



MOBILE SUIT
GUNDAM SEED FREEDOM

[Side Story] NOVELS

RIU GOTO

Original Concept by

HAJIME YATATE, YOSHIYUKI TOMINO

Copyright © 2024 by Liu Goto
Copyright © BANDAI NAMCO FILMWORKS, Shochiku

This book is a ***solo fan translation effort.***

Support the official release if there ever is one, but if you enjoy reading great material like this, give my Patreon a follow below!

Names, characters, organizations, places, events and incidents may differ slightly from official names at the time of translation. Updated versions of this will be made to reflect changes at a future date.

“Mobile Suit Gundam SEED FREEDOM Sidestory Novels”
Released 2024.12.25

For more information, or to read more Gundam novels and manga:
<http://www.zeonic-republic.net>
<http://www.patreon.com/zeonicscans>

Novel Translation and Book Layout by Zeonic|Scanlations

First Edition: January 2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Escape for Two 004
Moonlight Valkyrie 016
Neumann's Travel Log 027

Escape for Two

"Is it this way?"

Athrun Zala surveyed the bustling, eclectic streets of Orb's downtown area. A surge of nostalgia swept over him, an unexpected guest in his mind, as he trod the seldom-visited lanes of this old town quarter.

Before long, he paused at a quaint shopfront. The name of the shop, in sync with his digital guide, confirmed his destination.

Still, he hesitated before entering.

The entrance was unassuming, the door wide open, with a garishly bright sign fluttering in the breeze, carrying with it the enticing aroma of grilled delicacies mingled with the buzz of animated conversation. It was unmistakably a place of the people.

Athrun, currently seconded from the Orb military to Terminal, was engaged in gathering intelligence across various locales. This time, Cagalli specifically instructed him to hand over a report at this eatery. However, the ambiance here was utterly unexpected, hardly befitting a place the head representative of Orb would frequent.

Stepping inside with a mix of curiosity and caution, he was greeted with a vibrant "Welcome!"

A waitress, clearing tables, beamed at him.

"Please, there's a free seat at the back!"

Tentatively, he proceeded deeper into the diner. Finding an empty table, he settled down, only for the waitress to briskly present him with the menu.

— "*Monjayaki*," "*Modanyaki*"... *it seems this place specializes in grilled dishes...*

He noticed the grill embedded at each table, with various meals sizzling upon them around the room.

— *But what in the world is 'monja'? 'Modan'? What's modern about it? What exactly **do** they grill?*

The menu, with its cryptic culinary lexicon, only thickened the fog of his perplexity.

— *What is this 'Dance of the Dragon Palace'? 'Haumea Lava Grill'?*

Isn't Haumea a deity in Orb's pantheon? Is it really okay to grill that?!

Puzzled, Athrun furrowed his brow until the waitress returned.

"Have you decided on your order?"

He mumbled, "I'll... wait for my companion..."

Choosing from this menu proved daunting; he'd leave it to Cagalli, assuming she actually showed up. But why the insistence on a face-to-face meeting, eschewing digital correspondence?

Was the subject too sensitive for electronic transmission?

The thought of seeing Cagalli after such a long time stirred old memories—they were once inseparable...

A wave of nostalgia threatened to engulf him, but he anchored himself to the present.

—*No! Focus on the mission.*

His mission was to report on the strife in Southern Eurasia. He felt the data disk in his pocket, mentally revising its contents, ready for any questioning. Post-Foundation Independence—post the so-called Foundation Shock—the region remained a hotbed of tension. The lurking presence of Blue Cosmos, instigators of conflict, might still permeate the area.

A soft exhale escaped Athrun.

When will the cycle of turmoil cease? He wondered if Kira and Lacus, too, wrestled with this sense of helplessness.

Minutes later, Cagalli made her entrance, her casual attire blending her in with the everyday youth, far from incognito yet unassuming. Spotting Athrun, her face lit up with a spontaneous smile as she slid into the seat opposite him.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Have you ordered yet?"

"No, not yet..."

"Then, do you mind if I choose? Let's order a few things and share," she suggested, her eyes skimming the menu with ease. She chose the monjayaki, modanyaki, and the cryptic Dragon Palace Dance.

"And for drinks... shall we try the Otohime's First Love Soda? What will you have—"

"I'll stick with oolong tea," Athrun cut in, a tad too hastily, sidestepping a potentially outlandish beverage selection. The drink menu was another puzzle he hadn't anticipated.

With the order placed, Cagalli's mood lightened.

"I used to come here a lot with Kisaka. Brings back memories."

"Oh?" Athrun conjured an image of Kisaka, a stalwart presence, finding it hard to imagine him sipping on an "Otohime's First Love Soda." The thought was inconceivable.

Lost in his own thoughts, he barely caught Cagalli's sigh.

"I just needed a break, you know."

Athrun was torn—should he feel privileged or disheartened to be her choice for a respite? Probably the former.

Their drinks arrived shortly after. Cagalli's soda was a fanciful pink concoction crowned with an umbrella. Athrun breathed a sigh of relief at his own tea, the epitome of simplicity.

"To us," she toasted, lifting her glass.

"Cheers," As he obliged out of politeness, Cagalli clinked her glass against his. The way she leaned in, looking up at him, made her look cute, and Athrun felt a bit flustered.

"Now, about that report?" she nudged, transitioning back to business.

Snapping back to the task at hand, Athrun presented the disk. Their casual backdrop momentarily faded into the background as they delved into matters of state, even if it was intended to be a respite for Cagalli.

"Here it is, all the intel we have so far."

Accepting the disk, Cagalli's tone grew serious.

"Thanks. And about Michael's base—"

"It's in the Eurasian and Foundation's military buffer zone."

"I'll need you to keep investigating. And could you delve deeper into Foundation?"

"More details, you mean?"

"They're suggesting a joint operation, you know."

"Joining COMPS, then? But--"

"Of course, but that's not on the table right now. We can't provoke Eurasia's wrath."

Cagalli sipped her drink again.

Foundation. With its brilliant independence from the Eurasian Federation and subsequent rapid economic development, it was a country shrouded in mystery. And now they were approaching COMPS.

"What do you think is going on?"

Athrun inquired, to which Cagalli frowned slightly.

"I'm not sure... but..."

It seemed too convenient. That might be what she wanted to say. Michael, who currently led the main forces of Blue Cosmos, was an existence COMPS absolutely could not overlook. If they were presenting a path to him in the form of a "request for a joint operation..."

As if using Michael as bait to lure someone in...

Perhaps sensing the same indescribable unease, Cagalli absentmindedly caressed the disk but then snapped back to the present, her smile returning.

"Enough work talk. Like I said, I'm here to unwind."

"So, I'm your chosen escape?"

Athrun half-joked, half-sighed, wishing she'd see his side of their unexpected meeting.

Cagalli heaved a sigh.

"I mean, lately, I've just been going back and forth between the official residence and the cabinet office, and even when I occasionally go to a tree-planting ceremony or something, I'm surrounded by dozens of attendants... It's constant, you know? If I so much as drop a pen, like twenty people whirl around... Of course, I understand my position, and I'm grateful for their work... But... I'm really at my wit's end. It's suffocating..."

Her voice trailed off, eyes lowered. Her exhaustion apparent. Athrun was reminded anew of her burden, she was a leader bearing the weight of a nation on her shoulders. All this as she was leading a nation through these tumultuous times after the war.

While advancing her country's reconstruction, she also had to walk a tightrope, maintaining a delicate balance in an international community that could revert back to war at any moment.

As if shaking off the dark shadow, she raised her hands in a dismissive gesture.

"So today is a complete day off. I left my guards and attendants behind, and I told my driver to come pick me up later."

"That means..." Athrun realized that the responsibility to protect her fell on him. His alertness heightened, yet he wished for her to enjoy this moment of reprieve.

"Sorry for the wait! One modanyaki!" The server announced, placing a sizzling disc on the griddle, seemingly a pancake encasing fried noodles—a carb on carb enigma.

While Athrun grappled with the dish's concept, Cagalli was presented with a bowl of monjayaki, ready to be cooked by her own hand.

Cagalli put the cabbage on the griddle and started finely chopping it with a spatula in each hand. After chopping, she arranged it in a ring, leaving the center empty. There, she poured the rich broth from the bowl. Steam rose with a flashy, sizzling sound.

"Perfect!" Cagalli beamed, her enthusiasm infectious, though Athrun's expression betrayed his confusion.

How was one supposed to eat this liquid concoction?

Cagalli mixed the cabbage, ingredients, and soup together, the mixture becoming increasingly amorphous, straying further from what one typically recognizes as food. Frankly, it wasn't exactly appetizing to look at.

"Hm? What's wrong? Eat up," Cagalli urged, and with a hesitant "Ah, okay," Athrun opted for the more recognizable modanyaki, slicing a piece with his spatula. To his surprise, it delighted his taste buds, a testament to the sauce's unique flair.

"Good, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Athrun admitted, prompting a pleased smile from Cagalli.

"This one will be ready to eat soon, too."

"I think I'll stick with this one," Athrun gestured to his current dish.

"Try it. You like cabbage, right?" Cagalli insisted.

Athrun did like cabbage, but in forms like stuffed cabbage or coleslaw, not this... his palate wasn't quite ready for such adventurous cabbage cuisine.

Cagalli, continuing her culinary effort, casually asked, "How have things been for you lately?"

Athrun recognized this as his cue to maintain a light, convivial atmosphere.

"Well, the other day, Mey--" Athrun started but then hesitated. It felt somewhat awkward to bring her up.

But as he'd been on assignments with Meyrin lately, no other harmless topics came to mind quickly.

Cagalli's curiosity piqued, "Did something happen to Meyrin? Is she okay?"

"N-no, she's fine. Totally fine. As fit as a fiddle."

"Sure, if you say so."

He had made it unnatural by being overly considerate.

Athrun pulled himself together and asked, "Speaking of which, have you been in touch with Kira?"

"Not much, but I do chat with Lacus sometimes... She loves cooking, you know. Ends up making too much all the time."

"That's Lacus for you."

"She gets all excited making things, and before she knows it, the table is full of dishes. She and Kira can't eat it all, so they share it with staff and soldiers. Apparently, it's quite popular."

"That makes sense. Homemade meals are a rarity in the military."

"Yeah, especially compared to the standard military fare," Cagalli recalled with a chuckle. "Remember the rations we had on that deserted island? Those were terrible."

Both laughed, reminiscing about when they were stranded during battle, both separated from their units.

"It wasn't the time for being picky, but yeah, it wasn't great."

"Even that crab would've been better," Athrun couldn't help but snort. He had remembered the crab that had fallen out of Cagalli's clothes.

When they first met, they had been enemies. To think that after repeatedly parting and coming together with her, they could now laugh together again so lightheartedly—what incredible fortune.

Cagalli scooped up the cooked monjayaki with a small spatula, now insistent, "Just try it. It looks weird, but it's really good."

That kind of sales pitch was usually followed by regret. There was a part of him curious enough to explore this new culinary landscape.

Reluctantly, Athrun scraped up the messy, mysterious food with a small spatula and brought it to his mouth.

"It's decent," Athrun conceded after a thoughtful pause.

"Admit it, it's delicious," Cagalli prodded.

"Well, it's decent," Athrun repeated.

"Don't say it twice."

The unique texture was battling with the unexpectedly enticing flavor. He was almost tempted to declare it delightful.

Cagalli's expression soured slightly.

"You just have no sense of adventure when it comes to food," she chided. "Watch out, I'll introduce you to something even crazier next time!"

"I'd rather not," Athrun internally balked at the idea, picturing the daring tastes of Captain Waltfeld as a more suitable target for such culinary adventures.

"Why don't you recommend it to Commander Waltfeld or something?"

"Really? He might actually like it."

"No way, anyone who drenches kebabs in yogurt sauce has a questionable taste."

Athrun countered, imagining Waltfeld's glee juxtaposed with DaCosta's resigned frustration.

"He tends to be a bit too didactic for my taste," Cagalli remarked.

Well... he agreed with that.

"Alright, challenge accepted. Something wildly adventurous," Athrun said, poking at the monjayaki suspiciously, eliciting a sly grin from Cagalli.

"You said it. I'll hold you to that."

"Sure."

As they contemplated their next culinary adventure, Athrun smiled, relieved to see Cagalli's spirits lifted. A bit of gastronomic risk was a small price for her momentary respite.

Their light-hearted banter was shattered by a sudden commotion within the restaurant.

"Wha—?"

Athrun's instincts kicked in instantly, positioning himself between Cagalli and the source of the disturbance. But before his protective instincts could fully kick in, the entire room erupted into action. Laughter from a nearby couple was abruptly replaced by the hiss of an expanding shield as they encased Athrun and Cagalli within a protective cocoon. A patron, mid-flip of his okonomiyaki, discarded his spatula in favor of a handgun drawn from an unseen holster. The waitress, who had just been offering smiles and menus, now brandished a shotgun from under a table, her aim fixed on the entrance.

"Get down, Representative!" came the unified cry from around them.

Athrun stood dumbfounded, half-crouched, scanning the room as the real situation unfolded.

A voice crackled through a hidden radio, "Seems to be a collision accident involving a civilian vehicle at the intersection. Emergency services have been alerted."

The waitress, hand to her ear, acknowledged the message, "Understood. Stay alert."

It wasn't an attack; the chaos was just a tragic coincidence. Slowly, the restaurant's occupants holstered their weapons, their posture relaxing as they returned to their seats. But they were no ordinary patrons or staff; they were Cagalli's guards, masquerading as civilians to protect her.

The waitress, now clearly a guard in disguise, cleared her throat and resumed her service persona.

"Apologies for the disturbance. Your Dragon Palace Dance will be out shortly. Please, enjoy your meal at your leisure."

"Impossible," thought Athrun as Cagalli, red-faced and furious, slammed her hands down on the table.

"This! This is exactly why I hate this!" she exploded, her voice trembling with anger.

"Wasn't today supposed to be my day off? My private time?"

"But, Representative Athha," one disguised guard tried to justify, "you are a person of great importance. If something were to happen--"

Athrun could see both sides. Cagalli's desire for a moment of normalcy wasn't trivial; it was a breath of fresh air she seldom enjoyed. Her outrage was justified; she had dedicated her life to Orb, and this brief escape was her only solace.

"Enough!" Cagalli's voice cracked as she stormed out, the guards scrambling after her.

"Wait, please..." a guard implored, reaching for her arm.

"Let go!" she tried to shake them off, but the guards grabbed her arm and wouldn't let go.

"We can't allow selfish behavior, Representative!"

Athrun acted, chopped the wrist of the guard grabbing Cagalli's arm, and as soon as it was freed, he scooped her up by the waist, darting toward the exit.

"Athrun?!" she gasped in bewilderment but ran along as she was led.

A guard rose to intercept them, but Athrun's shoulder sent him reeling.

"W-wait!"

At the same time, he kicked over a chair from the counter. As Athrun and Cagalli dashed out of the restaurant, they heard the sound of guards tripping over the chair and falling behind them.

Outside, the street was abuzz with onlookers drawn to the accident scene, allowing Athrun and Cagalli to blend into the crowd and slip away. From behind, shouts of "After them!" echoed as their chasers emerged, scanning the crowd. Athrun, sensing their gaze, pulled Cagalli into the maze of alleys that snaked through the old town.

Holding Cagalli's hand, Athrun immediately turned a corner and squeezed sideways through a back alley barely wide enough for one person.

"Athrun?" she asked, catching her breath, her tone a mix of confusion and urgency.

"What am I doing?" Athrun thought.

In that moment, Athrun pondered the gravity of their escapade. Running off with the head of state, being chased by her own security detail, it was like he was acting as a terrorist.

The word "selfish," hurled by the guards at Cagalli, echoed in his mind, sparking a defiant resolve. Yes, her role demanded unwavering responsibility, and it wasn't a position that allowed for rash actions, but she was not devoid of personal desires or the right to a moment's peace.

She had a "heart."

If she always sat quietly in a heavily guarded place for easy protection, it would certainly make the guards' job easier. But that would be treating her as just a "security object," a "thing."

People are not "things". No one should be forced to kill their heart by being bound to their duties.

If her wish was for a fleeting escape, Athrun was determined to make it a reality, even if he stood alone in that endeavor.

"Which way did they go?" a guard's voice echoed in the distance.

"Team A, head toward Himuka Street!"

Athrun met Cagalli's gaze, his eyes alight with a mix of concern and determination. "Let's lose them," he urged, his voice low but resolute.

For a moment, Cagalli looked surprised, but then her face broke into a smile, and she nodded vigorously.

"Yeah!"

"This way."

Athrun and Cagalli turned another corner and ran down the back alley.

"Team B reporting, no sign of the targets yet!"

"Team A has canvassed Himuka Street. Still no sign of them!"

The security chief's brow furrowed as she absorbed the updates crackling through the radio, her pace quickening through the serpentine alleys. Her lieutenant, a blend of determination and anxiety etched on his face, muttered, "They can't hide forever. The old town's a labyrinth, sure, but for an outsider..."

The alleys of the old town, a tangled web that could confound even the most seasoned locals, were notorious. Yet, the chief knew better.

The security chief exhaled sharply, her frustration evident as she glared at her subordinate.

"Do you not realize who we're chasing? That's Alex Dino—no, Athrun Zala. The person who was Lady Cagalli's security detail before us."

A flicker of realization crossed the lieutenant's face, recognizing the name but not the connection to their former protectee.

The chief's voice tightened, "With his knowledge of Orb's streets, he's likely more at home here than we are."

Suddenly, their radios crackled to life, "Target spotted!"

Emerging from an alley, guards caught a glimpse of the fleeing duo. Clutching Cagalli, he vaulted down a flight of stairs, her surprised yelp mixing with the thud of their landing. With seamless agility, he veered into an adjoining alley.

"Wait! This way!" echoed the pursuing guards' calls.

He had a mental map, a grid of the city's layout he'd memorized during his time in Orb, rechecked in preparation for their meeting.

He, too, wouldn't neglect preparations when meeting with a nation's head of state.

Meanwhile, the chief, amidst the chase, directed forces with precision.

"Teams B-2 and B-3, press on! Team A, intercept them from the front!"

Consulting the digital map projected by her goggles, she tracked the converging paths of B teams as they corralled Athrun and Cagalli deeper into the old town's heart.

Quickly rechecking the map, she barked out more orders.

"B-2, drive them into the right alley!"

—If this went well...

Just as the plan seemed to coalesce, an urgent update came through the radio.

"This is A-1, we have a visual on the targets! Moving to apprehend!"

"Ah!"

Cagalli's exclamation pierced the tense silence as they spotted guards converging on their position from ahead. With their retreat cut off by the sound of pursuing footsteps, their situation seemed increasingly dire. Yet, Athrun's

resolve only hardened; his pace quickened as they approached the imminent blockade.

As they neared the guards, Athrun executed a swift maneuver, his body momentarily dipping from view as he executed a precise slide, his actions nearly a blur to the bewildered guards. With a deft sweep, he upended the foremost guard's stance, creating a momentary opening. Cagalli seized the opportunity, shouldering another off-balance guard out of their path with an apologetic "Sorry!" before continuing her sprint.

Athrun's hand found Cagalli's, and they dashed into the alley that branched off to the right.

"Oh, no!" Cagalli's voice was a whisper of dismay as they faced a dead end. On one side was a high fence, and at the back and the other side, walls of buildings towered.

Yet, Athrun remained undaunted. In a surge of agility, he lifted Cagalli, their bodies almost defying gravity as he scaled the wall, feet finding impossible purchase, kicking off the scant footholds and leaping up.

"Whoa!"

Cagalli's exclamation was a mix of awe and alarm.

In moments, Athrun perched atop the fence with feline grace, ducking under an overhanging branch, their temporary sanctuary.

Cagalli whispered, still feeling her unabated heartbeat.

"Did you just run up a wall?"

"Shh!"

Below, the guards swarmed into the alley, their search frantic and futile. The female security chief's arrival only heightened the urgency.

"What happened?! Where are they?!"

"Well... they definitely came this way..."

"Find them!"

When people are looking for something, they rarely look up. Watching while holding their breath, the guards searched behind the pillars in the alley and behind the trash cans and finally started banging on the back door of the building to get it opened.

After the security chief gave some instructions over the intercom, they split up, some barging into the building and others heading back down the alley.

When no one was left, Athrun, still cradling Cagalli, jumped down to the other side of the fence.

It seemed to be the courtyard of a building. Trees cast quiet shadows, and tomatoes in the home garden were ripening red.

Athrun took Cagalli's hand and cut across the courtyard, their footsteps stealthy. At the far end of the fence was a wooden gate with peeling white paint. Athrun opened the gate and went outside.

Outside the gate were narrow stairs. Descending them, the sea spread out before them.

Stepping onto the white sandy beach, Cagalli took a deep breath.

It was vast. As far as the eye could see, the blue of the sky and sea stretched out, with nothing obstructing the view. The space without walls or ceilings pressing down on her head cheerfully freed her shrunken mind and heart.

It had been a long time since she had heard the sound of the waves lapping and receding this close.

Breathing in, the scent of the tide filled her chest.

Cagalli let out a small laugh and trotted toward the sea.

Entering the captain's room, Murrue was just putting down the communicator. She had an indescribable, strange expression, so Mu asked,

"What's the matter?"

"Just got a message from Cagalli's detail. They say she's missing."

"What?!"

As Mu's face changed color, prompting Murrue to elaborate quickly, "And she's with Athrun."

A smirk crept onto Mu's face.

"Really now?"

A head of state going missing would be a major incident, but Athrun's involvement changed the entire narrative, painting Cagalli not as a mere victim but rather as a willing participant in her disappearance.

He understood the perplexing look on Murrue's face. She was simultaneously bewildered and struggling to suppress her laughter.

"So, they asked if we had any idea where they might have gone."

The fact that the security detail was reaching out to Murrue spoke volumes of their desperation. Yet, their willingness to seek help without obsessing over pride was commendable.

Trying to hold back his laughter, Mu responded, "Let them be. They're not kids anymore."

Murrue chuckled.

"I should have told them that."

"What did you tell them?"

"Not to worry. If she's with Athrun Zala, Cagalli is in safe hands."

Mu nodded, then paused, pondering, "Safe, huh?" as Murrue fixed him with a stern look.

As Athrun watched over Cagalli, strolling along the edge of the sea, there was a sense of unhurried grace in her movements—neither rushing nor playful. Yet, it was clear she was savoring the moment.

She's grown up, Athrun found himself thinking. No longer was she the child who played in the waves.

Nor was he.

Cagalli turned, offering him a smile. Side by side, they walked on the beach, passing a playful dog and a laughing child in pursuit. The distant barks and laughter danced on the wind, mingling with the shimmering sea and the distant

sails of windsurfers. It was a serene afternoon tableau, with themselves as part of the canvas.

After a while, Athrun asked,

"So... what now?"

"Hm?"

Cagalli looked at him, holding back her wind-tousled hair with one hand.

"If there's somewhere you want to go. I'll be your guard. In their place."

At Athrun's words, Cagalli looked up at the sky with a thoughtful "Hmm."

After a bit, she looked at him and suddenly grinned.

"What?"

"You know, I'd almost forgotten how useful you can be."

"Huh?"

"I forgot. Haaaah, that felt good! Anyway..."

Cagalli stretched both hands heavenward with a satisfied groan, then spun on her heel, laughing.

"'Anyway' what?"

Athrun hurried after Cagalli, who had started walking briskly, in surprise.

"I just feel satisfied! So, I'm good now," she replied in an almost refreshed voice.

"Wha... h-hey..."

Despite all the trouble he went through to shake off the security detail, and now they could freely go anywhere?

As Athrun gaped, Cagalli turned around as if remembering something and patted the pocket with the disc.

"Oh, thanks for this. Keep digging, 'kay?"

"O-Oh, sure..."

"Say hi to Meyrin for me!"

Waving exuberantly, Cagalli walked away with quick steps. Athrun watched her go, feeling utterly befuddled.

Glancing over, a car had stopped on the embankment road at some point. Standing beside it was the guard who had been disguised as the restaurant server. She had taken off her apron and was now wearing a black jacket.

As Cagalli approached, she bowed respectfully.

Cagalli got into the car without hesitation.

The guard seemed to glance at Athrun one last time and give a small nod.

It seemed he wouldn't be arrested as a kidnapper.

Well, if that little adventure had "satisfied" Cagalli, he supposed it was all right, even if it didn't sit quite right with him.

The sun was setting. Athrun too started walking back toward the city.

Recalling today's commotion, he couldn't help but smile.

He glanced in the direction the car had driven off and murmured to himself, "Hang in there... Representative."

Moonlight Valkyrie

"Wow! Hey, hey, Youlant, look at this!"

Laced with overexcited astonishment, Vino's voice rang out as he flipped through the military's public relations magazine.

Youlant, slightly annoyed, replied without pausing his work, "Hmm? I'll check it out after I finish this."

Vino and Youlant are members of the technical staff aboard the battleship Minerva. The Minerva had seen its fair share of fierce battles, resulting in significant losses to its mobile suits. Frankly speaking, they needed all hands on deck.

"No, you gotta see this!" insisted Vino, thrusting the magazine into Youlant's face, revealing a familiar face.

"Agnes?" Youlant muttered in recognition.

"Yes! The 'Moonlight Valkyrie,' how cool is that!" Vino beamed, practically buzzing with excitement. The girl smiling proudly in the magazine's glamour pages was Agnes Giebenrath, a fellow cadet from their officer academy days, known for her fiery red hair and cat-like, spirited eyes. The article, as Vino read out, touted her as a rising star for her exploits on the lunar front.

Vino, ever so simple and easily swayed, was brimming with excitement as if Agnes' achievements were his own.

"She always excelled, even back in the academy, topping the class several times."

"Uh huh," Youlant responded nonchalantly.

"Cute, hardworking... Ah, so she's still making her mark."

Youlant, however, was skeptical.

"Look, don't take this stuff at face value. The media loves to hype up someone with a decent face and a fair record as a 'hero' or 'heroine.' It's all for boosting morale."

His opinion of Agnes wasn't exactly favorable, her insincerity irritating, but Vino was too naive to see through the facade, completely disregarding Youlant's words and continuing to admire Agnes' photo.

"Hey, between us... I think Agnes had a crush on me back then," Vino mused dreamily.

"I'm gonna go with no on that," Youlant retorted bluntly.

Meanwhile, Agnes was basking in her newfound fame.

Ever since her photograph graced the military's public relations magazine, she noticed more heads turning her way and more requests for autographs. She didn't particularly think the photograph did her justice, but that seemed irrelevant now.

She emailed Lunamaria, too, but didn't get a reply back.

She must be jealous, she mused.

It was understandable, given she had swiftly become the new heroine, a title that surely didn't sit well with her peer, Lunamaria.

In her mind, it was a well-deserved outcome.

Initially assigned to the moon's defense line, Agnes had been discontent, especially knowing that Lunamaria and Shinn were aboard the newly commissioned battleship Minerva.

Glory was hard to come by in the backlines.

Of course, the Minerva would still be in its trial phase for a while, so there wouldn't be any real combat, but being chosen as a pilot for the new mobile suits was an honor.

Agnes could never accept why she wasn't chosen. Maybe because her parents were high-ranking government officials, they were being considerate assigning her somewhere safe?

More unnecessary meddling.

Hearing about Minerva's involvement in combat only fueled her envy. If she had been there, she was sure she would have achieved heroic feats much sooner.

Nevertheless, she, too, had made her mark as expected. She held her head high, proud of being the "Moonlight Valkyrie" — a captivating catchphrase no matter how many times she heard it.

She thought the PR copywriter who came up with that tagline deserved a bonus. But for Agnes, this was just the beginning. She aimed to rise higher in her military career, eventually leading her own team and retiring as a high-ranking officer, perhaps even venturing into politics or business.

She envisioned herself at the top, and naturally, she needed a partner who matched her stature — someone who was not just good-looking but also competent. In the military context, someone at least FAITH level.

That day, she received an email from Vino Dupre. It took her a moment to recall him. Oh right, a classmate from the technology track back at the academy. She recalled how amusing it was to interact with him, knowing he was thrilled by any attention from her. As an elite born to lead, Agnes considered it her duty to bestow favors upon those around her. As expected, Vino's email was about seeing her in the magazine.

—Seeing you active, too, makes me proud as a classmate.

The phrase "you too" in his message irked her slightly.

As she read on, her expression changed.

—I'm sure you already know, but Shinn and Rey became FAITH members.

Crazy right?

FAITH? Rey, sure, but Shinn?

That was unbelievable.

—Shinn has really been incredible lately...

—He even shot down the Freedom...

No freaking way. That loser Shinn did?

The email was filled with incredulous statements.

—By the way, heard from Luna that she and Shinn are dating?

She was stunned.

She hadn't heard.
Lunamaria and Shinn?
That meant Lunamaria had snagged a FAITH-level boyfriend before her?
Agnes felt betrayed.



"Seriously, you're so dense! Don't drag the team down!"

Agnes's scathing words made Shinn bristle, his eyes flashing red in irritation.

"Shut up... Sorry, okay? I'll do better next time!" he retorted.

They had just finished a virtual combat training session in the simulator and were on their way to lunch. Vino and Youlant from the technical department were joining them, the pilots.

"What's up, Shinn? Another bad run?" Youlant teased as he slung an arm around Shinn's shoulder, rocking him playfully, only to be shrugged off with a gruff "Leave me alone."

"Bad run doesn't begin to describe it!" Agnes shrieked indignantly.

The simulator training was the closest thing to actual combat they had right now. Actual mobile suit mock battles were still a long way off.

Among their cohort of pilot candidates, Shinn was somewhat of a problem child. Not only did he lag in classroom theory, but he also fell behind Agnes and Lunamaria in physical training, his only saving graces being stamina and stubbornness. If only he could manage the simulations, there might be hope, but Shinn was KILLED right at the start of the missions, always rushing in without the requisite skills.

Initially, it was individual combat, so Shinn's performance didn't matter much. But unfortunately, they ended up on the same team. Agnes, of course, had topped the individual scores. Maybe that's why the instructors paired her with the problem child, to balance the teams. Frustrating, to say the least. She wished she had held back a bit during the individual rounds.

The rest of the team, Agnes and Rey, had no issues. In fact, Agnes thought this might be a good opportunity to get closer to Rey. He had good grades and excellent piloting skills, though he was quite reserved.

But she knew the real problem was Shinn.

"Dying within ten seconds? That's just not acceptable! He's got zero aptitude for piloting!" Agnes fumed.

Lunamaria tried to calm her down, "Ease up, Agnes. It's about fostering teamwork."

"Teamwork? With this dead weight? Impossible!" Agnes retorted.

Rey, who had been quiet, murmured, "Fourteen seconds."

"What?"

"It was actually fourteen seconds, not ten."

He was referring to the time Shinn lasted in the simulation. Lunamaria and even Shinn himself looked exasperated.

"That's hardly a consolation, Rey," Shinn muttered.

"Who cares!" Agnes exploded, pointing accusingly at Shinn. "Do you even take this academy seriously? If you're just going to hold me back, why don't you just drop out and go home?"

She wished he would just quit. It was impossible to work with someone so inept. As far as Agnes was concerned, it was the only solution. But then Shinn glared back at her, his deep red eyes burning with an intensity that momentarily took Agnes aback.

"I will become a pilot, no matter what."

"Who does he think he is talking back to me? The nerve of that loser!" Agnes was seething, frustrated that Shinn's defiance had even slightly intimidated her.

The mood had turned so sour that Shinn and Rey eventually walked away from the group. Lunamaria tried to placate Agnes, "Shinn really is useless, huh. Maybe he has no talent after all."

Just as Agnes was about to continue her tirade, Youlant, who had followed them, said quietly, "Agnes... that wasn't right."

As Agnes whirled around, Youlant averted his eyes.

"You know... Shinn's a refugee from Orb."

Lunamaria's expression turned to one of shock at Youlant's words. The devastation of Orb, which had tried to maintain neutrality only to be invaded and ravaged by the Earth Alliance forces, was common knowledge.

Youlant's voice was tinged with bitterness. "He has no home to return to." It was a pointed remark at Agnes's earlier, unknowing statement - 'Why don't you just go home?'

Aware of the truth now, Lunamaria looked uncomfortable. But Agnes was infuriated. Were they trying to make her the villain here?

She lashed out at him for sticking his nose where it didn't belong.

"So what? Should we pity the poor refugee and give him passing grades? Is that it?"

"That's not what I meant..." Youlant tried to interject.

"On the battlefield, *none* of that matters! The enemy's not going to give him special treatment for being pitiful!" Agnes retorted.

"Well... that's true, but..." Lunamaria said hesitantly.

Agnes was adamant.

"You're all too soft! If you want sob stories, go somewhere else!"

It was infuriating. Being painted as the bad guy, sympathizing with a failure.

What she said wasn't wrong.

A loser is a loser, after all.

"Dammit, let's go again!" Shinn shouted as he immediately jumped back to his feet after being thrown.

"Ugghhh... again?" Lunamaria sighed in exasperation but quickly assumed her stance.

Shinn charged with vigor, only to be promptly sent flying through the air by Lunamaria's judo throw.

"Ouch! Okay, one more time!"

"You know, you really should pay more attention! It's not just about you; watch your opponent! Use their movements against them!" Lunamaria advised.

"Right!" Shinn replied reflexively, resembling a disciple under his master's guidance. Lunamaria was always helpful and patiently offered advice even to the struggling Shinn.

He listened intently to her suggestions, trying to follow them. The number of times he was thrown seemed to decrease. After the martial arts class, Shinn collapsed on the mat, exhausted. Lunamaria, looking tired herself, headed towards the showers.

Agnes joined in, mockingly commenting, "Can't believe you seriously bother with that washout."

Lunamaria laughed it off.

"It's good, makes for training too."

Agnes, mischievously probing, asked, "What, you have a thing for him?"

Lunamaria recoiled dramatically.

"No way! As if! No, no, no, he's just a kid!"

She shook her head vigorously, waving her hands in denial.

Agnes laughed heartily at her over-the-top reaction.

"That's what I figured. For a sec, I wondered if you had weird taste. There's no way it's Shinn, right?"

Lunamaria nodded in agreement.

"He's silly and simple."

"Really, it's embarrassing getting thrown by a girl. He seems totally fine with it, though!" Agnes scoffed.

However, Lunamaria suddenly became serious.

"But you know...I actually respect that side of him."

"Huh?" Agnes was exasperated.

"No matter how many times he gets knocked down, he gets back up to try again. Even if it looks lame."

Agnes rolled her eyes, visibly annoyed. She disliked this side of Lunamaria, always playing the perfect student, holier-than-thou attitude.

"No matter how many times he tries, a loser is a loser! He's just a fool wasting his time and effort," Agnes retorted.

The idea that effort is sacred was just a fairytale for Naturals. Everything boiled down to genetics, and no amount of effort could change that.

Wouldn't it be more efficient to pursue a path suited to one's abilities from the start? It was easier and more beneficial to society without causing inconvenience to others.

Why couldn't these fools understand such a simple concept?

Agnes sighed in frustration at the stupidity of her peers.

"I'm sorry, but I think we should break up," Hulegu suddenly announced in the cafeteria, causing Lunamaria to nearly drop her cup of coffee.

Their relationship was barely a month old. Hulegu was a top student among her classmates, and his serious, honest demeanor had appealed to Lunamaria when she initiated the relationship. She, like Agnes, believed in dating only the elite. Lunamaria herself was determined to become a top pilot, and she felt it would be unbecoming to have a less capable partner. She wanted someone she could respect and who would inspire mutual growth – a typical teenage girl's desire. Hulegu seemed to fit this criterion perfectly.

They spent breaks and after-class hours together, revising lessons and chatting. They even went to a movie during a recent break.

Did she do something wrong on that date? Did she wear the wrong clothes? Should she have listened to Meyrin's advice?

As her mind raced through these thoughts, Hulegu uttered something completely unexpected.

"The truth is... I've fallen for someone else..."

"Who?" Lunamaria asked, barely able to utter the word.

Hulegu hesitated, but eventually, his honest nature compelled him to reveal the name.

"Agnes."

Lunamaria was speechless. She had considered Agnes a friend and never anticipated that her boyfriend and her friend could develop such a relationship. Sure, there were times when Agnes seemed overly friendly with Hulegu, even flirtatious, but Lunamaria had assumed she was just trying to get along with him for her sake.

Hulegu stumbled over his apologies, expressing regret for hurting her, pleading not to think poorly of Agnes, and stating he couldn't continue their relationship now that he realized his true feelings.

Lunamaria felt anger and deep humiliation.

This guy. He thinks Agnes is more attractive than me.

The betrayal hurt as much as the realization itself. After one last apology, Hulegu left quickly, almost fleeing the scene.

Lunamaria later wished she had dumped her coffee on him.

Overcome by irritation, she abruptly rose from her seat to storm off, colliding with someone's tray behind her. Coffee spilled everywhere as a wrapped burger tumbled to the floor.

"Oh no!"

"I'm so sorry!" Lunamaria apologized quickly, picking up the wrapper. She turned to see a scowling Shinn.

"What's the big idea, Luna?" he grumbled.

"Shinn..." Noticing her odd expression, Shinn's concern grew.

"Are you okay? Did any coffee get on you?"

His chest was splattered with coffee droplets.

"Yeah, sorry..." she said, returning the hamburger wrapper.

Shinn just laughed it off. "It's fine. I can still eat it. Thanks."

And with that, he walked away, seemingly unfazed. Lunamaria thought to herself, "He's really just a kid."

Determined to forget the incident, she quickly left the cafeteria. Hulegu was just that kind of guy, quick to be unfaithful with a little attention from her friend.

Now she knew Agnes too for what she was.

Neither was trustworthy.

Better to have realized it sooner.

Sour grapes, perhaps, but it lifted some weight off her. She couldn't think of them as friends anymore, but she would interact with Agnes as usual. It was more embarrassing to show she was affected by the ordeal.

With a resolved mind and a defiant stride, Lunamaria left.

Then it struck her – she had managed to dump coffee, albeit on the wrong person.

Poor Shinn, but the thought brought a slight smile to her face.



Ever since reading Vino's email, Agnes had been mired in utter misery.

Even the military achievements she had so proudly earned now seemed utterly diminished.

"What a traitor Lunamaria is! Claiming that Shinn was an absolute impossibility and then lying through her teeth! I never thought she'd be such a cunning woman!" Agnes raged inwardly but still couldn't shake off her discontent.

Why hadn't Lunamaria herself said anything? Some friend she is, totally unfair.

Of course, at this time, the Minerva was in the midst of fierce battles, and neither Lunamaria nor Shin had time for such matters, but Agnes was not inclined to consider this. Every time the Minerva was glorified in the media, she would bitterly change the channel.

One day, she entered the space fortress's recreation room only to see the Minerva's heroic exploits being broadcast. She immediately turned on her heel and strode out, drink still in hand.

That's when someone spoke to her.

"All that's just propaganda. Only fools would take it seriously."

Agnes regarded the speaker with interest. A tall, handsome man in the red uniform reserved for elite pilots.

"Oh really?" she flashed a smile as if to test him.

"Yeah. The Minerva is the Chairman's little darling," the man said with a suggestive undertone.

Agnes immediately took a liking to him, not just for his words, but for the man himself.



In the officer academy's recreation room, there stood a classical grand piano, seemingly out of place in a facility dedicated to the art of war. However, some

senior classmates, who were accomplished musicians, occasionally showcased their skills here.

As Agnes and Lunamaria entered the room, they were greeted by the sound of someone playing the piano. To their surprise, it was Rey, usually unemotional and distant, demonstrating a masterful touch on the keys.

"Didn't see that coming..."

"Seriously?"

Lunamaria and Agnes whispered among themselves as they watched Rey play. Beside him, leaning casually against the piano, stood a man with long black hair, exuding an air of sophistication and charisma. His pale face was calm, sharing occasional warm smiles with Rey.

They had never seen such an expression on Rey's face before, let alone the sight of him pouring emotion into the keys with delicate sensibility. It was like he was a completely different person from the usual expressionless, icy Rey. Captivated, they watched his graceful form at the piano.

As the performance concluded, the dark-haired man placed a hand on Rey's shoulder in a fatherly gesture. "See you around. Keep up the good work, Rey."

"Yes, Gil..." Rey responded to him with a childlike trust in his eyes and nodded.

Mesmerized by Rey's radiant smile, Agnes and Lunamaria were compelled to approach him as soon as the man, Gil, left.

"Rey, you can play the piano? We had no idea!"

"Is that man your father? Who is he? What does he do?"

Bombarded with questions, Rey reverted to his usual stoic expression. "It's none of your business."

Realizing they might have crossed a line, Lunamaria tried to smooth things over.

"Could you play some more for us? That piece earlier was really beautiful."

Rey seemed unopposed to this request and was about to return to the piano when Shinn burst into the room.

"Rey!" Shinn rushed over to ask, "About that propulsion system you explained earlier, could you go over it with me again? I didn't quite get it."

"Alright," Rey promptly turned away from the piano and left the room with Shin, who was carrying a textbook, without even a word of farewell to Agnes and Lunamaria.

Stunned by the cold dismissal, Agnes exclaimed, "What was that about!"

Lunamaria, equally perplexed, added, "Seriously, they're just kids!"

The fleeting moment of enchantment was quickly buried, leaving behind two disheartened young women in its wake.

"Sorry," Shinn mumbled as they walked down the corridor.

"Hm?"

"I'm not the brightest, you know..." Shinn's voice was laden with self-deprecation. Despite being a Coordinator, he felt ashamed. He wanted to complain to whoever had been responsible for his genetic modifications to do their job properly.

"That's not true," Rey responded.

"I can't seem to get the hang of the simulations... Maybe I'm just not cut out for this. You can do everything so easily."

"No," Rey flatly denied. "You have talent."

"Huh?" Shinn looked at his friend in surprise, accustomed to hearing the opposite from Agnes. But Rey's face was serious.

"It's true. Simulations are different from real combat. And you've been dying less often."

"Well, that's after a hell of a lot of practice..."

"People learn at different rates. Being faster doesn't always mean being better."

Rey looked directly into Shinn's eyes, offering a smile. "You have talent. Someday, you'll surpass us all – Agnes and even me."

Shinn felt an unexpected warmth in his chest.

"Thanks," he mumbled, looking down to hide the tears that threatened to spill. He didn't know what Rey saw in him, but the fact that someone believed in him gave him an extraordinary sense of strength.

He slapped his cheeks with determination.

"Alright! I'm going to give it my all!"

His earlier doubts seemed to vanish as he took the next step forward with renewed vigor. Rey looked momentarily taken aback, then let out a half-laugh, half-smile. It was different from the practiced expression he had shown earlier – this one seemed to come from deep within, a genuine smile.



"Do you like my hairstyle, Leo? It doesn't look weird, does it?" Agnes asked.

Leonard flashed his melting smile, caressing her cheek, "As always, you look flawless, Agnes."

"Oh, stop it, Leo," she playfully scolded. Leonard was simply the best. She loved that he'd never say something like, "Who cares, you'll be wearing a helmet anyway?"

Leonard Valway.

He was the one who had approached her at the space fortress, commenting, "The Minerva is the Chairman's little darling," and since then, they had hit it off. An ace pilot in red uniform, from a good family, and incredibly handsome – he was the man worthy to stand beside her.

Agnes felt elated. Chairman Durandal was dead, and his actions were condemned after the war. His attempt to fire Requiem at Earth was called into question, and the Destiny Plan was outright denied.

"Serves them right," Agnes thought smugly.

The achievements of the Minerva and Shinn's commendations all were mistakes.

"Using Requiem? Utterly moronic!" she mused, conveniently forgetting her own past thoughts of striking at the Naturals.

After the war, Lunamaria and Shinn, for some reason, joined COMPASS, an international mediation organization led by Lacus Clyne.

No doubt just a useless figurehead body though, they'd have no future there.

"Well, that's what you get as Durandal faction washouts," she thought with a sense of superiority.

"Losers will always be losers."

Now, Agnes was on her way to meet those "losers." Yzak Joule was delivering new models of Freedom and Justice to COMPASS, and Agnes and Leonard had volunteered to be the pilots or rather their transporters. Leonard's insistence that he "wanted to pilot the Freedom at least once" had led Agnes to pull some strings using her family connections. His boyish enthusiasm was one of the many things she found endearing about him.

But Leonard had his own painful past. His family had been on Januarius Two when it was destroyed by Logos. He had been deeply shocked, his face dark with sorrow when he confided in Agnes. It took her sympathy and comfort to bring his smile back.

"A little darkness in the past only added to his appeal," she mused.

Agnes resolved to be his support from now on. Every day would be happy, especially since she, so beautiful, strong, and capable, would always be by his side. She took a wrapped jewelry pouch from her pocket.

"Leo, this is a gift from me."

"Really?" Leonard unwrapped it to find a silver pendant. Inside the locket was a photo of them together. Agnes pulled out a matching chain from around her neck.

"We have a matching set. Will you wear it?"

A radiant smile spread across Leonard's face.

"I'm so happy, Agnes."

She put the chain around his neck and snuggled up to him, feeling an overwhelming sense of happiness.

"I'll always be here for you, to replace your lost family..."

She couldn't wait to flaunt this happiness to Lunamaria, to show her that she was always right.

"Yeah... 'replace my lost family'..." Leonard murmured, his words laced with an emotion Agnes couldn't detect. Behind her back, unseen to her, his face twisted into a cold, sardonic expression.

Gradually, a cynical smile crept onto his well-composed features.

He whispered, almost to himself, "Thank you, Agnes."

Neumann's Travel Log

Compass has officially been formed, so they say it's a "non-state, non-genetically discriminatory organization with its own enforcement power, dedicated to preserving peace." And so, we're joining this group on temporary assignment from the Orb Forces...

"So basically, we'll be intervening in conflicts around the world... is that it?" Neumann posed the question, prompting Murrue to think for a moment before responding.

"I'm guessing most of our activities will focus on rescue operations. I hear they're adding more infirmaries on the Archangel, too."

They were gathered on the bridge of the Archangel, discussing the organization they were about to join. Although a ceasefire treaty had been signed for the time being, world affairs remained shaky. At any moment, a spark might fly somewhere on the planet, igniting another war, exactly as it had last time.

To snuff out each of those sparks one by one, Cagalli had proposed and established Compass. The reality of it, however, was far more complicated.

"It's not like we've got the strength to fully dive into every conflict. And the Eurasian Federation hasn't even signed on," Murrue pointed out.

Neumann nodded.

"They're the ones actually in dispute right now."

"Guess that means 'stay the hell off our turf,' huh?"

Chandra leaned back in his chair, scowling.

At present, the only members of Compass were the Atlantic Federation, the PLANTs, and Orb. They were short on manpower, and without the immense territory and influence of Eurasia, there wasn't much they could actually do.

Especially since so many potential flashpoints lay smoldering within Eurasian borders.

Neumann felt a heaviness settle inside him.

"So what can we really do, then?"

"I wish I knew..."

Murrue's expression darkened.

Not long ago, a PLANT ground facility had been attacked, likely the work of some Blue Cosmos offshoot. Even though the war had officially ended, the old battle lines remained. In a world so ravaged by conflict, destructive acts seemed all the more senseless to Neumann. Yet it was that very exhaustion and disillusionment that allowed violence to seep through the cracks.

No matter what you do, it's like bailing out a sinking ship with nothing but your bare hands.

Mu, however, wore his usual breezy smile, his characteristic nonchalance.

"No need to overthink it. Same as always, right?"

Murrue couldn't help sighing in exasperation.

"It's not the same. We can't just follow our own judgment like before."

"Yeah, we're probably not allowed to pull stunts like we used to," Chandra said with a wry grin, and Neumann gave a tentative shrug.

"Like kidnapping a bride?"

"Absolutely out of the question," said Murrue, whose own involvement in that incident made her adopt an air of prim composure, prompting everyone to burst into laughter.

Indeed, now that they were part of a regular military, abducting a head of state from their own wedding venue could land them in serious trouble.

"Well, at least we're getting paid for this," Chandra joked, tossing out a comment that was a bit too honest. But in truth, it was hard not to feel a little grateful for a guaranteed monthly paycheck. Being a legitimate military unit did have its perks.

"I can finally afford a car," Neumann mused aloud.

Driving was one of the few hobbies he truly enjoyed.

Chandra teased him instantly.

"You're buying a car? But you don't even have a girlfriend."

"Shut it. So what?"

"Oh, let him buy one," Murrue encouraged him with a smile, prompting Chandra to make a grandiose display of generosity.

"Well, if you must—I suppose I could grace your passenger seat!"

"No thanks!"

What fun was it for two guys pushing middle age to ride together? Though maybe it could be fun, in its own way.

Amid the banter, Mu remarked with a laugh, "Anyway... Doesn't matter what we call it, 'Compass' or whatever. We'll be doing the same thing we've always done."

This time, everyone understood exactly what he meant.

Murrue nodded.

"True."

I might be staying on this ship mostly out of inertia, but I get what the Captain means. Fighting, so there won't be any more battles. It's a contradiction, but in the end, it's no different from what we've been doing all along.

From ZAFT, three pilots—Shinn, Lunamaria, and Agnes—are staying in Orb for training while awaiting the launch of their new ship. It seems likely that Compass's activities will be primarily ground-based...

Before his shift, Neumann swung by the recreation room. Even out in the hallway, he could hear Shinn and his friends talking.

"...So the commander, he's that famous Freedom pilot, right? Is he really that incredible?"

The one asking was Agnes Giebenrath, a pilot who'd joined Compass alongside Shinn and Lunamaria. They were all graduates of the same academy class.

Their voices carried clearly into the corridor.

"He's not just amazing," Shinn enthused. "It's like... he's larger than life. As a human being, I mean..."

He was so worked up that he couldn't find the right words.

Neumann stepped inside, heading to the drink dispenser for coffee. Spotting him, Shinn rushed over as if he'd found just the person he needed.

"Lieutenant Neumann! Could you help me explain to her how awesome Mr. Kira is?"

"Huh?"

"Lieutenant, you've been with Commander Yamato from the very beginning, right?" Lunamaria chimed in.

With Shinn and the other young pilots all gazing at him expectantly, Neumann felt a bit cornered, but eventually relented.

"Well... I guess you could say since the Helipolis escape."

Memories flooded back, the very first time he'd seen Kira.

"At first, he was just a student, kinda spaced out... seemed so vulnerable."

Yet now, people called him the greatest pilot in the world, recognized everywhere by the name "the Freedom pilot."

"He got pulled into fighting and had no choice but to pilot the Strike. But right from the start, he was on another level, he was rewriting the mobile suit's operating system in the middle of battle."

"Wait, what?!" Shinn's eyes practically popped out.

"Yeah, see, the Earth Alliance OS back then was garbage. Completely unusable. Kira was an engineering student, so right there on the spot--"

"He rewrote the OS?"

"Right, while fighting."

"That's insane!"

Shinn was practically glowing with admiration. Seeing that youthful awe made Neumann feel unexpectedly warm inside. Agnes, apparently intrigued, spoke up.

"Hmm... So Commander Yamato is going out with Lacus Clyne, right?"

For some reason, Lunamaria shot Agnes a sharp look, but Neumann continued as if he hadn't noticed.

"Yeah, the two of them actually met on this very ship. Kira 'brought her aboard,' you might say, the pink princess..."

"No way! Really?"

Lunamaria sounded stunned.

"He found a ZAFT escape pod and brought her back on board... then he snuck her out later, returning her to ZAFT. Well, it's kind of a long story..."

That “long story” included using Lacus as a hostage when they were cornered, which Kira deeply resented. He ended up releasing her without permission... At the time, Neumann remembered thinking Kira had done something reckless, but in retrospect, maybe it was for the best.

Suddenly, Agnes clapped her hands with a giddy squeal.

“So their romance started right here, huh? I want details!”

But Lunamaria grabbed Agnes by the arm and dragged her off. In a low voice, she demanded, “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Excuse me? Why should I have to explain myself to *you*?”

Agnes feigned ignorance. Lunamaria’s voice rose.

“Just don’t go stirring up any unnecessary drama!”

“You’re the one making a fuss over nothing!”

Neumann and Shinn watched, dumbfounded, as the two women argued.

“What’s going on?”

“Yeah... They’ve never really gotten along,” Shinn whispered.

Neither man wanted any part in their quarrel, so they huddled together, trying to make themselves as small as possible. Eventually, Agnes stormed out of the room, leaving Lunamaria sighing in her wake.

Neumann decided it was the perfect cue to slip away, coffee in hand, before he got roped into anything else.

Later at dinner, that Agnes girl came to talk to me again.

“Mind if I sit with you?”

She approached, carrying her tray. Chandra nearly choked on his food in surprise, but managed to nod. Agnes settled down across from them.

“I was hoping you’d tell me more stories about Commodore Yamato... I hope I’m not bothering you?”

“No... not really...”

“Oh, I’m so glad! You two fought alongside Commodore Yamato since the first war, didn’t you? That’s amazing!”

They were unaccustomed to such attention and praise. Chandra blushed and scratched his head, while Neumann felt equally flustered.

“Well, we were sort of caught in the middle...”

“Things just turned out that way, you know...”

But Agnes only beamed at them, her eyes shining with earnest admiration.

“I haven’t actually met the Commander in person yet, so I wanted to hear about him from the people who fought by his side. It’s not often you get to talk with real heroes of the last war!”

“Heh, ‘heroes’ might be a stretch.”

“Especially with a mug like his,” Chandra teased, jerking a thumb at Neumann.

“Don’t say that! You’re both so cool!”

No man can resist being flattered by a cute girl. As Chandra’s face reddened with pleasure, Neumann elbowed him.

“Don’t listen to him.”

Chandra gave a theatrical sigh. “Crazy to think Kira’s a commodore now.”

It still felt unreal to them. The Kira they knew didn't quite fit that lofty rank—and probably nobody was more bewildered by it than Kira himself.

Neumann, hoping to put Agnes at ease, said gently, "You don't have to worry too much. Kira's a gentle guy... let's just say he's naturally sweet?"

"Totally. Once he's out of the cockpit, he's just an ordinary kid," Chandra agreed.

"No way!" Agnes exclaimed, as though she couldn't believe her ears.

"Believe me. Frankly, sometimes he's so nice it's a bit concerning. It's not hard to imagine him getting swept off his feet by a pretty girl."

"Ohhh," both men said, nodding in unison as though recalling some memory. Agnes cocked her head curiously.

"He must have been popular with the ladies, right? Strong and kind, that's quite the combination."

"Well, there was something... complicated, anyway," Neumann murmured, lowering his voice.

"That one girl sure had her eye on him: Flay Allster," Chandra muttered conspiratorially, prompting Agnes to frown.

"Flay Allster... She was Commander Yamato's girlfriend?"

"Well... I'm not sure you'd call it dating exactly."

"Kind of a... stolen relationship," Chandra commented.

"Hey, do *not* go there," Neumann chided, though not very forcefully.

"But I'm not wrong, am I? She was Sai's girlfriend, right? And I heard she made all the moves on Kira."

It was the sort of juicy gossip that had once fueled the entire ship's rumor mill, especially since Kira hardly acted like the leading man in a love triangle. Even the captain had been watching.

"God, if a beautiful girl like that came onto me, I'd--"

"Hey, this has nothing to do with you!"

"Fine."

Chandra cut off his useless daydreaming with a scowl. Flay Allster had been a striking redhead—beautiful, if also somewhat arrogant, the daughter of a politician in the Atlantic Federation. Her presence lit up any room.

"You had to feel sorry for her, though," Chandra said softly. "Her father died right in front of her... and then she..."

Neumann's chest tightened at the memory.

"Wait... she passed away?" Agnes asked, sounding rattled.

"She was killed in the Battle of Jachin Due. Her escape pod got blown apart..."

In reality, she should never have been anywhere near a battlefield. But fate cast her into war, and she lost her life in a cruel twist.

"Must've hit Kira hard... happening right in front of him."

"Yeah. I bet it did..."

Sensing the dark mood settling over them, Neumann cleared his throat and faced Agnes again.

"Sorry. That turned grim."

"No... it was valuable, if sad, to learn about."

Agnes bowed her head politely and stood, picking up her tray.

"I'm determined to do my best and get along with everyone on the Yamato team!"

Her bright voice seemed to dispel the lingering shadows. Chandra and Neumann watched her leave with a faint smile.

"She's a good kid," Chandra remarked.

"Yeah," Neumann agreed.

Whenever I think of Kira, the image of the Freedom in Alaska always flashes before my eyes. Abandoned by our own allies, we were sure we were doomed—then suddenly, there it was, descending like salvation. As long as I carry that memory, I'll never lose faith in Kira. I'm glad he's got enthusiastic team members by his side now. I really hope it all goes well.

Today Athrun and Meyrin dropped by Orb to share the latest intel from Terminal...

"So, this Captain Michael is now the leader of Blue Cosmos?"

Mu's voice carried a note of wariness, and Athrun nodded.

"Yes. We believe his unit carried out that attack on Doma."

They were back on the Archangel's bridge. Athrun and Meyrin had arrived to deliver important information, and everyone listened carefully to their report. A PLANT ground facility had been ambushed recently, sustaining heavy damage. Blue Cosmos had claimed responsibility afterward, but no one knew how they'd pulled it off.

"They didn't even have a carrier ship. A squad just appeared out of nowhere," Murrue said with a troubled expression. Meyrin sighed.

"Exactly. Because they launched no apparent carrier, we had no forewarning at all..."

"Wow... that's rough on their own forces," Neumann muttered.

No carrier meant mobile suits and other units had to travel long distances on their own, without rest or any real chance of returning safely. It was practically a suicide mission, chewing up their own men.

Neumann couldn't help recalling Alaska.

Back then, their own command had lured ZAFT into a trap, planning to destroy everyone, ally or foe. They never told the Archangel or any other unit what was coming. Their plan was simply to sacrifice them as bait.

Blue Cosmos was no different. To treat even your own people as disposable tools, and to rationalize that as part of war, was exactly why fighting had to be stopped.

"We're working as fast as we can to locate Michael's base of operations..." Athrun said, his voice laced with frustration.

"Counting on you," Mu replied, giving him a supportive pat on the shoulder.

"All right, well, thank you for the update," Murrue said, turning back to the bridge.

Neumann, having finished his shift, stepped into the elevator alongside Athrun, Meyrin, and Mu.

Inside the elevator, Athrun spoke up.

"Oh, by the way, Cagalli wants you to come over for dinner sometime, Murrue."

"Hmm? You two scheming something?" Mu teased.

Athrun shook his head.

"Nah, she said you two haven't been able to talk much lately. Probably just wants some quality girl time?"

"That sounds lovely," Murrue responded with surprising eagerness.

"Eh?" Mu glanced her way in puzzlement.

Murrue flashed him a knowing grin before turning back to Athrun.

"Oh! So that's what you meant."

Mu, too, suddenly looked as though he'd caught on, smirking slyly.

"What's going on?" Athrun asked, more confused than ever. Meyrin nearly burst out laughing.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," she giggled, barely restraining herself.

Athrun turned to Neumann with a silent plea for clarification, but Neumann was just as clueless, so they could only exchange equally baffled looks. By then, the elevator doors had opened.

As they walked down the corridor, Athrun asked, "So... how's Shinn doing? Is he... getting along with Kira?"

Neumann realized Athrun was worried about his former subordinate's tendency to get hotheaded. Murrue gave him a reassuring nod.

"They're fine."

"Shinn practically worships 'Mr. Kira' these days," Mu added with a laugh.

"Mr. Kira?" Athrun echoed incredulously.

"Yeah, he seems to really look up to him," Murrue said.

"Right?" Neumann agreed, sharing a glance with her.

"I... see." Athrun stood there blinking, seeming oddly unsettled.

"Something wrong?"

"No, I just... I'm relieved he's not causing trouble," Athrun answered hurriedly, but he still had that puzzled expression.

"Don't worry about it," Mu assured him. "They're all good kids, eager to learn and straightforward."

"Yeah, they're wonderful," Murrue added.

"Right... Right," Athrun said, but the slight cloud in his eyes never lifted. From Neumann's perspective, Shinn seemed perfectly friendly and straightforward.

Perhaps he'd been a different person under Athrun's command.

Watching Athrun and Meyrin walk away, Mu tilted his head.

"Think I said something wrong?"

"Beats me," Murrue replied.

Athrun can be quite caring. Yet as he left, his shoulders looked a bit forlorn. Why, I wonder...

Today Shinn told me some stories from his days on the Minerva. Turns out there really are all kinds of captains and executive officers...

“Really, Arthur... uh, I mean, XO Trine was so scatterbrained. I don’t want to call him clueless, but he kinda was...”

They were in the recreation room again after training. Shinn grabbed a drink while recounting stories from the Minerva.

Meyrin peeked in from the doorway, calling out to him, “Hey, Shinn, you haven’t seen my sister, have you?”

Clearly, the sisters had plans of some sort while both were stationed in Orb.

“She should be here soon,” Shinn said, then waved her over. “Actually, you’re just in time, Meyrin. We were talking about Arthur... you know, XO Trine. He was totally scatterbrained, right?”

“No doubt about it,” Meyrin answered immediately, without the slightest hesitation.

“That certain?” Neumann asked warily, only half listening.

Meyrin stepped fully into the room, apparently eager to join in.

“Oh, absolutely! If Captain Gladys hadn’t been so on top of everything, the Minerva would have gone under. The minute it was just Arthur in command? *Boom—sunk!*”

“Wow, that bad?” Neumann said, skeptical but somewhat intrigued. An executive officer was second in command; in the event the captain went down, the entire ship would be in their hands. Having someone “unquestionably scatterbrained” in that position sounded terrifying.

Yet Meyrin, who’d served on the Minerva’s bridge, insisted, “During battles, whenever missiles came at us, he’d be like, ‘Eeek!’ or ‘Waaah!’”

“I used to think, ‘Get it together, Arthur!’ all the time,” Shinn agreed.

“Captain Gladys shot him a death glare practically every five minutes,” Meyrin added. “I’m sure it was tough on her.”

Neumann was overwhelmed by the vivid picture they painted.

“I, uh... yeah, that does sound rough.”

“Rough” was probably an understatement. Neumann felt a belated wave of sympathy for the Minerva’s captain.

“But you know,” Meyrin went on with a laugh, “it wasn’t all bad. Sometimes, we were on the brink of total disaster, and hearing Arthur freak out like, ‘Eeek!’ would make us laugh. It broke the tension. Captain Gladys was always the calm, dependable one, but she could make us anxious with how serious she was. Arthur helped lighten the mood.”

Shinn nodded.

“He was... weirdly comforting, I guess.”

“Comforting.” It was certainly one way to describe an executive officer. Yet somehow, Neumann could see the logic in it, a strange but possibly perfect foil to a strict captain.

“Oh, but now Arthur’s taken in Captain Gladys’s child, he’s raising them,” Meyrin pointed out, and Shinn joined in.

“That’s right. I mean, he is a good guy.”

They both called him simply “Arthur,” not even bothering with rank, yet it was plainly affectionate. Someone that loved by his subordinates must have had a good heart, no matter how scatterbrained. For all their differences, he and Captain Gladys must have made a balanced pair.

Recalling his own experiences, Neumann said, “We had the opposite situation. Our executive officer, Natarle Badgiruel, was the serious, disciplined type, an excellent officer, but completely by the book.”

Natarle Badgiruel. Like Neumann himself, she’d originally been assigned to the brand-new Archangel. The ZAFT attack at Helipolis had decimated the crew, forcing Murrue to become captain and Natarle her second-in-command, whether they were ready for it or not. Neumann’s own appointment to chief helmsman was one more outcome of that.

Whenever he thought about Natarle, though, he grew a little wistful. They’d gone their separate ways, and in the end, she was lost. Still, he wanted to believe she’d done what she felt was right.

“Ah, so Captain Ramius must be the soft one,” Shinn inferred.

“No!” Neumann countered, a bit too fervently. “That’s only because you’ve never seen her in action. She’s insane in battle, I’m telling you!”

“W-whoa. Easy, Lieutenant,” Shinn said, startled by Neumann’s outburst. “You don’t need to paint her so demonic...”

“Believe me,” Neumann insisted. “Back when XO Badgiruel was still aboard, she’d rein in the Captain’s wild tactics. But after she left, guess who’s stuck cleaning up the mess?”

In everyday life, Murrue seemed gentle and feminine. But once a battle started, she could be bolder and more unpredictable than any hardened commander Neumann had met. And without that unpredictability, they’d likely never have survived. Still...

“She’s always giving us these crazy, impossible maneuvers, her orders can be so vague! And so fearless! I’ve lost count of how many times I was sure we were done for...”

Shinn’s eyes flicked over Neumann’s shoulder, turning panicked.

“Uh, Lieutenant Neumann... behind you...”

But Neumann was too far gone, caught up in venting his frustrations.

“I’d kill for an executive officer who’s ‘comforting.’ Actually, how did I end up acting like one myself? It’s not in my job description—”

A polite cough interrupted him. Shinn and Meyrin were staring over Neumann’s shoulder, frozen stiff. Sensing danger at last, Neumann spun around to see Murrue standing by the rec room door.

“Sorry for all the trouble, with my vague orders.”

She wore a polite little smile, though her eyes gleamed with razor-sharp edge.
“Ca-captain Ramius!”

Neumann shot up so fast he nearly knocked over his chair and his cup, stammering an awkward salute. It did nothing to lessen the tension.

Murrue’s voice was disarmingly calm.

“I’ll keep your request for a ‘comforting XO’ in mind.”

“N-no... That’s not... I mean—”

“Please, carry on.”

She turned on her heel and left, leaving Neumann, Shinn, and Meyrin to collapse like puppets with cut strings. Neumann sank into a chair, burying his face in his hands.

“I’m doomed...”

“I’m sorry, sir... That was terrifying,” Shinn whimpered, looking near tears even though it had nothing to do with him. In the oppressive silence, Meyrin tried her best to sound encouraging.

“Hang in there, Lieutenant Neumann...!”

Moral of the story: Always check who’s behind you before complaining about your superiors.

The Compass uniforms have arrived. Miriallia came over from the government offices to do some publicity shots.

A rare crowd had gathered around the pier where the Archangel was moored. Propping a camera on a tripod, Miriallia raised her voice, trying to get the assembled crew members into place.

“Okay, almost done—just this group photo! Himeko, scoot a little closer to the Captain! And, uh, Captain Fraga, could you not make that weird face?”

“Gotcha, Director! Make sure you snap me looking handsome!”

Mu called back, prompting Chandra to echo, “Me too, me too!” and the entire group burst out laughing.

“All right, Murdock, you too, get in the shot! Okay, everyone, big smiles!”

Satisfied at last with the arrangement, Miriallia clicked the shutter several times.

“Great! Thanks for your cooperation!”

Once upon a time, she’d traveled the world as a bona fide journalist, camera in hand. Compared to negotiating peace and war coverage, wrangling this eccentric bunch to pose for a photo was child’s play. Now finished with the shoot, she packed away her gear. Murrue stepped over and thanked her.

“Appreciate it today, Miriallia.”

“Oh, no problem, Captain. Thanks for having me!”

“I saw that piece on public TV the other day. That was yours, right?”

“Yes! How’d you like it?”

Off to the side, Shinn watched Miriallia chat easily with Murrue and Mu. He nudged Neumann.

"She seems really chummy with them."

"Sure. Milly was part of our crew back in the day. Now she works for the Orb government."

"Ah... so that explains it," Lunamaria murmured, taking another curious look at Miriallia.

"She's apparently quite good at what she does," Neumann said with a certain pride, as if bragging about an old friend. Not only had Miriallia worked as a journalist, she'd also been part of Terminal, giving her valuable insight into world affairs. Now she served as both a PR specialist and one of Cagalli's advisers. It made Neumann happy, seeing how far an old fellow bridge crewmate had come.

A short distance away, Murrue and Miriallia were discussing the state of Compass.

"Well, at least we've finally gotten things moving," Murrue said.

"Right. Although our representative still isn't giving up on getting Eurasia to join. Apparently she's ready to try anything," Miriallia replied.

Mu made a wry face.

"I doubt that's gonna happen. With everything that's gone on in the past and the aftermath of the 'Foundation Shock,' Eurasia has its hands full."

Indeed, Eurasia was consumed by the near-constant need to quell, or rather, forcibly suppress, various small nations attempting to secede.

"Honestly, she's talking about going there herself, trying to charm them face-to-face," Miriallia said with an exasperated sigh. Shinn cut in before he could stop himself.

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"Well... I wouldn't say 'dangerous,' exactly..." Murrue attempted a mild rebuttal, though she couldn't declare it entirely safe. Relations between Orb, widely seen as pro-Coordinator, and Eurasia were never exactly cordial.

Yet Miriallia laughed it off.

"She'd never back down just because it's dangerous."

Her tone suggested she was half-begging someone to intervene, but beneath it all, she clearly felt a deep fondness for Cagalli.

Shinn must have sensed it too, because he fell silent, wearing a pensive look. Lunamaria glanced at him, then turned a smile on Miriallia.

"You can tell she's taking Compass very seriously."

Shinn, still looking thoughtful, nodded.

"Yeah..."

Miriallia gave them a sunny grin.

"Of course! You all keep up the good work, too!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Lunamaria answered cheerily, and Shinn straightened his back with a resolute nod.

Once the interview wrapped, Miriallia and her team began packing up.

"Hey, Sagara, there's still a reflector board by the hatch!"

"Got it, I'll grab it!"

"Thanks!"

While her staff bustled to and fro, Miriallia carried some equipment over to the van.

"Need a hand with that?" Agnes offered.

"Oh, no, we're just about done..."

Miriallia politely declined, but Agnes picked up a remaining bag and set it in the backseat.

"I heard you were classmates with Commander Yamato, right?"

"Uh—yes, that's true."

Miriallia nodded, finally taking a closer look at the girl. Agnes gave her a sweet smile.

"How wonderful! I'd love to hear more. Maybe we could have lunch or tea sometime? When's your next day off? I don't have many friends here in Orb, and I'd really like to see some nice spots around town!"

"Well, I—uh..."

Pressured by Agnes's friendly enthusiasm, Miriallia could only nod uncertainly.

"Great!"

Agnes clapped her hands together gleefully.

"Oh—maybe you have old photos of everyone from back in the day?"

Miriallia, who had started to get caught up in the girl's momentum, momentarily stiffened with caution.

"Hmm, not sure about that. All my old data got erased anyway."

Her voice turned pointedly uninterested as she shut the car door and waited for her staff to retrieve the rest of their things. Agnes, however, showed no sign of letting up.

"Aw, come on. If you dig around, I'm sure you'll find something! I could help—"

Agnes was pressing for more, but that was when Lunamaria rushed over, looking flustered.

"Agnes! What are you up to?"

"Nothing! I'm just trying to make friends with Miriallia. Right?"

Agnes tossed Miriallia a smile, but Lunamaria cut in sharply, "Enough already!" and hauled her away by force.

"Hey! Why are you getting in my way!?"

"Because I know exactly what you're—!"

They trailed off into low-voiced bickering as they walked away, leaving Miriallia to watch them go with an exasperated look. She let out a resigned sigh.

"Seems there are more and more of those types lately..."

That was when Neumann approached, intending to say his goodbyes.

"Hey, thanks for your hard work. Heading out already?"

"Yes, we're all packed."

"Tell Sai I said hi."

Miriallia glanced briefly toward Agnes and Lunamaria, then turned back to Neumann.

"That girl's new, isn't she?"

“Agnes, you mean? She’s a good kid, *very* earnest,” Neumann replied, genuinely oblivious.

Miriallia responded with a deep sigh.

“Men... so clueless sometimes...”

“Huh? Sorry, what?”

She’d mumbled under her breath, and Neumann didn’t quite catch it, but she waved him off dismissively.

“Never mind.”

With that, she climbed into the car alongside her returning staff and drove off.

Miriallia has really grown into a capable professional. I'd be lying if I said it doesn't feel a bit lonely, seeing her so different from before. Still, putting on this new uniform gives me a real sense of belonging to Compass.



Attended the launch ceremony for ZAPT's new long-range battleship, the Millennium. Once she sets sail, this vessel is slated to become the home base for Commander Yamato's Compass unit...

Once Ezaria Joule had finished her remarks, the guests invited to the launch ceremony began to mingle. Some struck up conversations, while others helped themselves to the refreshments laid out on a nearby table, and the hall soon filled with lively chatter. Neumann, balancing a plate in one hand, drifted through the crowd until he spotted Shinn and the others.

At some point, Shinn had piled food high on his plate and was now devouring it with single-minded focus.

“Whoa, this is so good! Luna, you’ve got to try this!”

“Ugh, don’t gorge yourself like that. It’s embarrassing...”

Despite Lunamaria’s scolding, there was something refreshing about Shinn’s obvious appetite. Agnes, nibbling on an hors d’oeuvre, nodded approvingly.

“This catering’s not half-bad, is it?”

“Huh.”

Intrigued, Lunamaria grabbed one of the spring-roll-looking bites off Shinn’s plate and popped it into her mouth.

“Oh wow, that’s delicious!”

“Right?!”

Delighted, Shinn and Lunamaria exchanged a look that was almost endearing. Neumann, tempted by their reaction, was about to head for the buffet when he saw Kira making his way through the crowd, accompanied by Lacus, Cagalli, and Hilda Haken.

Everyone hurriedly set down plates and tried to salute, though it wasn't exactly graceful.

Cagalli returned their salute with a friendly nod.

"Thanks for being here. Relax—no need for formalities."

"How's training going, Shinn? All of you?" Kira asked with a warm smile. Shinn's face lit up just from seeing him.

"Really well, Commander!"

"Same here! I can't wait to serve under you," Agnes added crisply, though Lunamaria sent her a fleeting, dubious glance.

Lacus stepped forward with her usual gentle grace and bowed her head slightly.

"It's a pleasure to meet all of you. I look forward to working together."

"Madam President, right back at you!"

"Thank you, Madam!" Shinn and Lunamaria both chimed in.

Lacus gave them a slightly embarrassed smile.

"Please, just call me Lacus... Oh, goodness!"

Her gaze drifted to the plates in their hands, and she looked mildly flustered.

Seeing Kira and Lacus unchanged made Neumann feel somehow relieved.

They had seemed overwhelmed lately with negotiations and arrangements for establishing the organization, Lacus as President and Kira as head of the operational forces.

At the same time, he had felt they were becoming distant figures, unlike when everyone had fought side by side as equals. But seeing them now, they carried the same gentle, relaxed air as before.

Hilda approached her future colleagues with her characteristic easy manner.

"Hey, kiddos. How's life in Orb treating you?"

"Lieutenant Haken!"

"Good to see you!"

Shinn and the others greeted her.

Seeming to take a liking to Shinn, Hilda rested her elbow on his shoulder and said regretfully, "Orb must be nice. Beautiful beaches, great food... I kinda wish I'd been sent, too."

"Ah... yeah..."

Shinn seemed thrown by her sudden chumminess. Hilda eyed the plate in his hand.

"What're you eating? Maybe I'll get some too."

"Yes! This is incredibly delicious!"

When Shinn nodded vigorously, Lacus turned and smiled brightly.

"Oh... thank you."

As Shinn looked confused, Kira explained, "That dish you're eating, Lacus made it herself."

It turned out that the food they'd all been raving about came straight from her.

Shinn's eyes popped wide.

"Seriously?!"

Agnes let out a startled, "No way!"

Hilda's own eyes gleamed.

"Oh, not all of the food here," Lacus said modestly. "I just ended up making too much at home, so I brought some along..."

Kira and Lacus exchanged a soft laugh, radiating a pleasantly laid-back vibe.

"Wait, L-Lady Lacus herself prepared... these...?"

Hilda was practically trembling in awe, before jolting back to her senses.

"This is no time for talk! I need to get some!"

She dashed off toward the buffet table, nearly plowing through the crowd with the unstoppable force of a DOM Trooper in battle. She had a rather fanatical devotion to Lacus.

Cagalli, having overheard, gave Kira and Lacus an incredulous look, pursing her lips.

"Don't tell me you've been stress-cooking again? Kira, are you actually listening to her when she needs to talk?"

She gave Kira's side a poke, her casual manner making Shinn bristle.

"Hey, that's no way to address the Commander—!"

"Oh, it's fine," Kira cut in, smiling. "Cagalli's my sister."

Shinn froze, eyes wide. "Si... sis... ter...?!"

"Hey, I'm the older one!" Cagalli jumped in to set the record straight.

"There we go again," Kira mumbled.

"It really doesn't matter..."

"It matters! I clearly look—!"

As usual, they fell into their typical sibling bickering. Lacus couldn't help an amused laugh, turning to address Shinn and the others.

"They're twins, actually."

"Twins?! But how—?"

"Wait, that doesn't make any sense..."

Lunamaria and Agnes glanced at each other. Indeed, the detail that Kira was a Coordinator while Cagalli was the heir to Orb's leadership made "twin" an oversimplification, to say the least.

"I see..." Shinn, momentarily stunned, gave the two a long look. When his eyes met Cagalli's, he snapped to attention with a salute.

"S—sorry, Representative!"

"The heck? No need for that all of a sudden," Cagalli said, blinking in surprise. Lacus regarded them fondly.

"Well then, if you'd like, why don't we head over to tour the Millennium?"

Outside in the dock, a sleek, gray-toned battleship sat moored. Other guests wandered around, craning their necks to admire the brand-new vessel. Off to one side, Murrue and Mu spoke with the ship's captain while a blond officer rattled off the ship's specs at lightning speed.

"This is an LHM-BBOBS 'Super-Minerva-Class' mobile suit planetary assault ship, roughly 430 meters in length, 400 meters in width, with a standard displacement of 148,792 tons under 1G water conditions—"

“Uh-huh, thanks, Lieutenant Heinlein. We get the picture...” Mu said, struggling not to look overwhelmed. Murrue smoothly pivoted, addressing the Millennium’s captain.

“Captain Konoe, how many crew will you carry? How far along is your automation?”

Meanwhile, Neumann stood a short distance away, gazing up at the spotless hull of the freshly built warship with genuine admiration. A young officer marched over, snapped to attention, and saluted crisply.

“Excuse me! Are you Lieutenant Neumann?”

“I, uh... yes, that’s me...”

His enthusiasm was so intense that Neumann actually took a step back.

“I’m Marcus Magdanel, the Millennium’s helmsman. It’s an honor to meet you!”

“Oh—uh, nice to meet you, too?”

“I’ve heard all about you. To think we’ll be fighting together under Compass—it’s my greatest privilege!”

“R-right... Wait, what?”

Neumann couldn’t hide his confusion at the flushed young man’s apparent hero-worship. Rumors? The greatest privilege? He had no idea what he meant. Could Marcus have mistaken him for someone else?

Neumann glanced behind him, but Marcus was clearly staring at him, and him alone, with reverent awe.

“I’ve been dying to ask you something, Lieutenant Neumann, if you don’t mind...”

“Er... me?”

“Absolutely! There’s no other helmsman on Earth who’s pulled off a 1G barrel roll in the Archangel! It’s a bona fide miracle maneuver!”

“Oh...” Neumann felt both relieved that he understood, and horrified to be reminded of that particular move.

“So that’s what this was about...”

Before he could respond, they were interrupted. It was that same blond officer who’d been listing off specs, Heinlein, apparently.

“Lieutenant Neumann, I’ve also reviewed the Archangel’s combat data. Barrel rolls in atmospheric conditions aren’t typically included in a space warship’s tactical repertoire. Strictly speaking, the maneuver you performed wasn’t a standard barrel roll, but if you calculate the angular velocity and thrust needed to form a spiral—”

He reeled off a long series of calculations at rapid speed. Marcus tried to speak up.

“Lieutenant Heinlein... I was hoping to talk to Lieutenant Neumann—”

“Silence, you!” Heinlein snapped. “Shut your mouth!”

Marcus, the one who’d started the conversation, shrank back sheepishly.

“I’ve calculated that there’s a more than 390% chance of catastrophic turbulence leading to unrecoverable stall. How on Earth did you manage to overcome that risk?”

Heinlein pushed up his monocular lens and fixed Neumann with a near-blinding intensity. Neumann, flustered, could only blurt out a pathetically vague answer:

“Uh, well... with a lot of guts?”

Silence fell over them like a heavy curtain. Neumann wanted to vanish into the far reaches of space. Why hadn't he left the service after Jachin Due, and just become a civilian? Why, oh why, had he stayed?!

Suddenly, Heinlein burst into crazed laughter.

“Guts! ‘Guts,’ you say... Fascinating! Guts—of course!”

He repeated the word to himself over and over, pacing in a bizarrely triumphant way. Neumann and Marcus exchanged uneasy looks.

Is he... all right?

With a disturbingly manic grin, Heinlein turned to Marcus.

“Lieutenant Magdanel! We'll have to revise the Millennium's tactical simulations. I'm going to recommend to the Captain that we incorporate a formula for ‘helmsman guts’ in atmospheric battle maneuvers. From now on, all helmsmen must master it. Anyone who can't will be kicked off the Millennium!”

That declaration made, he bounded away toward the ship. Neumann stood frozen in place, pale as a sheet, gripped by the feeling that his offhand remark had triggered some kind of disaster.

Marcus, close to tears, clung to Neumann.

“L-Lieutenant Neumann... please teach me your secrets for the barrel roll!”

Despite a few mishaps, like XO Arthur Trine dropping the ceremonial champagne, the ceremony ended more or less without incident. Yet, for that ship, I can't help thinking a “therapeutic” executive officer is an absolute must...

We've arranged a joint operation with the Foundation, and set sail tomorrow. Could this be our chance to finally catch Captain Michael? If it works, maybe Blue Cosmos will quiet down for a while...

On the Archangel's bridge, Neumann and Chandra were wrapping up their pre-departure checks.

“All done! How about you?”

“Sensors are good, everything checks out... Whew.”

Chandra leaned back in his seat to stretch. Neumann shrugged his shoulders to loosen them up.

“That's it till tomorrow's launch. What's this Foundation place going to be like, anyway?”

Formerly a small nation in southern Eurasia, the Foundation was rumored to be secretive. If this was their best chance at Michael, it still felt precarious heading into unknown territory.

Chandra, however, appeared unconcerned.

"Man... that *Millennium* was something else."

He sounded downright envious. The new battleship must have made quite the impression.

"Ever since we got back, you've been going on about that ship. You realize a newer ship means more checklists, right?"

"Don't be such a buzzkill. Don't you ever think, 'I'd like to pilot the Millennium someday?'"

"Mm... well, it was a fine ship, but..."

"Exactly!"

Chandra leaned forward eagerly. Neumann, sounding a bit disinterested, replied,

"But the Archangel's a good ship, too."

"Huh."

Chandra hopped down from the operator's seat and clapped Neumann on the shoulder with a knowing grin.

"Ah, I see. So for sailors, your first ship is like your first love, you never get over it, right?"

"What? Don't be ridiculous—"

"Face it, you're in love! 'My sweet Archangel!' That how it is?"

"Idiot! It's not like that at all! I nearly quit this ship after Jachin Due, remember?"

Neumann bristled, but Chandra just kept elbowing him teasingly.

"Aw, no need to be shy—"

Suddenly, a muscular arm wrapped around them both from behind.

"Now, now. Love whoever you want, man, woman, or ship."

It was Mu, apparently having slipped onto the bridge unnoticed.

"Knock it off, Captain Fraga!" Neumann sputtered, face going red. Mu just smirked.

"Tomorrow, we're counting on you again, our miraculous helmsman."

"You... you heard that?!"

Neumann paled. Chandra leaned in with renewed interest.

"Wait, what? What'd I miss?"

"Oh, about the Millennium's helmsman—"

"Stop!" Neumann insisted.

"What's the big deal? It's cute how he practically worships you..."

"Huh? He worships *this* guy? Seriously?"

Neumann scowled at Mu and Chandra, who were clearly enjoying themselves.

"It's silly! Frankly, I wish I'd never done that barrel roll in the first place."

"So true," Chandra agreed.

Neumann nodded. The only reason they'd pulled that stunt was because they had no other way to break through an enemy attack, part of Murrue's near-

hopeless plan. To be praised for a move borne of desperation didn't exactly thrill him.

Mu joked in a lighthearted tone, "But you never know what'll happen in battle. Might need more death-defying stunts in the future."

"Ugh... I'd really rather not..."

"I'm serious! If it comes down to it, we're counting on that miracle helmsman skill of yours, Lieutenant."

He gave Neumann a hearty slap on the back and walked off. Chandra, wearing a half-sympathetic, half-teasing grin, patted Neumann's shoulder.

"Guess we're all relying on you now."

Neumann let out a long sigh. *Would they stop tossing this responsibility around like it's nothing?*

I really did think about leaving the ship after Jachin Due. But everyone urged me to stay, and somehow, I drifted along with them. Even so, I can't deny I've grown attached to this ship. Or more accurately, to the crew I've fought alongside. The trust I feel, like that moment in Alaska, when Kira showed up alone, or those times the Captain refused to give up, has never changed. Maybe they trust me just as much. And that's why I don't regret staying. Not anymore.

Dawn was painting the sky in layers of deep navy at the zenith and pale green near the horizon. The sea lay calm, offering perfect conditions for departure. On the bridge, the launch sequence progressed smoothly.

Settling into his usual spot at the helm, Neumann let his mind wander.

"It'd be perfect weather for a drive along the coastal highway."

Then he shook it off.

He could do that after they got back.

The final check was done, and they received clearance from Onogoro Island's harbor control.

"Archangel, you're cleared for departure... Have a safe journey."

The transmission crackled through the speakers. Murrue lifted her head and gave a decisive command.

"Archangel, launch! Our destination is the Foundation capital, Ishtaria!"

Neumann eased back on the control stick. The engines roared to life, and the Archangel glided out of the harbor, heading for the open sea. Rays of the newly risen sun bathed its white hull in a dazzling gold.

None of them yet knew what awaited them... beyond that gleaming horizon.