough to peel paint. From the outside, the Strike's position was unreadable, its firing lines impossible to predict.

The four X-Numbers broke formation and scattered, scrambling to evade an enemy they could sense only by the beams it sent screaming past them.

Kira disconnected the Agni's external cable and brought the Phase Shift armor online. Fighting through someone else's eyes had their limits, borrowed targeting data alone wasn't precise enough to land a killing blow on the X-Numbers. He launched the Strike skyward in a single explosive leap.

Tolle's data had already painted the enemy positions on his display. The instant the Strike cleared the smoke, the Buster and Duel opened up on him, beams lancing past on either side, but Kira slipped between the shots as though the trajectories were drawn lines he could simply step around, and squeezed the Agni's trigger on his way down. The beam struck true, punching cleanly through both Guuls beneath the enemy machines.

The Buster and Duel dropped like stones toward the sea, robbed of everything but gravity. As the Strike fell under that same pull, the Aegis and Blitz came after it. Kira dodged their fire and angled back toward the safety of the smoke. The Aegis pressed closer.

"Athrun!"

The last sad smile he'd seen flickered through his mind.

Then something flared deep inside the curtain of smoke, a pulse of light, low and immense, like heat lightning trapped in cloud. A heartbeat later, a massive beam ripped through the smokescreen in a blinding column. The Gottfried, the Archangel's main gun. The great white warship shouldered through the dissipating smoke, its hull trailing vapor, and opened up on the Aegis with everything it had, Valiant, Wombat, a wall of coordinated fire. The Aegis broke off pursuit and fell back.

Kira returned to the deck and shed the Launcher pack in one quick motion. Battery levels were still workable, but the shape of the battle called for mobility. Aile would be the right choice.

"La Flaga's unit, on approach!"

Sai called it, and Mu's Unit One carved a clean arc down from above, right on schedule.

"Strike, stand by for Aile conversion."

Miriallia's voice came through steady and professional, and then Mu added, in that casual drawl that never seemed to change regardless of circumstances.

"Try not to fumble the delivery!"

The Skygrasper was designed from the ground up to deliver power packs to the Strike in the field. But everything they'd practiced had been in zero gravity. This was the first atmospheric swap, tighter margins, less room for error, one chance, and for a held-breath moment, the full weight of that settled on Kira's chest.

"Ready when you are, Commander!"

He kicked off the deck and flew. The two machines matched velocity and the Skygrasper released the Aile pack. It locked into place on the Strike's back with a solid, deeply satisfying thud. The cruciform wings fanned wide, and color flooded the machine's armor: red, blue, white, the Strike made whole again. Kira caught the ejected shield in one hand and the rifle in the other. First atmospheric swap, clean and flawless. He fired the Aile thrusters without pause and rocketed toward the Aegis and Blitz.

The two enemy units moved in practiced tandem, every time the Strike closed on the Blitz, the Aegis punished the approach with precisely placed rifle fire.

"Ngh!"

Kira threw up his shield barely in time. The Blitz fired its Gleipnir from the left arm, the grappling anchor hurtling toward him on its tether. Kira's saber severed it mid-flight. Without a breath's delay, the Blitz raised the Trikeros in its right hand, but just then...

"Kira!"

Tolle's Skygrasper came screaming in from the flank. Its missiles connected squarely with the Blitz's right arm.

"Tolle!"

For a frozen instant, Kira caught a glimpse of Tolle's face through the canopy, jaw set, eyes wide, every muscle locked tight with concentration.

The Blitz turned its head a fraction to track the Skygrasper streaking past, and that fraction was enough. Kira closed the distance in a single burst and brought the saber around in one clean, committed arc. The Blitz's right arm separated at the shoulder and fell, spinning end over end toward the water below.

"Got him!"

Tolle's whoop of triumph crackled through the comm, and Kira allowed himself a thin, almost reluctant smile. He planted a kick against the listing Blitz and used it as a springboard, sending the Strike climbing skyward again. The Blitz tumbled downward with its ruined Guul, barely arresting its fall above the waves. But stripped of its weapon-bearing right arm and its Gleipnir alike, it was a machine with nothing left to give. It might limp back to the fight, but the fight would have no use for it.

One remained. The Aegis. Alone.

The Aegis fired on the approach, rifle shots stitching the air between them. Kira answered in kind. Both pilots dodged, deflected, absorbed what they couldn't avoid, and collided.

"Athrun!"

The name tore free of Kira's throat. The Aegis surged at him, and Kira hammered rapid rifle fire into the space beneath its feet. The Aegis's Guul ruptured in a gout of flame.

The Aegis vaulted clear and folded itself into mobile armor configuration, sleek and predatory. Kira flinched backward. The Scylla cannon locked onto the Strike and discharged a beam of horrifying intensity, one hit from that weapon and there would be nothing left to recover. Kira threw every instinct he had into evasion and pulled back hard. The Strike touched down on the Archangel's deck as the Aegis descended too, dropping toward a small island below, one of the scattered chain that dotted these waters. Just before impact, the Aegis reverted to mobile suit form and fired retro-thrusters, landing in a controlled crouch.

Now Athrun, too, had lost his wings. The Strike's energy was running dangerously low, which almost certainly meant the Aegis was in the same condition.

"Just walk away," Kira pleaded silently, watching, willing it to happen. But the Aegis crouched and jumped, hurling itself once more at the Archangel.

Something inside Kira snapped white-hot.

"Why won't you just let us go?! I don't want this, I never wanted this! Not with you, not with anyone!"

All of them, every single one of them, why?!

The faces came flooding back. Every person he'd had no choice but to kill.

"Why can't any of you just leave us alone?!"

The helplessness curdled, and what rose in its place was rage, clean and scalding and aimed squarely at the machine in front of him.

"Kira!"

Unit Two swooped in from above, Tolle's voice cutting through.

"Launching the Sword pack!"

He must have been watching the Strike's battery gauge drop. Kira shed the Aile and caught the Sword Striker that Tolle sent down to him. The anger burning through him was so consuming that the anxiety he'd felt during the first conversion, the held breath, the careful calculations, had been incinerated along with everything else. He drove the Strike forward, straight at the island where the Aegis had landed.

"Cease fire! Ensign Yamato, break off pursuit!"

Natarle's voice chased him, sharp with alarm, but it might as well have been wind. The only thing left in Kira's head was the fury, fury at the enemy who refused to stop, who kept dragging him back into a war he had never asked for.

Athrun watched the great ship sliding past and couldn't let it go. He raised his rifle and fired. The Archangel answered without hesitation, missiles and Vulcan rounds tearing through the air around him.

"Ghhk!"

He couldn't evade everything. Impacts hammered the cockpit, slamming him against his harness. A glance at his gauges confirmed the hits had bled his reserves to the edge of the danger zone. Then the proximity alarm shrieked to life, and Athrun's eyes flew to the monitor.

The Strike was already there. Right in front of him.

He threw the Aegis backward and swung his rifle up, but the Strike's enormous sword was faster, sweeping down in a single devastating stroke that sheared the barrel away. Athrun stared at the weapon in his hands, a dead thing now, and couldn't process what he was seeing.

"Athrun!"

Kira's voice tore from the comm.

Fall back! You've lost!

"What did you just—?!"

Blood roared in Athrun's ears. Lost? To Kira? To the boy who cried at everything, who never stood up for himself, who came running to Athrun every time the world got hard, the boy Athrun had always protected, always looked after, always been the strong one for, he had lost to him?

The wound wasn't to the ace pilot's pride. It cut deeper than that, down to the part of him that had always been the older brother. Athrun hurled the dead rifle away and ignited both arm-mounted beam sabers. He threw himself at the Strike with the full reckless weight of his fury. The Strike caught him on its left shield and held.

"Stop, Athrun! I don't want to do this anymore...!"

He slashed again, and again, and again, and couldn't touch the Strike. Couldn't even scratch it. The realization fed the fire until it blazed beyond control.

"Spare me the sentiment! Shoot me! You said you would!"

"Athrun—!"

Kira's voice broke on his name.

"You told me you'd shoot me too!"

"Next time we meet, I'll shoot you."

When Athrun had spoken those words, Kira had looked at him with pain written across his face and whispered back, "So will I."

But Kira wasn't shooting. If he fought him with real intent, Athrun would lose. He could feel the difference between them. Athrun wasn't holding back. He had overridden his teammates' objections, set the trap, waited in ambush, prepared to destroy the Archangel and bury Kira with it, everything on the line.

And still, to be outfought by an opponent who wasn't even trying. What kind of humiliation was that? What was left after that?

Athrun charged, blind with fury. And in that instant, the Aegis's Phase Shift system died.

The world came rushing back. Athrun stood paralyzed. The alarms, they had been screaming at him. He hadn't heard a single one.

He had lost.

He stared at his monitor, emptied of everything. Kira no longer needed beam weapons. There was nothing to do but stand and wait for the sword to fall.

But just then, a shout.

"Athrun, get back!"

Nicol's voice exploded from the speaker, so close and so clear it sounded as though the boy were standing in the cockpit beside him.

And then a dark shape materialized between the two machines, as if the air itself had given birth to it. The Blitz.

It had deployed Mirage Colloid. It had been there all along, creeping closer in silence, invisible, while the two of them fought.

The Blitz rushed the Strike with what appeared to be a single Lancer Dart clutched like a spear in its remaining hand. There was no time for a warning. No time for anything.

And for Kira, there was no time either.

Athrun could only watch. The Strike's Schwert Gewehr swung in a reflexive arc, not aimed, not chosen, simply the body's answer to a threat that arrived faster than thought. The laser edge was drawn through the Blitz's cockpit as though pulled along a groove that had been waiting for it. Athrun couldn't make a sound. His throat had closed around something too large to name.

"Athrun... r-ru..."

A high voice, a boy's voice, still pitched above the break that would never come now, fractured like glass, reached Athrun's ears in jagged pieces, and stopped.

"Nicol?"

Athrun whispered the name into the silence. He didn't understand what had happened. His mind refused to assemble the pieces into meaning.

The Strike was motionless. Utterly, perfectly still. As though Kira, on the other side of that armor, had been struck just as frozen, just as hollowed out, by the same impossible thing.



The moment stretched. It felt as if it would never end.

But an instant later, light erupted from the torn machine and swallowed Athrun's vision in white.

"NICOL!"

The scream ripped out of Athrun from somewhere beneath his ribs.

The Blitz came apart. Fragments rained against the Aegis's drained, colorless armor, each impact ringing out in sharp, metallic discord, a sound like broken instruments playing a hideous dissonance.

That blade was meant for him. Should have fallen on him.

He stood in the wreckage, unable to think, unable to feel, a hollow thing in the shape of a pilot, until voices from the comm found him and dragged him back to the surface.

"Nicol?!"

"You damned FOOL!"

Dearka. Then Yzak. Athrun moved his eyes across the monitors with the sluggish obedience of a man in a dream and registered the Buster and Duel, which had jumped to rejoin the fight. Directly ahead of him stood the Strike, its great sword hanging from one slack hand, the tip nearly touching the water.

"Hhhh... uuuhhhh!"

The sound that came out of Athrun was barely human. Debris tumbled through the air around him, spinning slowly, catching light. Fragments of the Blitz. Fragments of Nicol. Nicol was, Nicol...

"AAAAAAHHH!"

Nicol was dead. It wasn't possible. It just *wasn't* possible.

Kira stared at his own hands as though they belonged to someone else.

"NICOL!"

Athrun's anguished scream was still ringing somewhere deep inside his ears.

He had almost no memory of moving the machine. An enemy unit had appeared from nothing at point-blank range, weapon raised to strike, and Kira's reflexes, filed to the lethal edge of a weapon in their own right, had answered before thought could intervene. By the time his mind arrived at the scene, the great sword had already found the Blitz's cockpit with unerring precision.

He stood paralyzed in the aftermath, and beam fire snapped past him, dodged by instinct alone. The Duel and Buster had landed on the island at some point without him noticing.

"Ensign Yamato! What do you think you're doing?!"

Natarle's voice cut through the fog and dragged him, blinking, back to the surface of the world.

The Archangel had moved in overhead like an enormous sheltering hand, its belly-mounted Igelstellungs pouring fire downward in curtains so dense they resembled rain. Under that barrage, the three remaining X-Numbers couldn't close the distance to the Strike.

"Get back here! I specifically ordered you not to pursue!"

The words landed and the regret hit all at once, sudden, nauseating, total. Why hadn't he listened? He bit down hard on his lip and stole a glance backward at the three enemy machines. And beyond them, at the debris field that had been the fourth.

"Nicol...?"

He let the name sit heavy and bitter on his tongue, fired his thrusters, and left the island behind.

"All units, withdraw from the combat zone! Maximum thrust!"

The instant the Strike's feet touched the deck, Murrue's order rang through every speaker on the ship, and the Archangel leapt forward. The island fell away beneath them, shrinking to a speck. Kira, still moving through a kind of waking numbness, went through the shutdown sequence on autopilot, OS shut down, power cut, systems dark.

He climbed out of the cockpit and walked straight into a wall of cheering.

"YEAH! Hell of a job out there!"

Murdoch's booming voice filled the hangar, his palms cracking together.

"You actually bagged one?"

"The Blitz, they're saying!"

"That's incredible! You did it!"

Kira stood among them and understood nothing. The mechanics swarmed around him, blind to the wasteland behind his eyes, clapping his back, thumping his shoulders, tripping over each other to congratulate him.

"Seriously, you've been on fire lately! Kid, no, wait, Ensign! Sir!"

The realization assembled itself slowly, piece by sickening piece. They were celebrating. They were celebrating what he had done.

"Nobody's gonna touch you at this rate!"

"Keep it rolling all the way to Alaska!"

His stomach turned over. The faces around him seemed to melt and distort, twisting into something leering and grotesque. Even the fact that Murdoch, gruff, irreverent Murdoch, had finally called him Ensign with genuine respect tasted like ash. Kira forced words past the constriction in his throat.

"Please... stop!"

The jubilation died. Everyone stared, caught off guard. Kira's hands were shaking. He clenched them until his knuckles went white.

"I just came back from killing someone... and you're standing here saying... 'good job'...?!"

The warmth drained from the room. Murdoch's face fell, the look of a man who has just put his foot through something fragile. Others didn't bother to hide their irritation.

"What's his deal? It's not like this is the first time..."

The muttered words found Kira's ears with surgical precision, and the trembling deepened, spreading through his whole body. Before the scream building inside him could escape, Mu shouldered through the crowd and closed a firm hand around his arm.

"Enough. He's worn out."

The quiet authority in Mu's voice took some of the heat out of the air. The complaints dimmed to a murmur.

"Come on... Kira."

Mu tried to put a protective arm around his shoulders, but Kira shoved the hand away and walked, fast, head down, not looking back.

"All right, people, back to work! We're not out of this yet, so move it!"

Murdoch's bark herded the still-grumbling mechanics back to their stations.

Kira moved through the corridor as though the deck plates had personally wronged him. Mu caught up and matched his stride.

"They meant well."

No answer. Kira's thoughts had ignited and were burning too hot to produce anything as coherent as speech. Even Mu, Mu, taking their side, was intolerable.

"They see you as one of their own, Kira."

"I know."

And he should have been grateful. They had embraced him so completely that his victories were their victories, his survival their relief. They'd stopped thinking about the fact that every enemy he killed was one of his own kind. They'd simply stopped seeing it.

Mu's hand caught Kira's shoulder and pulled him to a halt.

"Kira."

The boy wouldn't raise his head. Mu's voice hardened into something that left no room for retreat.

"We are soldiers."

Kira's shoulder flinched under his grip.

"Not killers. We're fighting a war. If we don't pull the trigger, we're the ones who die. Me. You. Every single person on this ship."

"I *know*!"

It ripped out of him, jagged, desperate, aimed at nothing. Enough. He knew. He had always known. But knowing didn't change anything.

Mu's final words were stern.

"Then stop hesitating. Because next time, it'll cost you your life."

Kira stood in the corridor with his head bowed and said nothing at all.

"DAMN IT!"

Yzak, still clad in his pilot suit, drove his fist into the bulkhead. Beside him, Athrun and Dearka were changing in a silence so thick it seemed to have weight.

"Damn it! Damn it... DAMN IT ALL!"

Yzak turned his fury on everything within reach, raining kicks on a row of lockers with a violence that made the metal scream. One locker door swung open under the impact, and inside, hanging neatly on its hook, a red uniform came into view.

"Yzak!"

Dearka's voice snapped out like a slap, and Yzak's body locked mid-motion. Recognition arrived, late, devastating. That was Nicol's locker. That was Nicol's uniform. And no one would ever put it on again.

"Why does he have to be the one who dies?!"

Yzak wheeled on Athrun, his voice cracking.

"Here! Like this! Tell me!"

Athrun, who had been a mask of blankness, moved without warning. He seized Yzak by the front of his suit and drove him backward into the lockers with enough force to buckle the metal.

"Then say it!"

Athrun's face was fury incarnate, his shout tearing itself loose from somewhere deep.

"Say it's my fault! Say he died because he was trying to protect me!"

Surprise broke through Yzak's rage for an instant, a crack in the wall. It seemed to dawn on him for the first time that Athrun wasn't standing apart from this grief but drowning in it, perhaps deeper than any of them. Understanding flooded the gap, and Yzak's sharp, handsome features crumpled like paper crushed in a fist. Tears rose in his eyes. He forced his jaw tight and glared back, as though fury could seal the cracks.

"Athrun, Yzak, enough! Both of you!"

Dearka shoved himself between them, revealing a gravity none of them had ever seen from him. Nicol's death had stripped the armor of irony clean off, leaving behind someone none of them quite recognized.

"Tearing each other apart isn't going to bring him back! The one we need to kill is the Strike!"

"You think I don't know that?!"

Yzak screamed it through tears.

This had happened before. Athrun thought it, and the memory opened like a wound reopened.

Yes. The Gamow's pilot locker room. He and Yzak at each other's throats, just like this. And the one who had stepped between them, hands raised, voice gentle, had been Nicol.

Tears streaking freely down his cheeks, Yzak drew himself up and spoke in a voice that trembled but carried the iron ring of a vow.

"Miguel was killed by that thing. It gave me this scar. And next time, next time, I will destroy it."

He locked eyes with Athrun one final time, then turned and stormed out of the locker room. Dearka hesitated a beat, his gaze catching on the red uniform hanging in the open locker. Something raw and undefended moved across his face. Then he was gone too.

Those two had spent every idle moment ribbing Nicol, the youngest member of their squad, needling him, talking over him, dismissing him with the casual cruelty of boys who didn't know how to show affection any other way. And yet his death had undone them to a degree that startled even Athrun. But how could it not? How could anyone absorb this and remain

intact? Nicol had been fifteen. Fifteen years old. He had no business dying like this, in a place like this.

Athrun approached the open locker. His hand rose slowly, reaching out as if searching for some trace of warmth Nicol might have left behind, and touched the uniform. Something slipped free and fell with a soft rustle. Athrun's eyes followed it to the floor. Several sheets of music lay scattered at his feet. The sight hit him like a blade between the ribs, and his face twisted into an expression that lived somewhere between grief and terror.

"Ngh... aahhh!"

He slammed his fist into the locker and buckled forward. Tears fell from his face and struck the floor in heavy, distinct drops, one after another.

"Aaaaahhh...!"

"Were you sleeping?"

Nicol's face materialized, the teasing grin, the bright, conspiratorial eyes, the unguarded delight of a boy who still found the world worth marveling at.

He should have listened. He should have sat down and listened to every note, every phrase, every passage of that performance, as though the music were a message meant only for him.

But always, always, the only person occupying his thoughts had been the friend who was absent. The one far away, on the wrong side of a line that should never have been drawn.

And the one who was always present, always nearby, always noticing, always quietly making sure Athrun was all right, him, Athrun had never once truly seen. What kind of blindness was that? What kind of selfishness?

Too late. No amount of regret, no depth of grief, would conjure Nicol back.

Athrun sobbed, great, ugly, shuddering sobs that he made no effort to control, and cried out.

"It should have been me! That strike was meant for me! Nicol!"

That blade should have fallen on him. It was owed to him.

There had been softness. He understood it now with the merciless clarity. He had been soft toward Kira. He had allowed Kira to be soft toward him. He had fought at what he believed was the limit of his resolve, and the entire time, buried beneath every clash and every exchanged shot, had been a conviction he'd never examined: that he would never actually kill Kira, and that Kira would never actually kill him.

And that unexamined faith, that cowardice dressed as mercy, had devoured Nicol's future whole.

"I did this...!"

The words came out as a rasp.

"All this time... I couldn't bring myself to shoot him... and that weakness... that softness... is what killed you...!"

His indecision, his refusal to commit, had pulled Nicol into the gap between two people who couldn't bring themselves to finish what they'd started. A fifteen-year-old boy, gentle, gifted, too kind for any battlefield, who had gone to war not because he wanted to fight but because he



believed it was owed. His life, still unfinished, still full of music that would never be written, snuffed out because Athrun could not do what needed to be done.

"If you can't bring yourself to pull the trigger, the next person hit may be someone standing beside you..."

Rau's words returned, not as advice, but as prophecy fulfilled, precise and pitiless.

Athrun stared through the blur of tears at the sheet music scattered across the floor. For a long moment there was nothing in his face but devastation. Then, slowly, something else settled into his features. It hardened. It became resolve.

Nicol was dead. He had been killed.

By Kira.

"I will shoot Kira."

His voice was barely above a whisper. His eyes held something that had moved beyond grief.

"This time... I swear it."

That was the punishment. The sentence he had passed on himself.

To destroy the person who mattered most in this world, to do it with his own hands, knowing exactly what he was doing. Nothing less could answer for what Nicol had paid.

Phase.05

"Reverend Malchio..."

The voice came padding toward him on small, bare feet, sweet, plaintive. Soft hands found his arm where he sat, and Malchio paused the dictation he'd been feeding to the computer. He turned toward the voice. The face behind it would remain, as all faces did, invisible to him. But the sighted preferred to be looked at when they spoke, and he had long ago learned to offer them at least the gesture.

"What is it, Lin?"

He was a man in his late thirties, mild-mannered and composed, with features that spoke of intelligence and a quiet, cultivated grace. His gentle tone coaxed an answer from the shy little voice.

"I want a story."

"Of course. Shall I put you on my lap?"

"Uh-huh."

A warm, compact body wriggled its way onto his knees and pressed itself against his chest with the instinctive trust of a creature that has learned where safety lives. Through the open window drifted the sound of waves, patient, rhythmic, unceasing, and the brine-heavy air that had long since woven itself into the texture of every day spent here. The wind carried a sodden weight. A storm was gathering somewhere out over the water.

Lin was five, prone to clinginess, and devoted to Malchio. He would be leaving tomorrow for an indefinite stretch, and she could feel it. She had lost both parents six months ago. A child who has been left behind once carries the fear of it forever.

Every child in this house had a story. Family, taken. The reasons varied, poverty, disease, the indiscriminate appetite of war, but the result was the same. Children are resilient; they adapt, they laugh, they fill a new space with noise and motion until it begins to feel like home. But beneath the brightness, the fracture lines remain. They always remain.

"What kind of story would you like?"

"The one from before! About the princess in the PLANTs."

"Ah, Lacus Clyne. You're fond of Lacus?"

"Yeah! She's a really, really good singer, right?"

"She is. She sings with a voice as clear and beautiful as a songbird's. She has long hair the color of a pink cloud, and a smile so warm it makes everyone around her feel at ease. A truly wonderful princess."

These were details Malchio took on faith, he had never seen her face, nor any face, but the description had been consistent enough across enough observers that he'd made it his own.

"Lacus Clyne lives in space, right? In space you float all around! Did you float, Reverend?"

"Well, inside a shuttle, yes..."

The memory of weightlessness returned, and with it a familiar unease. The thought of where he was headed tomorrow darkened his mood, partly because he knew how slim the chances of success were, but also, in no small part, because of the physical discomfort of the journey. For a man without sight, the loss of gravity meant the loss of the last reliable compass the body possessed. Up and down ceased to exist. It was only in space that you truly understood how local the concept was, how this thing you had accepted as fundamental since birth was in fact a rule that applied only in certain rooms of the universe, and not at all in others.

The values people defended so fiercely worked much the same way. Right and wrong, essential and expendable, ally and adversary, all of it was contingent, shaped and bounded by time, place, and the accident of perspective.

And yet, just as a blind man needed the ground beneath him, needed its certainty the way he needed breath, there were those for whom the framework itself was survival. People who, stripped of the values they had always navigated by, would simply drift, paralyzed by an anxiety that admitted no remedy.

And that was what made any of this so impossibly hard.

"Reverend..."

Lin's voice, edged now with the particular displeasure of a child who has been promised a story and received a silence, drew him back. Malchio smiled.

"Forgive me. Now, where were we? Space, right..."

"Hm? Off to your watch?"

Mu was draped across a mess hall table, drink in hand, radiating the particular lethargy of a man who has just finished a shift. He raised one limp hand as Natarle entered.

"Yes. Were you on maintenance detail, Commander?"

Natarle collected a tray and sat down opposite him with the precise reluctance of someone who has been socially cornered and is too disciplined to escape ungracefully.

"Something like that. Finally off the clock. You've got the night ahead, my sympathies."

"Much obliged."

Mu had to physically restrain the laugh. The woman was incapable of producing an informal sentence. It was almost an art form.

"We should be inside the air defense zone by tomorrow."

Natarle offered this, and Mu let his gaze wander to the clock on the wall.

"Let's hope."

The flatness of his reply tugged Natarle's brows together.

"It's a fair concern... given that we're up against the Creuset team."

"No... that wasn't Creuset."

The words came out low, almost to himself. Natarle caught them and said, "Pardon?", but Mu's attention had already drifted to some middle distance, chasing a different thought entirely.

"Almost there... JOSH-A."

He said the abbreviation softly, tasting it. Joint Operational Supreme Headquarters, Alaska, the Earth Alliance's combined high command, buried in the Yukon Delta. For weeks, arrival had been the only star he'd steered by. Now that the destination was close enough to feel real, the comfort of the goal was being replaced by the anxiety of what lay beyond it.

The scene between Kira and the crew, not quite a confrontation, but something bitter and jagged-edged enough to leave marks, had weighed on him. Kira's entire experience of "the Earth Alliance Forces" began and ended with the Archangel. Even that miniature world had been too much for him; he was pulling away from his Heliopolis friends now too, retreating into a solitude that seemed to deepen with every battle. If this was how he fared aboard a single ship, what would happen when he was fed into the machinery of an organization so vast and Byzantine that even Mu couldn't chart its corridors?

The simple answer was discharge. Alaska meant arrival, and arrival meant the contract was fulfilled. Kira had never signed on for anything beyond protecting the people on this ship. Once the Archangel docked, he'd be free.

The harder question was whether the military would agree with that reading. And that question carried real weight, far more than anything else.

Mu had no window into the thinking of the people at the top. His own bone-deep awareness of what Kira could do came from standing beside the boy in battle. The generals gazing out at their frozen ocean might never register the value of what they held and let it slip through their fingers without a second thought. For Kira's sake, Mu hoped they would.

"Then again, maybe I shouldn't be spending my energy worrying about other people."

He said it without meaning to, and Natarle replied, "Pardon?"

Running back through the ledger of everything they'd done to get here, the list of insubordinations and improvisations and rules bent past recognition was staggering. In any properly functioning military, the lot of them would have been court-martialed six times over. But Mu would weather it. Whatever his rank said, he was a cockpit jockey, the brass wouldn't pin structural failures on the man flying the mobile armor. The one who would carry the weight was Murrue.

He began cataloging the charges she'd face and abandoned the exercise almost immediately. No sense in darkening his own sky.

That, too, technically qualified as worrying about someone else. But the distinction between "someone else" and "Murrue" had been quietly eroding for some time now. He allowed himself a crooked smile and addressed the woman across the table, who was making steady, methodical progress through her meal.

"Try not to be too hard on the captain?"

Natarle's head came up, bewilderment and affront arriving simultaneously.

"Commander, my critiques of the captain are not motivated by personal feeling!"

"Right, I'm sure they're not."

"When conduct warrants a report, it is my duty as executive officer to submit that report to command, regardless of whether the subject is a superior."

"Absolutely. Word-perfect."

Textbook. Officer's handbook, chapter and verse. It was so correct that arguing against it felt pointless. But there was something she wasn't seeing, or wasn't allowing herself to see. When the consequences of her immaculate reports finally landed, what would she feel then?

Perhaps sensing the weight behind his tepid agreement, Natarle's gaze dropped a fraction.

"If I may speak personally, I find the captain excessively lenient."

"Could be. But that leniency might be the only reason any of us are still alive."

"What?"

Natarle's eyes widened.

"Be honest. If it had been you at Heliopolis, standing guard over the Strike when everything went sideways, would you have handed the controls to a civilian kid?"

"Absolutely not, but—!"

"And if Kira hadn't been in that cockpit, would a single one of us have made it this far?"

Silence. Natarle weighed it, visibly and thoroughly, and answered in a tone that made clear how much the admission cost her.

"No."

But the concession lasted less than a breath. Her eyes snapped back to his, sharp and unyielding.

"That changes nothing! It was still a violation of military regulations. Without rules, there is no order. Surely you of all people aren't suggesting that the rules are wrong, Commander?"

"Rules, huh..."

Mu looked away as he answered.

"Here's the thing, though. The most dangerous things human beings ever do? Usually aren't the ones the rulebook covers."

"Meaning?"

"Well, for instance—"

Mu turned back with a grin that was equal parts warmth and mischief, and looked her straight in the eye.

"War."

The bridge door opened, and Natarle stepped through it with crisp punctuality. Murrue, who had been gazing at the panel before her with the

unfocused attention of someone running on fumes, glanced reflexively at the time. Five minutes before the scheduled watch change. To the second. She entertained the fleeting thought that Natarle had calibrated her walking speed against the distance from her quarters to the bridge and stored the figure somewhere in that filing-cabinet mind. Then she reconsidered: of course she had.

"I'll take over."

"Thanks."

The exchange was a formality worn smooth by repetition. Murrue rose; Natarle turned to Kuzzey at the comms console.

"Status on contact with Alaska?"

"Atmospheric interference is severe. Nothing yet."

Identical to the answer Murrue had received ten minutes ago. The two officers shared a look, and the same tired sigh escaped them both.

"At current speed, we'll cross the Tropic of Cancer by tomorrow evening. We should be able to get through after that."

Murrue offered it the way one offers a coat in the rain, something, at least, against the cold. Natarle acknowledged it while scanning her instruments, her voice carrying the acrid edge of someone who would prefer not to need consolation.

"The Vosgulov-class is built for speed. If they lost contact with us after the engagement, that would be ideal, but..."

Neither of them bothered to finish the thought. They both knew exactly how much it was worth. An enemy patient enough to sit in open water for days, waiting for the Archangel to emerge from Orb's protection, was not an enemy that would obligingly lose interest now, not with the finish line in sight. The Blitz was gone, yes, but three X-Numbers still remained, and three was more than enough.

"A unit with a grudge... they certainly don't give up easily."

Murrue murmured it half to herself, the words borrowed from Mu's earlier assessment of Rau Le Creuset. But Natarle's reply spun her around.

"Commander La Flaga suggested this may not actually be the Creuset team...?"

"What? But those machines are obviously—"

Those mobile suits were unmistakable. They were the same stolen units that had dogged this ship across space from the ruins of Heliopolis to here. Murrue searched Natarle's face for an explanation, and the younger officer shook her head with visible discomfort.

"I couldn't tell you more. I simply overheard the Commander say something to that effect..."

Not the Creuset team? Had the pilots rotated, or had command of the unit changed hands entirely?

And yet the deeper question lingered: how would Mu know? Could a pilot really sense, through nothing more than the rhythm and logic of an enemy's tactics, that the mind directing them had changed?

Murrue left the bridge with a vague, unsettled feeling that something didn't quite add up.

"No, honestly, I about died the first time!"

Tolle's voice, pitched for maximum dramatic effect, echoed clean out into the corridor. Flay leaned against the doorframe and peered inside.

"We'd barely launched and this beam just comes screaming past!"

He sat at the center of a loose semicircle: Sai, Miriallia, Kuzzey, a handful of mechanics and crew members, all wearing the relaxed, slightly glazed expressions of people happy to be entertained. Today had been Tolle's baptism of fire in the Skygrasper, and he was holding court with the relish of someone who had lived to tell the tale and intended to make the most of it. His hands carved shapes in the air as he spoke.

"But I'd run that exact scenario a hundred times in the sim, right? So my hands just moved, grabbed the stick—"

"Hey, credit where it's due. That kind of composure on a first sortie? That's something."

The mechanics egged him on, and Tolle's face lit up with pride.

"Hmph, so what," Flay thought from her vantage point at the door. He hadn't shot down a single enemy. Try killing a Coordinator and then come back and strut. Kira had been out there alone, battle after battle, carrying the weight of all of them.

Sai, with a look that mixed fond exasperation with something like grudging admiration, needled his friend.

"No, but seriously, that was impressive. When exactly did you learn to do that?"

"He basically lived in the simulator," Miriallia added.

"And Sai's been buried in those military manuals!" Tolle said, deflecting the spotlight with a grin.

"Miriallia and Kuzzey have gotten really good at their jobs, too!"

"Well, yeah," Sai said, his tone settling into something quiet and grounded. "We're not just along for the ride anymore."

Miriallia nodded. "You do adjust, eventually..."

"I guess so," Kuzzey said, looking cautiously pleased with himself.

Then Miriallia turned on Tolle with a sharpness that could have cut glass.

"But you were way too reckless out there! Do you have any idea how scared I was? When I heard you were launching, I—"

"It was support duty! That's all! You worry about everything, you know that?"

Tolle rolled his eyes for show, but the look he gave her beneath the performance was tender and unhurried.

Watching them, the easy, unguarded affection flowing between them as naturally as conversation, Flay felt something curdle in her chest. She turned away. She didn't want to go in. She had no place in that circle anymore.

No, she couldn't go in.

The realization came over Flay like cold water: she had been severed. Completely. Since landfall, her entire existence had contracted to the dimensions of Kira's cabin, his room, his presence, his orbit. While she'd been sealed inside that narrow world, the others had grown into their roles, had woven themselves into the fabric of the ship and its crew, had become part of something she no longer recognized. Even Sai.

Thinking about Sai made the irritation flare. He seemed to have moved on without a backward glance. All that clinging, all that proprietary hovering, playing the devoted fiancé like it was a role he'd been cast in, and he'd let go this easily? So that was the depth of it. That was all she'd ever been worth.

That she had been the one to betray him, to set the match to everything and walk away, was a detail her accounting conveniently omitted. Her anger was built on a foundation of pure self-interest, and she tended it with care.

Someone could have noticed. Someone could have seen through it, that she didn't really care about Kira. That she'd gone to his bed as a means to an end. An instrument of revenge, nothing more.

And yes, the practical benefits had been considerable. The move to an officer's cabin. No more sardine-can bunking, no more shared showers. Officers' quarters came with their own bathroom. And being the ace pilot's girlfriend carried a certain currency. Besides, Kira was unfailingly kind to her, attentive in small, thoughtful ways that caught her off guard more often than she liked to admit. He was kind. He had a face that people noticed, and a mind that worked at a speed she couldn't follow. Well, naturally, Coordinator.

Except that lately, she kept losing hold of that word. The label. Coordinator. It would slip from her grip at odd moments, and with it the chain of logic that connected Kira to her father's death, and her father's death to the reason she had crawled into Kira's bed in the first place.

Sometimes, just sometimes, she almost felt as though they were simply two people. Ordinary. Like Miriallia and Tolle. Like anyone.

"I messed up... We messed up, didn't we..."

Kira's voice from the other night closed around her chest like a hand. Quiet, bewildered, carrying the particular sadness of someone who has looked clearly at something he was trying not to see.

Messed up? No. She hadn't done anything wrong. Kira was a Coordinator. She didn't love him. Watching his face sink deeper into shadow after every battle, watching him twist in his sleep, trapped inside nightmares, she did not feel sorry for him. She refused to feel sorry for him.

A tremor passed through Flay's body, involuntary, fierce, as though the temperature had dropped ten degrees in an instant.

Because the person who had planted this suffering inside him, who had wound the key and set the mechanism turning, was Flay.

The thought surfaced complete and terrible, and she seized it and shoved it back under with both hands.

No, no. It wasn't her fault. Someone should have stopped her. Someone should have told her she didn't belong in the military, should have refused to

process the paperwork. Kira could have walked away, could have left all of them behind and disappeared into the world. And in the first place, if he had protected her father the way he should have, none of this would exist. If her father were alive, she would never have become this version of herself. Never.

"It's not my fault!"

Her feet had been moving without instruction, carrying her through the ship's corridors on a current of their own, and she found herself standing at the entrance to the hangar before she registered the destination. She looked down from the catwalk in a state of bewildered suspension, and there was Kira, alone on the hangar floor below.

The mechanics had finished their work and gone. The space was vast and empty and very still. Kira stood beneath the Strike, his face tilted upward. Birdy orbited him in lazy loops, occasionally spiraling up to the distant ceiling and drifting back down.

Inside Kira's head, the Blitz's final moment was playing on a loop that wouldn't stop, the eruption of light, the scattering debris, and underneath it all, threaded through every repetition, Athrun's voice tearing itself apart over the comm.

"Nicol!"

Nicol. Was that name attached to one of the three faces he'd seen on Onogoro? All of them had been young, his own age, or close to it.

Had he killed one of them? Had he taken one of Athrun's people?

Birdy descended and settled on Kira's shoulder with a small mechanical click.

"Birdy."

A questioning chirp. Kira raised his hand and the bird hopped to his palm. And there, superimposed over the tiny robot, was the hand that had first given it to him, Athrun's hand. Two versions, separated by three years and an unbridgeable distance: the slender, not-yet-finished hand of a thirteen-year-old boy, and the lean, tendon-corded hand of the young man he'd seen at the fence just days ago.

How had it come to this? From that parting, how had they traveled so inconceivably far?

"What choice do you have but to fight?"

The dead commander's voice, patient and implacable, returning again and again.

"As long as you are enemies to each other, until one side ceases to exist."

"Enemies..."

Kira shaped the word with his lips, testing it. Birdy lifted from his palm and rose into the air.

"I'm... your enemy..."

The word sounded alien in his own mouth. For the first time, the fact of it settled into his body, not as an abstraction, but as something real and heavy and permanent. He was someone's enemy.

Nicol.

Athrun would never forgive him for that death.

Kira could no longer be Athrun's friend. He was the enemy now. The one who had taken something that could never be returned.

"Yeah... I know, Athrun."

The words came out emptied of everything, hope, resistance. He spoke them to the air, to the absent friend, to the person who existed now only as a wound and a reckoning.

"Ship on radar!"

The operator's voice cracked through the Cousteau's command center like a rifle shot. Athrun and the others had been bent over the sea chart; their heads came up in unison. A point of light was moving across the radar panel, slow, steady, real. The operator ran his checks with practiced speed and delivered the verdict they had been holding their breath for.

"It's the Legged Ship!"

"Confirmed?" Monroe's voice allowed no room for error.

"Confirmed, sir!"

A current ran through the command center, not excitement, exactly, but something harder. Every person aboard the Cousteau carried the weight of the same unfinished debt. A young pilot had been taken from them, and the loss had settled into the ship's atmosphere, pulling everyone toward the same fixed point. Monroe's eyes moved across the incoming data.

"Island-heavy waters. Sun's almost up. Conditions favor us."

"Today it ends! The Strike is finished!"

Yzak's declaration rang off the metal walls, and Dearka bared his teeth in a grin that held no humor at all.

"Nicol's death and that scar on your face, I'll collect on both, one shot."

Athrun let their fire wash over him and then spoke, quietly, quietly, but with a cold resolve that cut through the noise.

"We launch."

His own composure surprised him. His pulse was steady, his thoughts clean. Good. That was how it needed to be. To do what had to be done, to bring the Strike down personally, finally, irreversibly, he needed to be colder than he had ever been.

"Wait for me, Nicol."

The words moved through him in silence as he walked the corridor to the Aegis's cockpit.

"No more hesitation. No more flinching because I once called him friend. He is the enemy. He is a soldier of the Earth Alliance who took you from me. I won't let him take anyone else. And because he was my friend, because of that, and only because of that, I will be the one who ends him."

He sealed himself inside the cockpit and waited. The ship began its ascent. Gradually, steadily, the Cousteau shouldered upward through the water and broke the surface into a dawn-lit sea, its hull parting water stained the pale pink of an early sun. The overhead hatch clanked open. The vertical catapult engaged, carrying the Aegis upward toward the sky.

Athrun spoke once more within the privacy of his own heart. A different name, this time. A different farewell, the last one.

"Wait for me, Kira."

"Sonar contact! Vosgulov-class submarine carrier!"

Tomomura's shout ripped through the early-morning quiet of the Archangel's bridge.

"All hands to battle stations! All hands to battle stations!"

The alarm tore the crew from their sleep. From the catwalk above the hangar, Flay saw Kira's head snap up, saw him launch into a sprint toward the pilot lockers, all hesitation burned away in an instant. She threw herself after him, feet pounding the corridor plates, and caught up just as he reached the door.

"Kira!"

He spun, startled. Inside Flay, guilt swelled, enormous, shapeless, choking.

"Kira... Kira, I—"

Nothing came. She needed to apologize. Since their fight on Onogoro, a silence had opened between them, and neither of them had been able to cross it.

She needed to say she was sorry. But for what, exactly? For throwing his kindness back in his face the other day? Or for everything, the whole poisoned architecture of it?

The lies. The performance of love, while she steered him like a weapon toward targets of her choosing. The quiet, methodical cruelty of knowing that every dark hour he spent in the cockpit was a consequence she had engineered.

The words piled up behind her teeth and wouldn't move. She plucked nervously at the front of her uniform, the gesture small and helpless. Kira watched her for a moment, something complicated and unreadable moving behind his eyes, then looked away.

"Sorry... we'll talk later."

The alarm screamed between them. Flay tried to follow, tried to say the thing she couldn't name, and Kira stopped. He turned. And he smiled at her, a real smile, warm and open, offered freely.

"When I get back."

The smile went through her like a needle. She stood where she was, unable to move, unable to breathe around the thing lodged in her chest. Even now. Even after everything she'd done. He was kind.

She watched him disappear down the corridor and held her tears.

When he got back. When Kira came home from this, she would sit him down and tell him everything.

It would be all right. Kira would forgive her. She was certain of it, as certain as she had ever been of anything, because forgiveness was simply what Kira did.

When he came back exhausted and hollowed out from battle, she would be the one to put him back together this time. Gently. Genuinely. Enough gentleness to cover every counterfeit kindness she'd ever offered.

They had been wrong, both of them, together. But wrongs could be mended.

Yes. When Kira got back.

"Three bogeys! Bearing five o'clock, range three thousand!"

The off-duty crew had barely thrown themselves into their seats when Tonomura's voice hammered through the bridge. Against the pale, brightening canvas of the South Pacific sky, dark shapes materialized like ink spreading through water, X-Numbers astride their Guuls, falling toward them out of the dawn.

"Heat signatures closing from the same vector!"

Sai's voice, sharp and professional.

"Evasive maneuvers! Hard to port!"

Murrue's order came instantly, but the Buster's beam was faster, lancing across the distance to score a searing line along the Archangel's flank. The battle had its opening.

"Anti-beam depth charges, stand by! Load Wombats! Igelstellungen, bring them up!"

Natarle's commands came in rapid, staccato bursts, and the Archangel responded, its weapons systems waking with a mechanical hunger. The first volley tore from the hull in a wall of light and metal. Beams skimmed past the gleaming white armor and struck the water below, flash-boiling the sea on contact. Towers of steam erupted, white, churning, enormous.

"Status on Commander La Flaga and Ensign Yamato?!"

Natarle whipped around to face Miriallia.

"Unit One, Commander La Flaga is launching! Strike proceeding to the aft deck!"

Kira was already bringing the Strike's systems online as Miriallia's voice reached him. Through the speaker, Mu's voice arrived, sour, combative, utterly unsurprised.

"Damn it all! Can't say I didn't see this coming!"

So he'd known too. Kira absorbed it with a bitterness that had grown familiar. Of course he'd known. Anyone paying attention had known. Athrun was never going to let them slip away, not this close, not after what had happened. They were almost inside the Alliance defense perimeter. Almost safe. But Kira had killed Nicol.

"Kira!" Mu's voice again, cutting through.

"Yes?"

The question in Mu's tone was unmistakable, careful, probing.

"You good?"

Yesterday's words returned, hard-edged and absolute.

"If you don't shoot, you get shot. Me. You. Everyone."

Kira answered in a voice scraped down to its foundations.

"Yes."

He knew. There was no version of this where he got to be anything other than ready. There never had been. He had to fight and protect everyone. That was all there was.

Maybe he wasn't good at all. Perhaps something inside him had already begun to fracture. But the fight would not wait for him to mend. Even if it meant turning his weapon on Athrun. Because if he faltered, everyone around him would pay the price.

Kira set the Strike down on the rear deck and brought his rifle to bear. The machine wore its Aile equipment, poised and ready for the sky. He watched the three X-Numbers closing the distance, his eyes tight with something like pain.

"Today we knock every last one of them out of the sky!"

Mu launched in a blaze of thrust and bravado, his Skygrasper screaming off the catapult.

The Buster came in hot, both flanking weapons blazing, launcher left, rifle right, while the Duel added its own storm of Shiva missiles. The Archangel answered with its Valiants, volleys of return fire streaking outward, and from the deck the Strike's rifle barked precise shots into the fray.

Lines of light and destruction crisscrossed the gorgeous South Pacific morning, cutting it to ribbons.

The Aegis broke through and drove straight for the Strike, rifle firing on approach. The Strike caught the beam on its shield and kicked free of the deck. The Duel slashed in from the flank. Kira fired thrusters mid-leap, twisted past the converging beams, and returned fire on both machines in a single sweeping arc.

The Aegis rolled with an almost graceful defiance and bore down on him once more, firing relentlessly.

There was something in its movements, a ferocity, a desperate resolve, that Kira could feel pressing against him like a physical weight.

His expression contorted.

Meanwhile, the Archangel sent a volley of Wombats arcing outward in a bid to keep the enemy at bay. But the Buster's guns picked off nearly every missile before it could find its mark. The early days of clumsy engagements were clearly behind them, they had learned to fight in concert with each machine's strength. The Buster, built for fire support and armed accordingly, shouldered the assault on the Archangel with ruthless efficiency, while the Duel devoted itself to the close-quarters dance of mobile suit combat.

Mu's Skygrasper came screaming down from above, bearing straight for the Buster. The Buster sidestepped his fire and answered with a salvo of missiles from its shoulder pods. They nearly had him. At the last breath of a second, Mu wrenched the craft into a plummeting dive, hauling it level again just above the wave crests. The missiles, unable to match the maneuver, hammered into the ocean and detonated in a chain of white eruptions. The Skygrasper slipped free by the narrowest of margins.

But all the while, the Buster's guns were methodically tightening their grip on the Archangel. A turret buckled under a direct beam hit, and the Helldart missile tubes behind the bridge were smashed apart, touching off a savage cascade of secondary blasts.

"Igelstellungs four and five hit!"

"Helldart launch tubes, seal the bulkheads!"

On the bridge, the damage reports came faster, the voices carrying them sharper with each passing moment. Murrue turned toward the communications station, dread plain on her face.

"What about Alaska?!"

Kuzzey's answer came in a voice that trembled at the edge of breaking.

"No good! No response!"

Natarle's commands cut through the chaos without pause.

"Gottfrieds, take aim! Make it count! Fire!"

Then Tonomura's voice cracked with alarm.

"Aegis directly above us!"

While the Strike and the Duel had been tearing into each other, the Aegis had slipped upward unseen, and now it hung over the Archangel like a raptor poised above its prey. The red machine kicked free of its Guul and folded itself into mobile armor mode midair. From that angle, the bridge lay open and defenseless. Murrue's shout was almost a scream.

"Hard to starboard!"

The Aegis unleashed its Scylla straight down. Neumann threw the helm with everything he had, teeth bared with the effort. The searing beam streaked past the bridge close enough to feel. But the Archangel's swing to starboard brought its port flank into the beam's path. The blast punched clean through the Valiant and gouged deep into the hull around it. The explosion tore through the structure; consoles sparked and died. Blast and screams filled the bridge in the same terrible instant.

Above, the Aegis calmly returned to mobile suit mode and settled back onto its waiting Guul.

The damage to the Archangel was devastating. Smoke poured from the port side as the great ship listed, her altitude bleeding away with alarming speed. Warning alarms wailed across every station on the bridge.

"Plasma tumbler damaged! Levitator down!"

Chandra reported, and Neumann's voice came out like a groan torn from his chest.

"Can't maintain lift!"

"Prioritize attitude control!"

"Emergency power to auxiliary levitator connection!"

Even Murrue and Natarle could no longer keep the strain from their voices. It was then that Tolle, who had been sitting rigid in the copilot seat, his expression growing darker with every damage report, stood up.

"I'm going out in the Skygrasper!"

Miriallia's voice broke through: "Tolle?!" Murrue stared at him, but he was already ripping off his headset, his words tumbling out.

"It's too dangerous! If we stay like this—!"

"Wait, Private Second Class Koenig!"

Murrue called after him as he bolted for the door, but another impact shuddered through the hull and swallowed the rest of her words. Behind him he could hear Miriallia and the others crying out, and the sound only hardened his resolve. He ran.

At this rate they were dead. So close, agonizingly close, to friendly territory, and it was all going to end here?

The corridor shook beneath him as hit after hit pounded the ship, each one threatening to throw him off his feet. Anger surged through him, hot and sharp. Hadn't they done enough? Hounding them mile after mile, never relenting, and those machines had been the Earth Alliance's to begin with!

Yes, it was those people who had shattered Heliopolis. They had torn away the only home Tolle and his friends had ever known, and even that hadn't satisfied them. They kept coming. For Miriallia. For Kira. For all of them, for everything.

He would not stand by and watch it happen. He had to defend the ship, defend everyone. Kira and Mu were out there fighting with everything they had. It was his turn now.

Shouldering past the tide of technicians rushing toward the damage, Tolle threw himself through the catapult deck entrance. He scrambled into the Skygrasper's cockpit, and Murdoch gave him one last look, concern etched deep in the old mechanic's face.

"Don't do anything reckless!"

"I'll be fine!"

He shouted it back and pulled the canopy down. As the hatch yawned open ahead of him, he felt something warm and steady rising in his chest, confidence, unshakable and sure. Yesterday's fear seemed like it had belonged to someone else entirely. A beam or two wouldn't rattle him anymore.

What he didn't recognize was overconfidence. Yesterday's triumph had settled into his bones like a certainty that hadn't been earned. No matter how many simulations he had completed, his real flight time still fell short of a single hour. But Tolle had always been an optimist at heart, and that optimism had already painted a picture in which he flew and fought as Kira and Mu did, naturally, capably, without fear.

"I'll be fine. Yeah. I can do this too. Yesterday went so well, after all!"

The linear catapult seized his craft and hurled Unit Two out into the vast and waiting sky.

"Damn it!"

Kira spat the words through clenched teeth as the deck pitched and shuddered beneath the Strike. He fired his verniers and threw himself skyward off the Archangel once more. Lining up the oncoming Duel's head, he stitched it with Igelstellung fire and brought his saber slashing down. The Duel sprang from its Guul at the final instant and drove a kick into the Strike.

The blow sent the Strike spinning away. But Kira caught himself with a sharp burst of verniers and pulled his rifle free even as he tumbled earthward. His shot found the Duel's right leg just as it tried to settle back onto the Guul. The machine pitched sideways, balance gone, and dropped toward the ocean below. Yet even in freefall the pilot refused to stop, rifle shots chased the Strike one after another with stubborn fury. One of them struck the rifle in Kira's hands, and his breath caught in his throat. He flung the weapon aside an instant before it erupted and threw his shield up against the blast.

The Aegis was already on him. Kira sensed it a heartbeat too late, he fired his thrusters to twist away, but the Aegis came driving in shield-first and collided with the Strike like a battering ram. Pain jolted through him.

"Augh!"

The impact flung the Strike hopelessly off course, away from any trajectory that might have brought him back to the Archangel. He fell, still unable to right himself, and the island below rose up to meet him. The Strike crashed through a grove of tropical trees, snapping trunks like kindling, and a startled cloud of brilliantly colored birds scattered into the sky.

The Strike lay where it had fallen, and the Aegis dropped from its Guul and advanced. A saber descended with terrifying speed, Kira caught it on his shield at the last possible instant. Where the two beams met, light blazed up fierce and molten, as if the air itself had caught fire.

In that furious glow, Kira looked up at the Aegis. The red machine loomed over him, and every joint, every angle of its frame seemed to pulse with Athrun's will.

He might lose. The thought settled into him, cold and quiet.

Trailing a long scar of smoke and listing so far her decks seemed ready to meet the water, the Archangel still clawed at the sky, refusing to fall. As they passed over the small island where the Strike had gone down, Miriallia stole a worried glance at the monitor. But the canopy of trees swallowed everything beneath it, if the fight was still raging down there, she would never know. There was nothing they could do and no help they could spare. The island slipped behind them, unanswered.

The sky had turned treacherous. Dull, heavy clouds rolled in and settled over them. Alarms sang their ceaseless warnings across the bridge; malfunction indicators stuttered on console after console, each one a small surrender. Neumann, who had been nursing the crippled ship forward with the patience of a man tending a dying fire, finally broke.

"Attitude control lost!"

Murrue's teeth came together hard enough to ache. After everything, after all of this—!

"We're going down! All hands, brace for impact!"

From somewhere in the shuddering bridge, Sai's voice reached her.

"Buster at two o'clock!"

The Buster was circling into their path, positioning itself like a predator cutting off a wounded animal's retreat. Natarle shouted over the din of vibration and alarms.

"Gottfrieds! Valiants! Take aim!"

But the island was already upon them. It rose from the sea wrapped in deep green foliage and bright, careless blossoms, its white beach serene and untouched, until the Archangel came down on it. The warship struck the sand at an angle, carving an enormous furrow that the ocean rushed to fill, seawater spiraling into the wound. The impact was staggering. Kuzzey and Pal, perched on the raised stations, threw their arms around their seats and held on for their lives. The ship tore through the beach, sheared through trees, and finally came to rest half-buried in the island's shore, a beached leviathan still groaning with the aftershocks.

On the bridge, still trembling beneath her feet, Murrue looked forward, and her blood went cold. The Buster stood before them, both cannons leveled at the vast, helpless target. There was nowhere to turn. There was no time to aim. Those barrels stared directly at the bridge, unblinking.

"This is it..."

In the instant her breath stopped—

"Like hell you will!"

The words tore from the radio like a war cry, and Mu's Skygrasper came hurtling out of the sky. His beam found the Buster's Guul and it blew apart beneath the machine's feet. The Buster kicked free and whipped its guns around. The two opened fire in the same breath, streaking past each other at speed. The Buster joined its twin cannons and let loose a blast of anti-armor shot; the Skygrasper answered with the Agni. They crossed in a heartbeat of fury, and when they parted, the Buster's right arm was gone, sheared away by the beam, and the Skygrasper's left wing trailed a ribbon of fire.

Murrue watched Mu's craft with her hands pressed white against the armrests, and only when she saw it hit the shallows at the water's edge, battered, smoking, but whole, did she allow herself to breathe again.

The Buster had come down hard in the earth ahead of the Archangel. It tried to stand, managed a few stiff, lurching movements upward, and went still. Something in its power systems had given out. Natarle's command came instantly.

"Gottfrieds, take aim!"

But even battered as they were, it would take a moment for the main guns to reach firing threshold.

"Wait!"

Murrue halted the order. The Buster's cockpit hatch was opening, and from inside it climbed a figure in a red flight suit. Slowly, with visible reluctance, the pilot raised both hands.

"He's surrendering?!"

Natarle's voice rang with disbelief. Murrue turned, and the two officers regarded each other in shared, silent bewilderment.

"Reverend..."

The children pressed close around Malchio.

Thunder broke across the sky, and rain came crashing down on the roof with the sudden, total violence of a dam giving way. Malchio cocked his head slightly and stepped out onto the porch. He could not see the storm, but he felt it, the wind throwing rain against his skin, each droplet sharp as a fingertip's tap against his cheek.

The children gathered at his sides and looked up at him. Whether they had come for comfort or had stationed themselves there to guard him, even they might not have known.

Between the rolls of thunder, something else reached their ears, a low, grinding rumble that did not belong to the storm. Malchio listened. It sounded as though something of impossible weight were being dragged across the earth, or as though a giant were striding through the jungle, each footfall flattening the world beneath it. Woven through it came the crack and crash of falling trees, and beneath all of it, unmistakable, the stutter of gunfire.

"Reverend, what's that?"

One of the children had heard it too. It was Oro, the boy who had lost his parents to the war. Malchio smiled down at them, a gentle, certain smile, and gathered their small frames closer to him.

"Oh, that's just one of our storms. The wind can be fierce, but we're perfectly safe inside. Now then, what shall we do to pass the time?"

The worry fell from them and they brightened instantly, elbowing each other, laughing, tumbling back through the doorway. Malchio let their small hands pull him along.

Before he closed the door, the sound came again. His ears, sharper than any storm could defeat, picked apart the noise with precision: the unmistakable percussion of large-caliber machine guns, firing steadily through the downpour.

The Strike and the Aegis fought on.

They clashed with beam sabers, collided and recoiled, then threw themselves at each other once more, two machines locked in a brutal, tireless cycle that neither seemed able to break.

"Kiraaaa!"

Athrun's voice tore from him as he slashed at the Strike. The blade met shield, and the Strike leaped clear. Athrun was beyond desperation now. The cold focus he had carried into this sortie had been stripped away entirely, his world had narrowed to a single point, and that point was the machine in front of him.

And still, after everything, he had barely left a mark.

His saber hand was swatted aside, bare-handed, and the shield drove into him, shoving him back. Something inside Athrun ignited. Was the difference between them truly this vast?

"Hyaaaah!"

He sidestepped the Strike's counterattack and drove in again, peppering it with Igelstellung fire to keep it honest.

He had made his decision. He would shoot. He had to.

"Then why, Kira?! Why are you inside that machine?! Why do you raise your weapon for Naturals?! Why didn't you come with me when you had the chance?! Why?! Kiraaaa!"

The Aegis folded into mobile armor form in midair, and the Scylla erupted from between its claws. The Strike flinched, the massive beam passed close enough to sear, and its balance shattered.

"Why?! You killed Nicol..."

Athrun was already moving, already closing.

"You killed Nicol!"

Kira watched the Aegis hurl itself toward him, and some part of him simply... stopped. His hands moved of their own accord, righting the Strike, raising the shield, arranging a defense his mind had not asked for. But somewhere behind his eyes, something was surrendering.

Athrun would not forgive him. Athrun would not let him go. Not now. Not ever.

He couldn't die here. But killing Athrun, that was something his hands would never do.

Kira felt the truth settle into place again, familiar and immovable.

He could not kill Athrun.

And if that was so, then he already knew how this would end. Didn't he?

He watched the saber's luminous arc descend toward him, his gaze empty, his arms slack.

But then, a voice he knew as well as his own burst from the radio.

"Kira!"

The world snapped back into focus. Skygrasper Unit Two was plummeting toward them from above.

"Tolle?!"

Missiles streaked down and chewed into the earth at the Aegis's feet. The red machine sprang clear of the eruption, but when it turned toward the Skygrasper, there was something vicious in the motion, an animal snarl made mechanical. Kira screamed until his throat burned.

"No! Stay away!"

The Aegis plucked the shield from its left arm and hurled it with a dismissive, almost contemptuous flick. The shield tumbled through the air, spinning, unerring, and then, it punched through the Skygrasper's cockpit.

A—a—aaahh—!

Tolle's scream reached him, thin, incredulous, the sound of a boy who could not believe what was happening to him, and then it was gone.

Kira's eyes missed nothing; vision that had always been sharper than he wanted it to be captured everything in merciless detail.

Tolle's helmet, ejected from the wreckage of the cockpit amid a spray of shattered metal.

The ribbon of blood that trailed behind it.

The precise, impossible red of it.

All of it, every fragment, recorded and indelible.

Then the explosion bloomed white and savage, and its light branded everything, every image, every color, every last terrible detail, into Kira's eyes as though it meant to stay there forever.

"Tolle!!"

Without warning, the monitor for Unit Two dissolved into static in front of Miriallia, stuttered once, and went black.

"Huh?"

She blinked at the console, uncomprehending, as the words SIGNAL LOST settled onto the screen like a verdict.

What kind of error was this? The bridge consoles had been throwing up warning lights for a while now, the electrical systems had been failing one after another across the ship.

So this was just another glitch. Another short in a system full of them.

It had to be.

"Tolle..."

She breathed the name of the boy she loved, so softly it barely stirred the air.

"Come back soon. Come through that door with that impossibly bright face and laugh at me for worrying too much..."

"Ah... ahhh... aaahhhh!"

The sound that tore from Kira's throat had no words in it, only something raw and ruined. His eyes were fixed on the machine in front of him.

Every trace of hesitation had been scoured from him as though it had never existed. What filled him now was a fury so total it left room for nothing else, a heat that could reduce the world to cinders.

"Athruun!"

He screamed the name and hurled the Strike at the Aegis. Somewhere in that charge, the knowledge that his childhood friend sat inside that cockpit simply ceased to matter. He flung Athrun's name into the storm like a curse and brought his saber down with all the hatred his arms could carry.

"Tolle... he killed Tolle...!"

The Aegis met him head-on. Blade found blade, light shrieking against light, and the two machines carved into each other without mercy or restraint. Kira drove the enemy machine back and swept his saber through a blazing arc.

"He killed Tolle!"

The Aegis's left arm separated cleanly and spun away into empty air.

"Graaahhhh!"

Kira did not hear the animal sound pouring from his own mouth. He did not feel the tears cutting tracks down his face. There was only the enemy, and the need to reach it, and nothing else in the world.

"Tolle... who had never once treated him differently for being a Coordinator. Who had thrown himself bodily in front of a gun to protect him. Who had helped smuggle Lacus to safety without asking a single question, as though the asking would have been an insult to their friendship. Who had stood on the deck watching Kira leave, his face tight with worry, asking, 'You're coming back, right?' Tolle... Tolle... Tolle!"

"I've gotta do my part too."

That grin, open, uncomplicated, full of a warmth hung before his eyes like a ghost.

"I volunteered for this myself, you know..."

"Tolle!"

And this man had killed him. Had discarded him like something worthless, like vermin to be crushed and forgotten!

The Strike rode the arc of its own saber swing upward and drove its foot into the Aegis's face.

"Guh!"

The impact threw Athrun's machine backward, and he gasped against the shock. Something fundamental had shifted in the Strike. It fought now as though it had cast off some great invisible restraint, every movement faster, sharper, more savage than before. It was like fighting a demon. Athrun couldn't match it.

He was being driven back, reduced to desperate, graceless parries, barely turning each blow aside before the next arrived. And then he understood. Until this moment, Kira had not truly been fighting him. That knowledge hit harder than any saber, and the fury it kindled was immediate and absolute.

"Kiraaaa!"

He could not lose.

"Athrun, run..."

Nicol's voice returned to him unbidden, thin and fading, the very last words the boy had ever spoken. Even at the end, even with his life bleeding out of him, Nicol had thought of Athrun. He had been gentle. So painfully, impossibly gentle, a boy who should never have been anywhere near a battlefield!

"For Nicol's sake, if nothing else, he could not lose! I will shoot you down!"

Something deep within Athrun broke free, not composure, not restraint, but something more fundamental, some last barrier between thought and pure intent. The red haze over his vision cleared, and for the first time, he saw with perfect clarity what needed to be done. He pulled back, spread the Aegis's frame wide, ignited beam sabers at the tips of the three remaining claws, and lunged for the white machine.

"Raaahhh!"



The blades bit through the Strike's left arm, and the severed shield tumbled away.

"Aaahhhh!"

They howled and crashed together, again and again, two half-destroyed machines driven by half-destroyed beasts who had forgotten how to stop. The Aegis lost its head. The Strike's cockpit hatch was ripped open.

And still they fought, blind and savage, as though ceasing would be worse than dying. Overhead the leaden sky answered them, fat, angry drops of rain and the white crack of lightning.

The end of a fight that had seemed as though it might burn on forever was finally, mercifully, terribly close.

The Aegis, folded into mobile armor form, drove into the Strike's body and locked its claws around the white machine's torso in an unbreakable grip.

"Got you!"

Athrun pulled the Scylla's trigger. The rush that flooded through him was not quite triumph and not quite horror, something between the two, sharp enough to make his hands shake.

But, in that instant, the Phase Shift dropped.

For one disoriented heartbeat, Athrun could not understand what had happened. He squeezed the trigger again. Again. The mechanism clicked, hollow and dead, and only then did the warning alarms, which had been screaming at him for who knew how long, finally register.

"No!"

The Strike filled his monitor, clamped tight in his claws, helpless. He had it. He could end everything right here, right now, and the weapon to do it with was gone.

The groan that left him was the sound of something inside him cracking.

"Damn!"

No. There is one thing left.

The cold returned to Athrun's eyes, not calm, but something harder. He pressed a single button. His fingers found the keypad and punched in the code with a speed that came from somewhere deeper than memory. On the monitor, the number 00:10 appeared and began counting down.

He had armed the Aegis's self-destruct.

The last weapon he had. The only one that remained.

Athrun blew the hatch and threw himself clear. The motion was half instinct, half training; his conscious mind had already moved past it.

Ten seconds. They stretched before him, impossibly, sickeningly long. But the machine was not far enough behind him when the flash came, white and total, swallowing the world.

The explosion picked him up and flung him through the air like something weightless.

The blast reached the Archangel. Its sound rolled across the water and through the hull, and at once every head turned. Mu, who had limped back

aboard with his battered craft. Murdoch, elbow-deep in repairs. Every soul on the bridge. They all heard it, and they all went still.

In front of Miriallia, another monitor died.

"What?"

The word fell from her lips, small and hollow. It was the Strike's communication channel. The display had gone the same way as the Skygrasper's before it, SIGNAL LOST, cold and absolute, in place of everything that should have been there. Miriallia reached for the screen. Her hand was shaking.

"Kira...? Tolle...?"

"That can't be. It can't."

Her fingertips found the monitor's surface and moved across it, slowly, tenderly, as though she were touching a face. As though, if she were gentle enough, she might feel them breathing on the other side of the glass.

"That can't be..."

But behind her, Murrue and Natarle stood motionless, their eyes fixed on the colossal bloom of flame that had erupted from the island.

Neither of them spoke.

The fire climbed into the low, heavy sky, and its light bled outward, staining the clouds and the rain and the air itself a deep, terrible red, the color of blood.

Commentary

Akira Ishida Athrun Zala's Voice Actor

So, this time around, I've been entrusted with writing the commentary section. It's true that I'm involved with the show as one of the cast members, but if I'm being honest, I'm not entirely confident I understand **Gundam SEED** well enough to offer a proper analysis. So I'll leave the real commentary to Director Fukuda, whose contribution is planned for the final volume. If you could think of this as more of a personal, supplementary essay based on my own interpretation, that would take a considerable weight off my shoulders.

I doubt anyone picking up this Sneaker Bunko edition of **Mobile Suit Gundam SEED** today has absolutely zero knowledge of the television broadcast. But for the sake of a future generation who might one day trace the lineage of the Gundam series of their era and find themselves reading this novelization of **Gundam SEED**, let me at least lay out some basic facts.

Mobile Suit Gundam SEED is a television anime series produced under the direction of Mitsuo Fukuda, with Mainichi Broadcasting System as the key station. It began airing on October 5, 2002. As for the story itself, there's surely no need to explain it to those of you reading this novel. However, as of July 2003, when I'm writing this, the narrative is barreling toward its climax, and each character finds themselves in the midst of tremendous upheaval.

The purpose of war and the question of good versus evil; the sleight of hand by which a faction's ideology gets substituted for the goals of the larger collective; the gap between the reality before one's eyes and the purity of one's ideals, amid all these intersecting circumstances and conflicting agendas, Athrun, the character I play, has had the very foundation of his values shattered. Driven into an acutely precarious position, he's only just begun the process of reassessing who he is and what he stands for. That's roughly where things are at.

I wrote that rather breezily just now, but what Athrun is actually facing is an extraordinarily difficult ordeal. One day, everything you believed to be right is utterly repudiated, and then you realize you can't even argue back. The psychological blow that comes from that is immense.

Still, a scenario like this, where the very ground you've built your judgments on collapses beneath you, feels so inherently dramatic that those of us living our peaceful daily lives might think we'd never encounter anything like it. But even if we're never confronted, as Athrun is, with questions about the purpose and meaning of war from the perspective of

someone directly involved, we are constantly making judgments about far more mundane matters based on our own values.

We critique, we evaluate, and in each instance, we arrive at conclusions about what is "right" and what is "wrong." So then, when we affirm that we are right, when we push our position with the conviction that our values are justified, does that always mean objective justice is on our side?

We are neither gods nor buddhas, and we possess no absolute standard of correctness. What's more, the meaning of what's deemed "right" shifts with the times and the circumstances. Within that reality, even the ideas an individual clings to as the basis of their values are swayed, and can be overturned, by the direction the society they belong to is heading. This is because conforming to the group carries fewer risks when navigating life within it.

So, what happens, then, when someone challenges your position with a set of values fundamentally incompatible with your society's? More often than not, rather than genuinely reconsidering the reasoning behind things, people shy away, because reconsidering might mean having the values they've believed in all along upended, because it might mean taking on unnecessary risk within the community they belong to. And so, unconsciously, they dismiss the other person's argument as something they simply cannot comprehend, and in doing so, protect their own values. Doesn't that ring true? In such cases, the highest priority is self-preservation, shielding oneself from a precarious situation, and making an objective judgment becomes secondary.

Ultimately, that is an act governed by egoism.

This will be an episode a bit further ahead in the novels, but to give a concrete example: even when Lacus corners him with, "What is it you believe in and fight for, Athrun? The medal they gave you? Your father's orders?" if he had simply shot back, "I have done nothing wrong as a Coordinator and a soldier of ZAFT," and gone on believing his own words afterward, that would have been the end of it. The path ahead would have been comparatively easy for Athrun.

Egoism may not conjure the most favorable image, but as a survival instinct, a way of thinking designed to keep oneself from needless danger, I believe it's a quality human beings are born with, something that precedes any question of good or evil. And to put it somewhat bluntly, whether the conflicts people engage in stem from disputes between neighbors or international crises, whether the trigger is money, religious differences, or wounded pride, however varied the initial causes may be, at the end of the day, it comes down to this: the moment egoism overpowers rational judgment. The moment you cannot bend yourself to accommodate the other party's wishes. In that sense, Gundam SEED, with war as its central theme, carries within it the dimension of ideologically armored egoisms clashing against one another, and in doing so, it grapples with something fundamental to the human condition.

Now, let's bring this back to Athrun.

The first half of the Gundam SEED story depicts the process by which childhood friends Kira and Athrun reunite amid the circumstances of war and are forced to make their positions as enemies unambiguously clear.

During that period, as everyone well knows, Athrun, despite the anguish of crossing blades with a friend, harbored not a single doubt about his reason for belonging to ZAFT or the purpose he served there. This is the polar opposite of where Athrun stands at the point I described at the beginning, and the journey between those two positions represents nothing short of a Copernican revolution for him.

From Athrun's current vantage point, one might think the opportunity to reexamine himself was already there the moment he reunited with Kira. But given the early Athrun's consciousness as a Coordinator and his understanding of the way ZAFT operated, that was simply too much to ask. The more deeply steeped a person is in the rigid value system surrounding them, the less susceptible they are to outside disruption, history offers us the example of Galileo and the Roman Catholic Church when heliocentrism was finally acknowledged, and more to the point within this story, one need only look at Murrue and Natarle to understand.

The decisive blow that shatters Athrun's thinking comes from Lacus, so I hope you'll look forward to the volumes ahead. But here in Volume 3, which falls in the middle portion of the story, we see Athrun's encounter with the other heroine: Cagalli.

Throughout this encounter, Athrun never once abandons the stance that he is, above all, a man of ZAFT. On the single basis that his counterpart is not a soldier, he affords her a somewhat lenient, individual-to-individual treatment that probably doesn't exactly align with military regulations, and because of that, moments of something almost endearing pass between them.

But his values have not yet been shaken in the slightest. That much is plainly evident in the conversation that takes place after Cagalli seizes Athrun's gun while he's fallen asleep. However, that fact does not automatically mean Athrun and Cagalli as individuals must fight each other to a decisive conclusion.

In armed conflict, the primary objective of attacking the enemy is to erode their fighting capability and thereby break their will to continue, and the taking of human life that results from this is, in principle, a secondary, incidental matter. That interpretation might seem to make light of human life, but I'd argue the reverse: for a leader to declare war and order the subjugation of an enemy while remaining in a sound state of mind, precisely this kind of rhetorical framework is necessary.

Of course, there will inevitably be a vast gulf in perception between such leaders and the soldiers on the ground, the ones who carry out the acts and witness all manner of things firsthand. Cagalli, too, saw the Aegis, an enemy's fighting power, looming behind Athrun, and she was spurred on by the suffering her comrades had already endured. But above all else, war is not something that can be resolved through individual combat between two

people. Hurling your emotions at someone is simply revenge, it operates on an entirely different level from strategic retaliation meant to demonstrate the capacity to strike back. And yet, when leaders in power conflate the two, the situation only deteriorates further.

That is the reality of things.

In this volume, when Uzumi speaks to stop Cagalli from joining the Archangel's course of action, I'd encourage you to revisit his words as one expression of an ideal, one rooted in a global perspective, with all of this firmly in mind.

In the end, this particular crisis is averted because Cagalli, who never truly intended to kill Athrun in the first place, recalls Waldfeld's words, recognizes what it truly means to make an enemy of someone, and, unable to bear the enormity of it, throws the situation away along with the gun. But I see this incident as a crucial turning point for Athrun.

This episode corresponds to Episode 24 of the television broadcast, titled "War for Two." The line that left the deepest impression on me from this episode was: "You people aren't even soldiers, and yet, all of you..." If you're not a soldier, stay out of the fight. If you did, there'd be no need for the kind of life-or-death encounter we had last night.

Speaking purely as an individual, that's not something I want. You can see all of this in Athrun's words. Within the grand justification of war, a different, more personal way of looking at things has been planted in him. Wouldn't you say? Of course, this is an evolution of the feeling that had been smoldering since his very first reunion with Kira, the wish, if at all possible, not to have to kill someone he cares deeply about. In that sense, I believe Cagalli is, for Athrun, a second Kira. And I imagine that through these two people, a trigger was embedded deep in Athrun's heart, one that would eventually compel him to think about why he fights.

From the next volume onward, I expect this Sneaker Bunko edition of ***Gundam SEED*** will, much like the television broadcast, demand that its characters sever themselves from the low-risk, society-conforming values they had accepted as a matter of course, and require each of them to judge for themselves.

How that will be portrayed is something I very much look forward to seeing.