



小説 機動戦士

ガンダムSEED FREEDOM

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM SEED FREEDOM

上

Liu Goto

Original Work by Hajime Yatate & Yoshiyuki Tomino

Illustrations by Tomofumi Ogasawara

Zeonic|Scanlations

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

This book is a *fan translation*.

Support the official release if there ever is one.

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 (VOL.1)”
Released 2024.01.30

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 2024

Vol.1

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM SEED
GUNDAM *シード・フリーダム*
FREEDOM

Written by
Liu Goto

Original Work by Hajime Yatate & Yoshiyuki Tomino
Illustrations by Tomofumi Ogasawara

C.E. (Cosmic Era) -

In this era, two distinct classes of humanity exist: those genetically modified from birth, bestowing upon them exceptional physical and intellectual prowess (known as Coordinators), and those who come into the world as nature intended (known as Naturals). A profound ideological clash over their very essence has escalated into an armed conflict between the two sides.

In the thick of this tumult, a system called the Destiny Plan was proposed. This scheme envisions a world devoid of competition, where roles are unilaterally assigned to individuals. Yet, to safeguard the aspirations of a free future for humanity, the Destiny Plan meets resistance and is ultimately rejected amidst the chaos of war.

Although the war reached its end after exacting a heavy toll, the schism and animosity between the two factions continue to smolder in various corners of the world to this day.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue006
Chapter.1007
Chapter.2034
Chapter.3052
Afterword078

Prologue

In the warm, comforting darkness, the rhythmic *whoosh, whoosh* of an artificial heartbeat filled the air.

Tiny bubbles, glimmering silver, ascended towards the surface, making faint plops.

He was dreaming.

—*Don't hesitate...*

Someone was speaking to him.

—*If that's what you all truly desire...*

It was a voice from the past, tender and soft, smooth as dark chocolate, it irresistibly drew the listener in with its affectionate tone.

—*You were wished for, and so you came into being.*

—*The world longed for you.*

Yes... he was born because he was desired.

As he dreams, he smiles.

The entire world exists within his dreams.

The world belonged to him.

And he belonged to the world.

Chapter.01

Missiles screamed across the smoke-filled sky, trailing tails of fire. Thunderous explosions echoed as they slammed into buildings, reducing concrete and glass to pulverized rubble. Plumes of choking dust billowed upward, blackening the heavens. Mechanical steel feet stamped down inexorably through the haze and debris, crushing all in their path.

It was an invasion, abrupt and unheralded.

Sirens wailed over the thunderous roar of explosions as people scattered in panic, fleeing the burning metropolis.

This was the Aldrin Autonomous Region of the African Republic, a hub of the PLANTs economy. A city that had, until today, been a city of mundane, everyday life. Now, it was thrust into a whirlwind of destruction and chaos.

A group of Daggers, scattering beams and bullets, advanced; Windams darted across the sky, and behind them loomed an ominous, dark shadow. It appeared almost mountainous to the bewildered onlookers below it, a grim reaper shrouded in gleaming steel armor.

From its sinister cannon maws, it spewed forth thick beams of searing heat. Buildings struck by this fiery onslaught were instantly obliterated, the scorching gas incinerating everything in its wake.

In the midst of this hellish, burning city, people cry out in despair yet are frozen in place.

And then——

They saw it. From the heavens above, descending upon them, were white wings.

"This is the global peace monitoring agency COMPS. To all attacking units: cease combat immediately. I repeat——"

Kira's warning message echoed across smoldering ruins that minutes ago had been buildings, his voice booming from the external speakers of the descending Rising Freedom. The city below was a wasteland, battered by the merciless onslaught. The attackers were radical Blue Cosmos units. Despite ceasefire agreements, they had not disarmed and continued to engage in acts of destruction.

Scanning the enemy from his cockpit above, he gasped. Behind the Daggers and Windams, lumbering through the smoke and debris, was an ominous shadow, towering nearly thirty stories tall.

The Destroy.

The mammoth mechanized weapon was less a mobile suit than a moving fortress. Its hulking frame bristled with high-energy beam cannons and thermal plasma guns capable of obliterating everything in their path.

"Not one of these things again!" Kira muttered in a groan, flooded with the memories of the nightmarish threat those war machines posed. Each one was capable of razing entire cities to the ground alone.

The Destroy swiveled its mammoth turret toward Kira and his allies. With an eruption of blinding light, it unleashed a blistering torrent of energy. The allies veered wildly, narrowly evading the blast.

Jaw clenched, Kira wrenched the controls, sending the Freedom hurtling on an intercept course with the harbinger of death.

Shinn Asuka was also bubbling with rage.

"Why does Blue Cosmos keep repeating these atrocities?" he thought.

The city lay in ruins, engulfed in flames and smoke. Mobile suits of the attacking force were closing in on the panic-stricken people.

Shinn landed the Immortal Justice between them, shielding the civilians while returning fire with his rifle.

"Agnes! Cover me!" he yells, blasting two enemies through their heads and slicing down a third attacker.

"What are you talking about? My unit is specialized for close combat! You're the one supposed to cover!" Agnes retorted, clearly irritated.

Her Gyan Strom was engaged in a fierce battle with enemy units, while Lunamaria Hawke, in her Gelgoog Menace, seemed to be guiding civilians to safety.

Another flash of intense beams streaked overhead, and Shinn glanced up sharply.

—*Commander!*

Their commander, Kira, had tasked him with defending government facilities, while Lunamaria and another colleague, Agnes, were assigned to assist civilian evacuation and support the Aldrin Defense Forces.

It meant, once again, Kira was leading the charge alone, and they were all ordered to hold the rear.

Again.

But with enemy forces of this magnitude, even Kira couldn't handle it alone.

Freedom was now confronting the Destroy. The arm unit separated from it, beam blasts strafing wildly from its five fingers as they zip around. Freedom seemed to anticipate their trajectory, effortlessly dodging and unsheathing its beam saber. In a sparking flash, it slices through one of the arms.

The other arm dove at Freedom from above. Just as Shinn thought it was dangerous, a shield boomerang detached from Freedom, knocking it down.

In an instant, Kira closed the gap to the Destroy's massive frame.

An ominous glow builds within the Destroy's chest cannon.

But Freedom was faster, unleashing all its firepower, simultaneously obliterating Destroy's arsenal in a single barrage. The shield boomerang, like a coup de grâce, flew in, severing the head of Destroy.

The once seemingly invincible fortress-like unit tatters, then crumbled to the ground, spewing flames.

Shinn, tense with apprehension over support a moment ago, could only mutter dumbfounded, "Damn, no role for me to play..."

Realizing their disadvantage, the Blue Cosmos attack force began to retreat towards the old city district of Kanaji.

Then, a message came in from the Aldrin Defense Forces.

"This is Aldrin Defense Headquarters. Michel is behind this battle! Take control of Kanaj and capture Michel!"

Shinn gasped in disbelief.

"What was that?!"

—*Michel!? In Kanaj?*

Colonel Michel, rumored to lead the remnants of Blue Cosmos, was a formidable force, still in possession of weapons like the Destroy.

No one knew Michel's whereabouts, and now, if he was indeed in Kanaj, it was a rare opportunity.

The Aldrin Defense Forces, previously on the defensive, surged into Kanaj, pursuing the enemy.

But then—

Kira's voice echoed from above.

"I warn you. Stop your advance. Colonel Michel is not here!"

The Aldrin Defense Forces, crossing into the autonomous region, launching an attack on the Blue Cosmos forces. A GINN fired on a Dagger, its explosion engulfed nearby civilians. Missiles fired off brought down buildings throughout Kanaj.

"Further combat will only harm more civilians!"

Kira implored desperately.

But, the Aldrin Defense Forces continued their implacable advance, driven by vengeance to repeat the same acts just inflicted on their own city. Once peaceful streets set ablaze, innocent lives maimed and lost...

Kira muttered bitterly, "So, this is what happens when the tide turns."

A man's voice resurfaced in his memory.

—*But no one ever makes that choice. People forget, and repeat the same mistakes.*

"Damn it!"

As if shaking off the memory, Kira springs into action. He landed in front of the advancing mobile suit forces, severing their rifles and saber arms with his beam saber.



His movements were too fast for them to follow. Without hesitation, he fired his linear cannon, precisely hitting only the mobile suits weapons.

"Back off! They're Milan's enemy—"

A pilot's voice came from a damaged GINN, striking with his saber.

Who was Milan? A close friend, perhaps.

But avenging him on the enemy only begets more hatred.

"Why don't they understand!" Kira shouted, severing the legs of an approaching GINN, hurling the damaged unit to the ground.

He shielded himself from incoming beams, leapt up, and fired his linear cannon in rapid succession. The Aldrin Defense Forces' mobile suits fell, their heads, weapons, arms, or legs shot through.

Kira, as if driven by some force, kept slashing and shooting.

Finally, all attacks ceased.

Breathing heavily, Kira looked back.

What remained was a harrowing scene of destruction – buildings billowing smoke, the earth trampled, and a sprawl of fallen mobile suits.

Kira, overwhelmed by the carnage he and his kind had wrought, hung his head.

—How long must we continue this...?

In C.E. 74, the great war that had twice engulfed both Earth and the PLANTs finally came to an end.

The conflict was rooted in the rift between genetically modified humans—Coordinators—and their unaltered counterparts—Naturals. The Coordinators, with their enhanced abilities due to genetic modification, settled in space, establishing their domain as the PLANTs and declaring independence. Earth's nations, defending their narrow self-interests, refused to recognize this, igniting the war's devastating flames.

Though a temporary ceasefire brought brief respite, conflict soon flared anew, wreaking havoc on Earth and the PLANTs alike. In these chaotic times, Gilbert Durandal, the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the PLANTs, maneuvered in the shadows.

He proposed the "Destiny Plan," advocating for a society where people were classified and assigned roles based on their genetic capabilities. He attempted to apply this plan globally and threatened to annihilate those who resisted, aiming the Moon-based omnidirectional strategic cannon Requiem toward Earth itself.

Durandal's actions were not purely for personal gain. In his view, the Destiny Plan was the sole strategy to bring a permanent end to the seemingly endless history of warfare.

And for that end, he would readily sacrifice any number of lives.

Kira and his allies found Durandal's methods utterly reprehensible. They couldn't stand idly by and overlook what Durandal had taken from the

people thus far and what he intended to deprive them of with the Destiny Plan.

In a decisive battle, Kira thwarted Durandal, halting both the Requiem and the Destiny Plan.

With this, a semblance of peace appeared to return to the world.

But nothing was truly over.

People continued to harbor hatred, ceaselessly engaging in acts of violence against each other.

"Kira Yamato—General and four others, requesting permission to come aboard," Kira formally stated, saluting with some hesitation still evident in his unaccustomed role as General.

Shinn and the others, crisp in their movements, mirrored his salute. Murrue Ramius, standing before them, granted permission warmly, "Permission granted. Well done out there."

They had stopped aboard the Archangel for resupply and to file mission reports before returning to their mothership, the Millennium, still stationed in orbit.

Both ships were now integral to the global peace monitoring agency COMPS, which was established after the Second Alliance-PLANT War.

The PLANTs, Orb, and the Atlantic Federation established COMPS as an "active, non-state, non-genetically discriminatory enforcement organization for peacekeeping." Lacus Clyne was appointed as its first President, and Shinn and others voluntarily joined, technically on secondment from ZAFT. Similarly, the Archangel was seconded by the Orb forces.

COMPS, an agency that also undertakes rescue and reconstruction support, often saw Shinn and his team deployed against the destructive activities of Blue Cosmos. This terror group, constantly changing its leaders, still maintained a considerable force, abhorring Coordinators as a violation of natural order and seeking their eradication.

Small conflicts continue breaking out across the post-war world. There was a growing movement among small countries seeking independence from the weakened Eurasian Federation, scattering seeds of conflict globally.

Amidst this, COMPS, proposed and established by Orb, attracted significant attention.

Approaching with his usual affable manner, Mu La Flaga chimed in, "Yo. The machines check out fine on the whole. How're the new models treating you?"

"Very well," Lunamaria nodded, while Shinn added, "Good enough."

However, Shinn couldn't shake off the unease of piloting the Justice, a successor model to the one Athrun had piloted. It somehow didn't feel right. Lunamaria would probably say something like, "You're acting like a child" for thinking like that.

While heading to the bridge with Murrue and Mu, Kira asked, "What's the extent of the damage?"

"So far, we have 257 confirmed casualties, including 68 civilians... probably more to come," Murrue sighed, her expression somber.

Mu, looking equally troubled, added, "No mothership this time either. Just mobile suit squads in a surprise attack."

"It's Michael's network, isn't it?" Kira sighed.

"But his involvement was a feint to provoke a ZAFT border violation," Murrue clarified.

Shinn's shoulders sagged in frustration; Colonel Michael had eluded them again in Kanaj.

"He's cocksure we'll keep taking his bait if he dangles his name," Mu spat, "Same damned trick with Domma, Aaron, Reha time and again."

"I know..."

"Damn it, how long are they going to keep this up!?" Shinn exploded in anger. "Operations without any plans for return! Pilots and machines are expendable to them!"

The pattern of Blue Cosmos' attacks had remained the same recently. They struck without warning, targeting PLANT-related residential areas and facilities. By not moving their bases like motherships, it was harder to detect them, and they baited PLANT forces by making them believe Michael was there. If they could provoke a border violation, they could then blame PLANT for the fault.

But the attackers' forces seemed disposable, an utterly inhumane tactic.

Shinn's anger was unabated, and Agnes, standing next to him, seemed indifferent, inspecting her nails.

"And yet it continues..." Kira muttered softly.

Shinn turned on him hotly.

"That's why it's such a problem!"

Boarding the elevator, Mu sighed with a sense of futility. "It's a deep-rooted issue, really."

As the elevator ascended, Shinn felt a growing heaviness.

Naturals hating Coordinators, Coordinators hating Naturals.

The longer the battle continued, the more lives were lost, and the deeper the hatred grew.

When and how can this vicious cycle ever be broken?

"Are you aware of the losses inflicted on our own forces, President Lacus?" Hari Jagannath's angry voice resonated through the PLANT Supreme Council Chamber. "We were the ones subjected to a unilateral invasion by Blue Cosmos!"

"Commander Yamato's actions showed a callous lack of consideration for our soldiers' sentiments! Overly merciless!" he continued.

Lacus Clyne quietly weathered his indictment, her expression solemn. As current Defense Chairman, Jagannath had seemed suspicious of COMPS from the start - and not just the peacekeeping force, but the very concept of reconciliation and cooperation with Naturals.

In that sentiment, he was far from alone. In the aftermath of Blue Cosmos' savage attack on the Aldrin Autonomous Region, a swell of criticism had emerged from within ZAFT, questioning why COMPS - ostensibly representing the invaded party, the victimized Coordinators - would turn weapons against their own people when the culpability of the radical terrorists was clear.

Similar condemnations had erupted from the devastated city of Kanaj itself, decrying both COMPS and the PLANT leadership.

In response, Lacus, with a heavy heart, extended formal apologies and condolences. It seemed, increasingly, that such responses were a major part of the duties of the President of COMPS.

Everyone bore scars and pain from the previous war. Resentment and grief were still raw, ready to reopen and bleed at the slightest provocation.

While she understood these feelings, the fact remained that many people were tired of war. That was also the truth.

Supreme Council Chairman Walter de Lament interjected in a calm, resonant tone as Jagannath geared up for another salvo of accusations.

"However, isn't it thanks to COMPS' efforts that a border violation was prevented?" He let the rhetorical question hang for a moment. "What would have become of PLANT's position if, after razing Kanaj, it emerged Colonel Michael was never even present...?"

If that had happened, PLANT would have surely faced severe censure. It could have sparked another inter-state war, just as Blue Cosmos desired.

At this, Jagannath fell silent, glancing around at other councilors now nodding along to Lament's logic.

Lacus stood up and bowed deeply.

"Please accept my apologies, Defense Chairman Jagannath..."

Such an act of bowing meant little to her. Not when compared to the world sliding back into the mire of war.

Not compared to the pain Kira was feeling.

In the hall beneath the great whale stone sculpture, Lacus approached Chairman Lament.

"Please accept my apologies for causing you concern, Chairman," she said softly.

Lament, a genial elderly man, represents the post-war pacifistic sentiment chosen for his neutral stance. He smiled wryly, "Please, think nothing of it. But I must say, men like Jagannath feel compelled to react harshly. I hear the frustration within our military ranks is growing."

"Yes... As long as COMPS remains their target, it may curb violence, but..."

"But even that has its limits..." Lament finished her thought, his voice trailing off.

They walked on, the atmosphere leaden. The world hung in a delicate balance, seemingly at peace, yet they struggled to make this state permanent, limited in what they could do.

Lament sighed, "It's easy to forget the depth of hatred, yet it's our emotions that often guide us. The losses we have suffered were too great..."

"Yes..." Lacus's heart ached with the memory of the many losses endured, her mind briefly haunted by the poignant image of a girl, her doppelganger, singing with a hauntingly familiar voice.

"So, was there any truth to Michael hiding in Kanaj?" Lament's question sliced through her reverie, sharp and unexpected.

Lacus sadly shook her head, and she saw his expression darken with concern. "I feared as much. He has likely gone to ground in Eurasia's military buffer zone."

"That seems likely..."

"It's a dilemma; even knowing where he might be, our hands are tied."

"Quite true."

The elusive Colonel Michael sought worldwide, was believed to be hiding in a location identified with considerable accuracy. The problem lay in its location – the Eurasian Federation's backyard. Unlike the Atlantic Federation and other national states, Eurasia does not recognize COMPS and is known for its hardline stance against the PLANTs. Whispers suggest they might even be tacitly allowing Blue Cosmos's existence. The reason why Blue Cosmos's military power never seemed to diminish might be due to that factor.

Furthermore, it was not within their own territory but within the military buffer zone, where they couldn't investigate Eurasia's involvement. Neither foreign nations nor Eurasia itself could easily intervene in that location. They were at an impasse.

They desperately wanted to change the current situation. But unless they could strike at the heart of Blue Cosmos, situations like the one in the Aldrin Autonomous Region would continue to happen.

What should they do?

Lacus was feeling anxious.

The two of them left the Council building in a heavy mood. As soon as they stepped outside, their view opened up, and the greenery of the trees greeted them. They had arrived in the aerial garden adjacent to the Council building.

Inspired by the bright scenery, Lament changed the subject.

"The Millennium is returning after a month, isn't it? Will our General finally enjoy some rest this time?"

Lacus's face brightened at the mention of Kira. "Yes, that's the plan," she said, a smile gracing her lips.

"That's good to hear."

Kira was coming back, and just thinking about it lifted her spirits.

Blue, the pet robot that Kira had built as Birdy's partner, had been let loose in the garden. Seeing Lacus, it flapped its small wings and fluttered down. Chirping, it folded its blue wings and perched on Lacus's fingertip.

"I've met him a few times, but Commander Yamato is an intriguing man," Lament mused. "He seems oddly unsuited for the battlefield... as if trying to bear this war's contradictions alone."

Lament's words revealed not only his calmness but also his keen insight. Most people were surprised that the pilot of the Freedom was such a quiet and gentle man. They never saw the inner turmoil.

"He has a kind heart," Lacus whispered, and Lament, as if he understood everything, furrowed his brows and said, "I see."

Kira seemed to be carrying the weight of the world alone, due to his exceptional abilities and his chosen responsibilities.

As Blue took off into the sky again, Lacus was struck with a sense of urgency.

—/I must free him soon...

Before his kindness destroys him.

A small gazebo stood in a secluded corner of the garden, enshrouded by a tapestry of lush greenery. Its verdant embrace lent a serene tranquility, an illusion of nature that made one momentarily forget they were aboard a colony adrift in space.

A lone figure leaned against a pillar, fully engrossed in a book.

With the hood pulled low over their face, they concealed their features, but they had a slender, well-proportioned body and a sharp, youthful impression.

Sensing the approach of several men, the reader snapped the volume shut.

The newly arrived group halted a respectful distance away. At their fore, a sharp-faced middle-aged man addressed the gazebo's occupant deferentially.

"Your Excellency Tao?"

The young man inclined his head in tacit confirmation.

"An honor to meet you in person, Defense Chairman."

Sure enough, one of the men who showed up at the gazebo was the same individual who had denounced COMPS earlier, Jagannath, chairman of the Defense Committee. He gestured discreetly.

"This way, please."

With a slight bow, Tao follows Jagannath to a waiting car, escorted in turn by officers subtly scanning their surroundings.

Once safely inside the car, Jagannath murmured, "Will the bait work, I wonder?"

The young man, Tao, replied with a faint smile, his demeanor calm yet sharp, reminiscent of a slender saber ready to strike.

"It will serve."

Cagalli Yula Athha, Orb's chief representative and a key founder of COMPS, regarded Lacus intently on the video screen. A long-standing ally, her presence solidified the call's diplomatic gravity.

"That's the proposal from the Empress of Foundation, Aura. I imagine the same offer has been made to the PLANTs."

Despite the conversation's official nature, an undercurrent of candidness flowed, revealing a friendship beneath the formality. Lacus glanced briefly at the letter she'd received. It was an appeal to COMPS, seeking cooperation in capturing Blue Cosmos's leader, Michael.

Toyah Mashima, standing beside Cagalli, chimed in, "It seems that country has a fairly precise idea of Michael's location. I believe it's worth collaborating."

His attempt at calmness betrayed a youthful eagerness. His excitement was understandable; the seemingly impossible capture of Michael suddenly seemed within reach.

Cagalli, with a soft gaze at the boy, gently reminded him, "That's true, Toyah. But remember, there's always more than meets the eye."

At 14, Toyah Mashima was not only a member of Orb's ruling family but also Cagalli's secretary. His youthful age belied a remarkable intelligence, hinting at a future ripe with potential. Cagalli was grooming him for leadership, much like her father, Uzumi Nara Athha, had done for her. This kind of imperial education had been passed down through generations in Orb, and Lacus watched the two with great interest.

However, for now, she was concerned about the Foundation's motives.

"What do they want in return?" she asked.

"Participation in COMPS," replied Cagalli.

"To use this as an opportunity to gain recognition from the international community as an independent nation?" Lacus asked.

"Most likely," Cagalli nodded. "They've seen impressive growth since seceding from Eurasia, economically and technologically, but relations with them remain tenuous. Many Eurasian regions have been spurred by them towards independence."

"The 'Foundation Shock,'" Toyah declares learnedly.

Once a mere fragment of the Eurasion Federation, Foundation's journey to sovereignty began when a small, historic nation in Eurasia's south unilaterally declared independence. Naturally, Eurasia did not accept this and resorted to military force. However, contrary to most expectations, Foundation repelled Eurasia's invasion and effectively achieved independence.

Inspired by this courageous act, various factions dissatisfied with the Eurasian Federation started showing signs of defection one after another. While Foundation had achieved independence in such a spectacular manner, there were still almost no countries in the international community that

recognized their independence. They were always cautious about Eurasia's reactions. Weakened as they were, nobody wanted to provoke a confrontation with Eurasia.

However, despite these circumstances, Foundation had made a leap in national power after gaining independence. They demonstrated remarkable growth economically and technologically and were even establishing a presence in space.

It was truly a mysterious nation.

Lacus's voice held a hint of suspicion as she pondered aloud, "How did they achieve such an astonishing turnaround?"

"Rumors say it's the work of Chancellor Orphee Lam Tao; supposedly, he was even recognized by former Chairman Durandal."

Lacus frowned slightly at the mention of Durandal.

Cagalli caught her expression and quickly added, "You think they might be using the Destiny Plan?"

"No, not exactly," Lacus denied, though if that were the case, it would explain a lot.

Foundation was a mysterious nation. Despite being small, their military power and strategic prowess made them capable of defeating Eurasia. Furthermore, they managed to achieve a miraculous recovery after their independence. Using the Destiny Plan would hint at such a possibility.

"We rejected Chairman Durandal's vision for the future, but we can't deny the allure it had for many."

Cagalli nodded, a bitter look on her face.

"True enough."

Even if Foundation used the Destiny Plan, there was no law against it. However, international recognition would be further out of reach.

"If we agree to their participation in COMPS now, it might further complicate the relationship between our member nations and Eurasia." Lacus pointed out.

Cagalli scratches her hair in frustration, "You're right. But remember, Orb owes them for the Freedom hijacking incident six months ago..."

During that incident, the Freedom, which had been handed over to the Archangel, was hijacked by terrorists and attacked ground facilities. They were able to suppress the terror thanks to Foundation's mobile suits, which shot down Freedom.

Certainly, Foundation had done ORB a favor. However, the timing of their intervention and the high performance of their mobile suits raised suspicions rather than gratitude.

Timing.

Yet, it was the peculiar timing of their offer that gave Lacus pause, stirring a sense of unease.

Seeing her expression, Cagalli asked, "Are you against it?"

Lacus, with Kira's image briefly crossing her mind, finally said, "Please, let me think about it."

In the vast expanse of space, the PLANTs, homeland of the Coordinators, stands as a testament to human ingenuity - a cluster of colonies, each sheathed in self-repairing glass, forming a shape akin to a slowly rotating hourglass with twin teardrop-shaped habitation zones joined by a central ring.

The Millennium gracefully approaches the central ring's spaceport. This newly constructed warship, sharp in design, boasts a prow positron cannon, three beam main guns, linear cannons, and an array of cutting-edge technologies, melding practicality with experimental vigor.

On the ship, in the pilots' lounge, Shinn slumps with a weary sigh.

"Does he still not trust me?" he mumbled.

Lunamaria, engrossed in her tablet, glanced up, puzzled. "Huh?"

Shinn, his face clouded with unease, gazed through the glass at the Justice.

"It's just... the commander always fights alone."

It wasn't just this time. Kira always sent Shinn and the others to the rear for defense or evacuation, choosing to face the frontline solo.

"But that minimizes the damage," Lunamaria pointed out. True, the enemy's focus on Freedom meant less collateral damage, as the technical officer Albert had noted. Moreover, Kira could hold his own even without their assistance, just as he did in this battle.

Yet, Shinn couldn't suppress his mounting frustration.

"Yeah, but then what are we even here for?"

"Mm..." Lunamaria nodded, her face a mix of emotions

It wasn't about seeking glory or resenting Kira's spotlight.

"The commander said it himself back then. 'Come fight with us.'"

It was a moment when Shinn, who had felt betrayed by what he had previously believed in, lost his friend, and suffered the bitter taste of defeat, found solace in Kira's words.

—No matter how badly things get blown apart, we will always plant flowers again. I'm sure.

He could start anew. People could start over as many times as they wanted. For the first time, Shinn had thought he finally connected with the pilot of Freedom, the man he had long deemed an enemy, hated. He believed he could move forward towards a new future.

"I was so moved by those words, I joined COMPS..."

His voice trailed off. He yearned to fight alongside Kira, to walk the same path. But now, he wondered if his presence even mattered.

But as Shinn broods, Lunamaria chides him. "So, what? You're moping again?"

"No, it's not just that... It's this gnawing feeling... I need to be more, do more for Commander Kira."

It wasn't just about wanting recognition for himself. Lately, while watching Kira, Shinn felt a growing unease. Despite his incredible abilities in repelling enemies, he always looked somber, burdened, as if bearing an



invisible weight. Shinn wished he could share that burden with them, which was the whole reason he came here.

"Is it because I'm not dependable enough that Kira won't do that?" Shin wondered to himself.

"Shinn, you've been entrusted with the Justice. You ARE trusted--" Lunamaria started, but was interrupted by Agnes entering the room.

"Trusted? As if. The 'Freedom Killer' like you?"

"Freedom Killer?" Shinn echoed, surprised.

"What, you didn't know? Well, congratulations," Agnes said with a mocking laugh. "I wouldn't want someone around who might shoot me in the back at any moment."

Shinn felt a jolt of realization. Yes, he had once downed the Freedom, but they were enemies then, unaware of each other's identities.

"Agnes!" Lunamaria attempted to intervene, but Agnes pointedly ignores her and leans toward Shinn's face.

"You know, you should just give up the Justice. It's totally wasted on you. Besides, we all know I outperformed you in technical skills and evals at the academy."

"Agnes, that's enough!" Lunamaria protested.

Agnes Giebenrath, was a fellow cadet at the officer's academy with Shinn and Lunamaria. As she claimed, during their time at the academy, she was the top student while Shinn always felt inferior. Her haughty and arrogant demeanor made Shinn genuinely uncomfortable. When they reunited in COMPS, it seemed like she hadn't changed a bit since their academic days.

"I always found it strange during the war, you being a FAITH and all. But in the end, you were just a convenient pawn for Chairman Durandal," Agnes taunted, her words cutting deep into Shinn.

"Enough!"

Lunamaria finally exploded in anger, but it did nothing to deter Agnes, having said what she wanted, left the room without a word.

"Ugh! What's her deal?!" Lunamaria uttered angrily, but Shinn had no reply and just sank in on himself.

He knew he had been flattered and manipulated by Chairman Durandal, believing in him and being used as a pawn. He felt like such a gullible fool.

To think that now he wanted recognition from Kira—maybe such a desire was wrong in itself...

Peering around the corner, Agnes confirmed Kira's approach down the corridor. Kira was looking at his tablet, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings.

It was perfect timing.

She timed her move, bumping into him and scattering the components in her basket across zero gravity.

Feigning panic, she exclaimed, "I'm so sorry!" while attempting to catch the scattered pieces in the zero-gravity environment.

"No, my fault, I wasn't looking..." Kira admitted as he tried to help.

When they attempted to return the pieces to Agnes' basket, they bounced back into the air. In the rush to grab them, Kira's hand accidentally touched Agnes'.

"Ah! Sorry, Commander!" now she feigned surprise as if she had just noticed Kira. She returned the parts to the basket and explained while closing the lid, "I was helping Vino... we were classmates."

"Oh, really?"

Did she manage to project the image of a friendly and helpful girl from the technical department? Small impressions like this mattered. After all, this was how Agnes had managed to gain favor with her superiors. Of course, this "prop" had also been assigned to her by Vino, who seemed to genuinely think of Agnes as a "good girl."

"Um, Commander? May I have a word?" Agnes asked modestly yet confidently. Kira stopped.

"I want to be of more use to you in battle."

Kira tilted his head. "Aren't you already?"

Agnes tried to clarify, "Yes, but I mean more directly."

She looked up at him with a determined gaze, but Kira still seemed puzzled.

"Well... If Shinn isn't reliable, I could... I mean, even though I might not look it, I have experience from being on the moon--"

"We don't need that."

Suddenly, Kira's eyes turned cold, cutting her off before she could finish her sentence. He didn't listen to her finish and turned on his heel.

"But Commander, Shinn has always been technically and emotionally immature... I wouldn't be surprised if he can't earn your trust," she persisted.

"I trust Shinn. There is no doubt about that," he stated firmly.

"Huh?"

She was surprised and stopped in her tracks. She had assumed that Kira would have reservations about dealing with Shinn and would be reluctant to let her get close. That's why she had planned to take Shinn's place and approach Kira.

But it seemed like her read on the situation had been off.

Agnes sighed reluctantly, looking at the basket in her hand, and headed for the hangar.

This plan had failed, but there would be another opportunity. Gaining Kira's approval would secure her advancement in COMPS. And, of course, she also wanted to make the commander her own. After all, he was the pilot of the Freedom. He deserved a partner like herself. And, he was Lacus Clyne's lover. The prospect of becoming the woman who "stole Lacus Clyne's lover" was tantalizing and not something that came along every day.

As she floated away, her mind was already plotting her next move.

With a solemn cadence, the international newscaster's grave tone conveyed the escalating toll, "The carnage in the Aldrin Autonomous Region

has resulted in four hundred twenty-eight fatalities, pushing the total casualties from Blue Cosmos' remaining forces' terror acts beyond five thousand. The governments are taking this matter seriously, issuing an international warrant for the mastermind, Colonel Michael, and seeking to dismantle the organization. However, his whereabouts remain unknown..."

Amidst the grim news echoing in the background, Lacus stood frying croquettes, her movements methodical yet distant. Kira was coming home, after all. The pink Haro buzzed around excitedly, seemingly in celebration. The table was already laden with Kira's favorite dishes; in an attempt to distract herself from the gloom, she had cooked more than intended.

The news continued, a reminder of the stark reality: "The attacks, primarily targeting PLANT facilities, have disproportionately affected Naturals. Public outrage is mounting, questioning what COMPS is doing about it..."

A call chimed in, interrupting the flow of news. Blue responded and flew off as Lacus hurriedly lowered the volume and picked up the receiver.

"Kira!" she answered, her voice bubbling with joy. But her smile quickly faded as Kira, with evident remorse, informed her he couldn't make it home. Delays in the development of new equipment add-ons were keeping him aboard the ship, he explained with evident frustration.

Lacus, masking her disappointment, responded softly, "I understand... just don't overdo it, okay?"

Hanging up, she couldn't help but sigh. Conversations with Kira had become rare. His constant travels and her packed schedule had kept them apart, yet she had managed to take a rare break in anticipation of his return.

The croquettes were starting to burn. Lacus hastily scooped them out, setting them on a rack.

Why bother, she wondered, when there'd be no one to savor them anyway?

She reminisced about the moment she agreed to become the president of COMPS, sharing her decision with Kira.

—*No, Kira, it's not just because I was asked to...*

—*I want this, too. To fight alongside you.*

Kira had held her tightly then. She hadn't intended to leave all the burden on him. It was her responsibility, too, for their actions in defeating Durandal and the ensuing chaos in the world.

Together, they thought they could support and aid each other. But now...

A chill crept into Lacus's heart, a growing sense of isolation wrapping around her like an unwelcome shroud.

"The Fermion induction method is still not viable. Errors in the docking sensor over mere micrometer-sized obstacles are inexcusable!" Albert ranted in a single breath, his face twisted in frustration.

Accustomed to such outbursts, Kira responded with a calm inquiry, "Can you fix it, Captain Heinlein?"

"I'm the developer, so it has to be me, obviously! My god, the incompetence of the development department is staggering! And I still need time for Freedom's setup and adjustment, not to mention the bugs in the autonomous control program..."

Albert Heinlein, the technical officer of Millennium, combined exceptional brilliance and rapid speech with a notorious reputation for being difficult to work with. In Albert's eyes, perhaps, everyone else seemed irredeemably inept. His genius was the only reason the oppressed tech staff didn't rebel. In the meritocracy of PLANT, Albert's status was akin to a deity, being one of the creators of the Freedom and Justice.

Kira, sensing Albert's rant might go on indefinitely, interjected, "I'll handle the program. Please focus on the sensors, Captain Heinlein."

"My apologies, General," Albert saluted before returning to his work. His respect was reserved for a select few: Kira, Lacus, and Millennium's Captain Konoe.

"Are you sure you don't need to head home?" came a voice from behind. Turning around, Kira saw Captain Alexei Konoe, whose calm demeanor and relaxed speaking style, uncharacteristic of a military man, reflected his past as a teacher. While he hadn't achieved remarkable feats in the previous war, he was highly popular among the soldiers. Rumor had it that if you were on Captain Konoe's ship, you could return alive. It was due to his excellent risk management and rational operation of the ship. Kira had come to trust this captain, who valued the lives of his soldiers over rushing to achieve glory.

"Well..." Kira replied, a hint of guilt in his voice, as Albert's scolding of his subordinates echoed in the background.

Captain Konoe looked at him with an understanding gaze.

"Isn't President Clyne waiting for you?"

Kira's gaze was drawn to the massive wing-like armament attached to Freedom's back - the Proud Defender, a testament to his and Albert's collaborative efforts. The equipment would significantly improve the Freedom's offensive and defensive abilities.

"Overwhelming power for swift conflict resolution?" Konoe asked, scrutinizing the mechanism.

"It's not that..." Kira's shoulders slumped.

"But... we haven't been able to protect anything."

The recent scenes of destruction were vivid in his mind. Kira felt a sense of urgency. Even though more than a year had passed since the end of the war, it felt like nothing had changed. Battles were still erupting and lives and futures were being stolen. He desperately wanted to stop it.

Though everyone hailed his power, Kira was haunted by a sense of painful inadequacy, as if everything was slipping through his fingers.

Konoe spoke softly, "Don't overwork yourself. Just some advice from an old man."

This gentle, teacher-like reassurance was a hallmark of Konoe's leadership, making him an accommodating captain for even the most difficult personalities like Albert.

Kira bowed his head gratefully.

"Thank you, Captain."

Kira opened the door to his home. The living room was cloaked in darkness, save for the pet robot Blue, which fluttered down and perched on the kitchen faucet. On the dining table lay an array of dishes, cold remnants of Lacus's lovingly prepared meal, stirring a pang of guilt in Kira.

"Lacus, evidently exhausted, was sprawled out on the sofa in a deep slumber. She didn't wake up when he came in. Kira draped a blanket over her and hesitated before gently stroking her soft hair. Tiptoeing out, he headed to his own room.

The walls adorned with photos – Kira and Lacus, their parents, Athrun, Cagalli, and friends from the Archangel – but Kira couldn't see their smiles anymore. Sitting at his desk, he booted up his computer, revealing window after window of data: the Destiny Plan.

A system once advocated by Chairman Durandal, the Destiny Plan proposed to analyze every human's genetics, determining their profession, spouse, and their entire future – essentially, every facet of their life – based on genetic aptitude. In a society shaped by this plan, it could be considered the ultimate meritocracy. Those who possessed ability but were unfairly evaluated due to social circumstances might find salvation in such a system.

Yet, it would also strip the elite and wealthy of their privileges. Durandal had resorted to intimidating them with the weapon Requiem. But the Destiny Plan's true casualty was the freedom to choose one's own path, devoid of dreams, tolerance, and change. Humans reduced to mere cogs in society.

Kira couldn't accept such a world.

But...

—*They say they will not allow it to happen again! That the world won't end up like this! But who can say that with certainty?!*

—*Between your world, and the one I've described, which one would the people really prefer?*

Night after night, Durandal's voice echoed in Kira's mind, an unshakable specter of doubt and conflict.

The Destiny Plan might kill the future, but at least there would be no war in that world. A world filled with hatred, hurt, and the destruction of everything, a world consumed by madness and fear.

Could any other world be worse than that?

—*Our greatest enemy is the reason why conflict has been with us since the dawn of time, any why it will never disappear. An enemy that has*

been with us all along. This enemy that we continue to fall short of overcoming is none other than our own ignorance and selfish ambitions!

In her dream, Lacus found herself lost, groping through a dense, enveloping fog. She called for Kira but received no response. The fog, thick and oppressive like a viscous liquid, clung to her, impeding every step with growing anxiety. A sense of urgency gripped her as if someone she cared deeply lay gravely wounded or was on the brink of death, propelling her to move forward.

A shadowy figure loomed in the mist, its features indistinct yet sorrowful.

—*Kira, what's wrong?*

She pushed through the fog, determined to get closer. As she drew nearer, the figure gradually became clearer.

—*Kira?!*

As her hand lit upon the figure's shoulder, the realization struck - this was not Kira. A chill of confusion froze her in place.

Who was this person?

Where? Where was Kira?

Jolted awake, her heart pounding, Lacus was engulfed by the unsettling feeling of an irreparable mistake. Sitting up, the blanket slipped from her shoulders, illuminated by the dim light that seeped through the slightly ajar door.

Kira had returned.

Relief slowly dispelled the remnants of her uneasy dream. She got up and headed towards Kira's room. Peeking through the door, she saw Kira, too, had fallen asleep at his desk. A tinge of disappointment washed over her, yet she quietly entered and draped the blanket over him, a silent reciprocation of his earlier kindness.

After gazing at her beloved's sleeping face for a while, she was about to turn and leave, but something on the computer screen caught her attention.

The Destiny Plan.

She froze in her tracks.

She understood why Kira had been reading through that data. They were navigating days like walking through a thick fog, uncertain how to end it all. Having rejected Durandal's plan, they bore the responsibility to forge a different path, didn't they?

And yet, the struggle was painful.

She left Kira's room, her reflection in the dark glass window.

Meer Campbell, a girl with her face, her voice, exploited and discarded by Durandal and herself. After the first ceasefire, Lacus had withdrawn from the public eye with Kira, uncomfortable with her idolized image and war-ending hero status.

To fill the void left by her absence, Durandal had put Meer.

He had found a girl who could sing just like her, altered her appearance, turning her into Lacus Clyne, and used her to maintain his support. At the same time, he had sent assassins after the real Lacus to silence her. Though that attempt failed.

When Lacus returned to the stage, and Durandal's lies were exposed, he "disposed of" the unnecessary fake "Lacus Clyne." Even for this one act alone, Lacus couldn't bring herself to forgive Durandal.

Meer had her own thoughts and her own life, yet they were twisted to serve Durandal's agenda, and when she was no longer useful, she was discarded.

The Destiny Plan ultimately sought to use people in this manner.

Meer's haunting question lingered: So what is Lacus Clyne really?

That question was something Lacus herself had to bear.

The "Lacus Clyne" sought after by everyone, the songstress of peace, the war hero, the savior.

That idolized version had assumed a life of its own, diverging far from Lacus's true hopes and intentions.

Beneath the mantle of 'Lacus Clyne,' the real Lacus yearned for simple joys – cooking, admiring flowers, singing for fun, and cherishing pet robots with Kira – just like any other person.

Lacus herself didn't know how to bridge this gap. But because she had run away from this problem, Meer was forced to take her place, even losing her life in the process.

Taking on the role of COMPS president was her way of confronting this. She wouldn't let the seat of "Lacus Clyne" remain vacant, to prevent another tragedy like Meer Campbell's, who had been manipulated, exploited, and ultimately discarded in her stead.

The following day, Kira and Lacus decided to venture out to the countryside together. Nestled snugly against Kira's back on the motorbike, Lacus indulged in the rare luxury of closing her eyes, savoring his warmth and the isolating rush of the wind and engine sound.

They stopped at a deserted camping spot to enjoy a picnic. Birdy and Blue darted playfully between the trees, basking in the simulated brilliance of the PLANT's artificial sky. Lacus tried to keep the conversation light, talking about the antics of Haro and Blue, gossip from her secretary Rio, updates on Cagalli, Sai, and Miriallia. Yet, no matter what topic she brought up, Kira's mind seemed elsewhere, politely smiling but clearly preoccupied.

Eventually, their conversation dwindled into silence, a contrast to the times when their shared quietude was comfortable.

Finally, mustering her resolve, Lacus steered the conversation towards an unavoidable topic.

"Colonel Michael seems to be hiding near the Eurasian border, in Eldora," she said.

At the mention of that name, Kira's eyes took on a haunted intensity, signaling an end to their brief respite, and Lacus realized it.

"A letter from Empress Aura of Foundation has arrived, proposing cooperation in his arrest," she continued.

"What do you plan to do?" Kira asked.

"Honestly... I'm torn," Lacus admitted.

She felt a chaotic mix of emotions in this offer. She wrestled internally with a dichotomy: the doubt over trusting Foundation and the pressing urgency to act despite those reservations.

"What do you think, Kira?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because..."

Kira replied quietly, yet Lacus detected a subtle undercurrent of irritation in his tone. It felt like touching a sore spot. But when she remembered the display of the Destiny Plan on Kira's computer screen, she couldn't help but express her concern.

"If it means an end to all this, I see no reason to oppose."

"Yes..."

"But this fight seems endless. People don't change that easily," Kira's voice reflected resignation.

He's right. That's why this continues. The deep-seated hatred of Blue Cosmos towards Coordinators was not something to be easily eradicated, just as the pervasive fears haunting Coordinators were not easily allayed.

"We don't know what we can or cannot do. All I can do is..."

"Kira..."

"But someone has to do it, or nothing will ever change."

Kira's words were laden with a sense of duty, his eyes reflecting nothing of the serene surroundings or of Lacus.

In that moment, Lacus recognized the inevitability of her decision, a path laid out with no alternative.

The Millennium teemed with activity, her crew bustling to prepare for departure. Scarcely back from their last mission, they were now tasked with another urgent operation - a joint operation with Foundation forces to finally capture the elusive Blue Cosmos leader, Colonel Michael. Rumor even hinted at cooperation from Eurasian elements.

With their shore leave abruptly canceled, the crew hastened to complete their preparations, a sense of urgency palpable in the air.

"But Eurasia hasn't recognized COMPS, right?" Shinn asked Lunamaria as they were getting ready.

"That's why the President herself is going. It's probably for political negotiations," she replied.

Sure enough, President Lacus Clyne would accompany them, hinting at the mission's significance. With the addition of the Archangel from Earth's

surface, it seemed like this operation would be quite large in scale. Of course, their main objective was to capture Colonel Michael.

But could they really capture him this time? Shinn wondered if he had been chasing after that name for too long, as he couldn't feel the reality of it.

Well hey there kiddos!"

A burly man entered the recreation room where the two were talking. He seemed to have just finished training. The man was Maas Symeon, a senior colleague, followed closely by Hilda Harken and Herbert von Reinhardt.

Hilda, leading the trio, had earned her reputation as a fierce warrior under Lacus Clyne's command during the Great War. She wore an eyepatch over one eye and had a sturdy, tall frame. Maas, on the other hand, sported a full beard, and Herbert, who always seemed to have a nail in his mouth, wore glasses and had scars on his face. All three of them had unique personalities.

Just like everyone else, these three had joined COMPS, likely out of loyalty to Lacus.

"What are you two secretly up to? Ooh, don't leave me out of the fun!"

Hilda's sudden embrace in the zero-gravity environment sent Lunamaria flailing, struggling to stabilize herself.

"We're not up to anything secretive, Captain Harken! And that's sexual harassment, you know!" Lunamaria protested as she struggled to regain her balance.

As Shinn also recoiled from the sudden drama, Maas caught him by the shoulder, flashing a crooked grin.

Meanwhile, Maas Simeon, grabbing Shinn's shoulder to steady himself, reached for a vending machine.

"Watch out, kiddos. That place is haunted, you know," he teased, eliciting a skeptical look from Shinn.

Herbert joined in.

"It's Foundation. During their independence movement, some Eurasian folks claimed they 'saw' something, a Kelpie."

"A Kelpie?" Lunamaria, intrigued, turned to ask, while Hilda leaned closer, sniffing her hair playfully.

"It's a water-dwelling monster. Just shows how mysterious that country is," Herbert explained.

"Seriously, Lieutenant, no sexual harassment!" Lunamaria blushed, pushing Hilda's face away.

Shinn, observing the exchange, mused inwardly that Hilda was a dirty old man inside. Nevertheless, his thoughts drifted, momentarily distracting him.

The mention of 'monsters' triggered a vivid memory: a black mobile suit with an unusual, cape-like structure he had briefly witnessed during the Freedom hijacking incident. Its incredible mobility and beam-resistant armor were indeed monstrous. That was one of Foundation's mobile suits.

If a soldier who had seen it once described it as a "monster," it wouldn't be surprising.

Or perhaps... did their mobile suits hide even more monstrous capabilities?

A shiver ran down his spine at the thought, though he knew there was no need for alarm. Foundation was an ally in this operation. Yet, the unsettling possibility of facing such a formidable foe as an enemy lingered in his mind, prompting him to forcefully dismiss these ominous thoughts.

As the Millennium descended through the atmosphere, heated gases clearing, its bridge shield lowered, revealing the vast landscape below on the monitors. Patches of pale and dark green, interspersed with the tawny hues of desert, formed a tapestry that unfolded beneath the wisps of clouds. Rivers, sinuous as silver serpents, wound through the terrain, glittering under the sun's embrace. Though the vista appeared as a miniature diorama, Lacus could not help but marvel at the teeming life that filled it beyond count.

Descending swiftly, the Millennium brought the once distant landscape into sharp relief. Snow-capped mountains receded into the background as the ship approached its destination. A mirror-like lake came into view, encircled by the sprawling metropolis of Ishtaria, the capital of Foundation. The new city district, with its modern skyscrapers gleaming in the sunlight, showed little trace of the scars from the Independence War.

"Huh, they've managed quite the reconstruction..." mused Technical Officer Albert, his tone more observational than passionate.

"Amazing, isn't it! I've heard rumors, but this..." exclaimed Executive Officer Arthur, his praise more effusive.

Captain Konoe, ever detached, remarked, "The esteemed Chancellor must be quite capable, that... what's-his-name?"

As the Archangel entered their field of view, the two ships made their way toward the lake. The older part of the city, in stark contrast to the new, was built of stone, exuding a medieval charm. Layers of domed roofs culminated in the stunning blue-tiled royal palace, reminiscent of a scene from a fairy tale.

Following ground instructions, the Millennium and Archangel touched down on the lake, sending up great sprays of water, stirring a flock of startled swans into flight.

Soon after, Lacus and her companions boarded a helicopter bound for the palace.

Upon disembarking, they were greeted by Foundation soldiers who snapped to attention. Amongst the assembled guards, a young man stepped forward. Barely in his twenties, his slender frame, golden hair, and warm, delicate features bore an uncanny resemblance to Kira, despite their different faces.

"Welcome, Princess. I am Orphee Lam Tao, Chancellor of Foundation. We are honored by your presence," he said, his cool voice lending depth to the formal words. Lacus, smiling, reached out to take his offered hand.

"Compass President, Lacus Clyne. I am honored to meet you."

As their hands almost touched, Lacus's gaze was drawn to a ring on Orphee's finger, similar to one she wore, a keepsake from her mother. Hesitating momentarily, Orphee's firmly grasped hers.

A peculiar sensation surged through Lacus in that instant – a warm flood akin to soft light or a fragrant scent. Everything around her seemed to vanish, even gravity itself appeared to lose its hold.

Surprise etched Orphee's face momentarily before it melted into a knowing smile.

—*We finally meet, Lacus Clyne...*

The words were not spoken but flowed directly from their touch, carrying Orphee's thoughts. Lacus, bewildered, asked silently.

—*Who are you?*

But the question seemed redundant.

I know this person. From long ago...

Their presence together felt utterly natural, inevitable.

Orphee's response, trembling with emotion, came through their linked hands.

—*I am your destiny... the one to guide the world with you...*

Destiny...?

"Lacus."

Startled, Lacus turned to find Kira standing behind her, his eyes filled with confusion.

—*What just happened?*

Lacus quickly withdrew her hand, studying Orphee's face. He smiled as if nothing had happened. Around them, the heliport returned to normal, with Kira, Murrue, and Konoe nearby. Only Kira seemed aware of Lacus's momentary lapse, a brief event that felt eternal.

Orphee, with usual decorum, invited them inside.

Lacus felt her cheeks flush.

What happened to me? A daydream? Fatigue causing a waking dream?

The experience faded quickly, more rapidly than a fleeting dream. While easily dismissible as mere fatigue, a subtle unease continued to echo in Lacus's heart.

Walking behind Lacus, Kira inwardly cocked his head in confusion.

Just for a moment, Lacus had seemed off. She might appear gentle, but she never shrank from the presence of important figures. In Orphee's presence, however, her typically composed demeanor gave way to a vulnerable, almost entranced gaze.

As if her soul had been stolen.

Now, however, Lacus was back to her usual self, moving with steady steps and responding with her characteristic gentle, polite voice.



At the forefront of the welcoming party, a distinctly out-of-place group dressed entirely in black caught his attention. All young, they watched Lacus with intense focus. Had their gaze carried hostility, Kira would have been on guard. But their faces were uniformly filled with irrepressible joy.

Not a threat, then. Yet, an inexplicable twinge of discomfort lingered within him.

What was it? Something nagging at him, a frustrating sense of unseen currents moving beneath the surface. Such a beautiful place, yet...

Suddenly, a sharp, cutting sensation pierced his mind.

—*Annoying pest.*

The voice was clear, brimming with venomous hatred. Kira spun around, looking for its source. Shinn, Lunamaria, and Mu were walking nearby, but it wasn't their voices. It did, however, come from somewhere very close. It felt as if the hatred had been poured directly into his ears.

Shivering involuntarily, Kira looked out over the lakefront city, enchanting as a land from a fairy tale. And yet, he couldn't shake the feeling that this place, for all its beauty, might well be cursed by some malevolent sorcerer.

Chapter.02

The members of COMPS were ushered into the grand audience chamber. Its expanse spoke of a world touched by the intricate grace of Oriental designs. Delicate latticework adorned the windows, and arabesque patterns tiled the walls, carrying the scent of distant lands. From the high ceilings hung a chandelier, glittering like a constellation, its light softening under the plush carpets that swallowed the sound of military boots.

The splendor and solidity of the spectacle utterly overwhelmed Shinn, trailing behind his superiors. He fought the urge to gape, marveling inwardly at the thought that such places were not relics of the past but homes to the living.

From the highest point in the room, the youthful voice of the Foundation's empress reached them. "Welcome to Foundation," she said, her voice childlike, belying her age. Perhaps she was around ten, her small frame perched delicately on the oversized throne, her demeanor commanding despite her youth. "I am Aura Maha Khyber. Your swift response to our summons has not gone unnoticed."

"The honor of this audience is ours, Your Majesty," came the reply from Lacus, who bowed with a grace that evoked tales of princesses— a sight that made Shinn hastily bow his head in realization, feeling utterly out of place in what seemed like a step back into medieval times.

The empress, Aura, spoke with a maturity unexpected from someone of her years. "We've been at our wits' end with Michael's partisans. Despite repeated entreaties to Eurasia... the responses have been... tardy."

A glance at her chancellor, Orpheee, carried a wealth of implications. "Inevitable, given the myriad crises they face within," Orpheee remarked, his tone laced with irony, prompting Shinn to reflect on the roots of these crises, likely sown by Foundation itself. Naturally, neither nation harbored fond sentiments for the other.

"We are indebted to you. Please, protect our people," Aura's gentle request was followed by Lacus's earnest nod.

"We are humbled and will do our utmost."

"We have prepared a small banquet for you to enjoy. There, we wish to hear more of your tales," the young empress added, entrusting her hand to Orpheee as she descended from the throne, signaling the audience's end.

Shinn exhaled deeply, feeling an inexplicable weariness despite the absence of any exertion.

Unnoticed by Shinn, as Orpheee turned to leave, he cast a meaningful smile towards Lacus, who watched him depart with a puzzled expression, lingering long after the chancellor had gone.

Ingrid Tradoll, the chancellor's secretary, led Kira and his companions through the palace. Lacus, the captain and others had split off for separate tasks.

Ingrid, despite holding such a significant position, was surprisingly young, seemingly of the same age as Kira and his group. Her demeanor and speech were gentle, yet she exuded an air of competence that was unmistakable.

They came upon a spacious courtyard in front of the barracks, from which the sound of clashing metal could be heard.

"These are our nation's Royal Guards," Ingrid announced, pausing to introduce the spectacle before them.

In the center of the courtyard, two young men were engaged in a sword fight, observed leisurely by three other individuals, men, and women alike, dressed in the same black uniforms seen earlier at the heliport and during the audience. All were youthful, some even boyish in appearance.

"The rumored Black Knights, I presume," Mu murmured beside him.

Even from a distance, the duelists' fluid, dance-like motions and effortless handling of dangerous blades showcased the Black Knight Squad's extraordinary physical prowess. Eventually, one of the combatants executed a sharp thrust, disarming his opponent with a flick of his wrist.

"Ah, I just can't beat Shura," the defeated young man shrugged, not particularly dismayed, his sturdy, East Asian build contrasting with his casual demeanor.

Shura, the victor, slender and sharp-eyed as the saber he wielded, had not once altered his expression during the duel, showing no sign of exertion. Picking up the saber he had sent flying, he approached Kira with a dispassionate gait, stopping before him to offer a challenge.

"Would you honor me with a lesson, Commander Yamato?" he asked, voice devoid of inflection, extending the saber towards Kira.

Caught off guard, Kira stumbled over his words, "No... I—"

His voice trailed off, uncertainty written across his face.

He had never been trained in swordsmanship, let alone basic military training.

The Royal Guards began to jeer.

"A commander who can't wield a sword, really?"

The crew-cut young man taunted sharply, his words dripping with derision.

"So much for COMPS being all that impressive."

The youthful pitch of a girl's laughter filled the air, her words cutting deeper with every chuckle. Beside her, a boy seated lazily added, his voice low, "We've already proven that much."

His face, half-hidden by an unusual mask, hinted at a smugness born of recent triumphs, likely alluding to the notorious incident where Freedom was commandeered.

Ingrid, their guide, stepped in, her voice laced with disapproval, "Such disrespect to our guests is unwarranted!"

But Shinn couldn't stand their mockery any longer and stepped forward, "Commander! Let me—"

"Shinn!" Kira attempted to dissuade him, to no avail.

Mu, however, tugged on his sleeve and whispered, "Let him try."

Confused, Kira turned to see Mu observing the Royal Guards with a calculating gaze as if eager to gauge the Black Knight Squad's mettle.

Meanwhile, Shinn had taken up a saber, facing Shura in the courtyard. "Royal Guard Commander, Shura Serpentine," the latter introduced himself formally.

"Shinn Asuka of the Yamato Crew!" Shinn declared confidently.

A member of the Royal Guards signaled, "Begin!" and Shinn launched a wide swing at Shura, who deflected it with minimal effort, countering with a sharp thrust that Shinn barely managed to parry.

Despite Shinn's aggressive strikes, Shura evaded each with slight, precise movements, drawing admiring murmurs of "Impressive..." from Mu while Kira watched anxiously, unable to appreciate the skill displayed.

Shura countered Shinn's final thrust with a swift leap, landing behind him and disarming him in one smooth motion. Startled, Shinn turned to face Shura, but his saber was knocked away with a sharp sound.

"Damn...!" Shinn cursed as Shura pointed his saber at his throat, bringing tension to the onlookers. Mu's hand hovered over his holster, ready to draw his weapon.

Laughter then broke the charged silence.

"So much for the Freedom Killer!"

"He did hold up better than expected, though," they mocked, causing Shinn's face to flush with indignation. Yet, immobilized by the blade at his neck, he could not move.

"Perhaps Athrun Zala was the true challenge..." Shura mused aloud, a hint of disappointment in his tone as he withdrew his saber.

Hey! Who are you calling—?" Shinn's temper flared, but Kira quickly intervened, "That's enough, Shinn."

At Kira's command, Shinn fell silent, stepping back.

Shura then advanced towards Kira, saber pointed menacingly. Mu and Lunamaria tensed, ready for conflict, but Kira gestured for them to stand down. Clearly, he had no intention of engaging in their saber-rattling games.

Ingrid's patience wore thin. "Captain Serpentine, enough of this!" she exclaimed, though Shura paid her no heed, his gaze fixed intently on Kira.

"Only those with power can rule the world. Do you possess such power?" Shura's challenge left Kira momentarily speechless, returning the gaze with a mix of astonishment and defiance.

"Such a world... is not what people desire."

A world governed by force? Humanity had striven to move beyond such a primitive state, to not revert to a time where might dictated right. Kira himself had no desire for power nor the inclination to dominate others. What could this man possibly want?

"Is that so?" Shura smirked as if seeing through Kira, sheathing his saber with a smooth motion, "I look forward to battling under your command."

"Let's see what you've got," might be the undercurrent of Shura's parting words.

Behind Kira, Agnes was mercilessly berating Shinn.

"You're really pathetic! I should have been the one to step forward," she lamented, her disappointment palpable.

Shin, crestfallen, found an unlikely defender in Lunamaria. "Cut it out, Agnes," she implored, her plea cutting through the tension.

At her voice, Shura paused, his interest piqued. "Agnes Giebenrath—the 'Moonlight Valkyrie'?" His gaze, sharp as a blade, settled on Agnes.

"Uh... Yeah?" she responded, her confusion evident, only to be met with a surprising, faint smile from Shura—an acknowledgment of sorts.

Agnes stared back, equally surprised by his reaction. As the black-clad group departed with their sarcastic smiles, Kira watched them go, his thoughts heavy with the weight of the encounter. It had been far from easy.

"We've heard of your country's prosperity, but..." Lacus voiced her admiration not merely as a courtesy but as a genuine reflection of her impressions. The vast hall, bathed in soft light, was a spectacle of elegance and joy. Men and women, adorned in their finest, danced to the orchestra's melodies while luminaries from the government and business sectors engaged in light-hearted conversation along the walls. The banquet, far from "modest," was an exhibition of opulence and celebration.

Aura, seated beside her, smiled contentedly.

"Our country employs talent regardless of age or background, Natural or Coordinator alike."

Indeed, the dignitaries introduced were a diverse mix, varying in age, gender, and ethnicity.

"It's all thanks to Orphee's leadership," Aura shared with a smile, and the chancellor modestly bowed his head. Standing, he offered a courteous bow and extended his hand towards Lacus with a graceful gesture.

"May I have this dance, Princess?"

Lacus found her gaze drawn once again to the ring on his hand, so strikingly similar to the one given to her by her mother, down to the finest detail.

"With pleasure," she responded, reaching out. Orpheee took her hand with evident joy, leading her to the dance floor. As they assumed their positions, all eyes turned towards them. The orchestra began a waltz, and Lacus followed Orpheee's lead into the dance.

Her eyes caught Kira standing by the window. He was looking her way, but as their eyes met, he quickly looked away.

Suddenly, a memory came flooding back to her. She had once entrusted that ring to Kira before he went into battle. Engraved inside was a saying, "The world is yours, and you are the world's, as long as you are born into this life," the meaning of which her mother never explained. Yet, imbued with that trust, she had given it to him, praying for his safe return.

"Please come back to me..." she had whispered, hoping their shared sentiments would protect him. And Kira did return, bringing the ring back to her as if in answer to her prayers. The ring, already significant, became even more precious with the memories of that day.

Now, the same ring appeared on the hand of the man before her, stirring complex emotions within Lacus.

Who is this man, really?

Away from the dancing crowd, near a table laden with an array of colorful dishes, Lunamaria and her companions found themselves amidst the royal banquet's splendor, which attendants served to guests. The long table boasted a variety of dishes, some of which were unfamiliar to Lunamaria, having grown up in the PLANTs, yet each tasted exquisite. It was, after all, a royal standing party, and Shinn, among others, indulged with an eagerness that was almost embarrassing.

A buzz from the dance floor drew their attention to Lacus and Orphee, dancing gracefully together. Lacus, in her finery, looked enchantingly beautiful, her movements with Orphee fluid and practiced.

"They really are celebrities," Lunamaria thought, "And they can waltz too... I'm so impressed." admiring the duo with the simplicity of a commoner.

Beside her, Mu mused aloud, his gaze not on the dancing pair but on the black-clad group standing by Aura, "To think those high-borns are part of the Black Knights..."

Shinn, still busy with his food, asked, "What's with them, anyway?"

"Probably Coordinators, don't you think?" Lunamaria suggested, trying to rationalize their exceptional agility and poise.

"Probably," Mu agreed, though something seemed to bother him still. "But..."

"What is it?"

When pressed, Mu hesitated before confessing, "They don't seem like any proper military force to me."

Lunamaria realized he had a point. Sure enough, from the masked youth to the high-pitched laughter of the young girl, they hardly embodied the

disciplined image expected of a nation's Royal Guard. Given their status as the elite guard of the nation, they should have adhered to stricter discipline.

Their exceptional abilities contrasted sharply with their unruly demeanor, reminiscent of delinquent teenagers rather than elite guards. Even in ZAFT, known for its meritocracy and emphasis on individual initiative, they appeared less disciplined than regular soldiers. This realization brought unease, especially considering the impending need to collaborate with them. Lunamaria felt a silent gratitude that she wasn't in charge of leading them.

After returning her empty plate to a passing servant, she moved to a spot with a clearer view of the dance floor. The chance to witness a castle ball was beyond what she had ever imagined. While Lacus and the chancellor were the center of attention, the dazzling dresses of the other women provided endless fascination. The grandeur and extravagance of the event were unlike anything she had seen before, and she couldn't wait to share her experiences with Meyrin when she got back.

Not far off, she noticed Kira and Agnes, with Agnes seemingly trying to coax Kira into dancing.

"Shall we dance, Commander?"

"We're not here to play," Kira replied coldly before walking away. It seemed the commander was not pleased to see Lacus dancing with another man.

"Typical male behavior," Lunamaria mused.

It appeared Agnes's attempt to exploit Kira's feelings had backfired.

She sighed internally, advising, "Give it a rest, Agnes. Stop pestering the Commander."

She was well aware that Agnes was now "targeting" the captain.

Agnes was always like that. Searching for the "big catch," she deemed worthy of her attention, ready to snatch them away from others, regardless of any existing relationships — perhaps, even aiming to steal them away. And as soon as a bigger catch appeared, she would discard the current one without a second thought. Lunamaria herself had been a victim of this behavior.

In their academy days, Lunamaria too had shared Agnes's elitist musings, categorizing men as either worthy or not—a mindset she now viewed as youthful folly, almost unrecognizable as her past self.

War, along with various experiences and her relationship with Shinn, had significantly changed her. While there were many experiences she wished she hadn't had, she felt she had gained a deeper understanding of things she couldn't have fathomed before.

But Agnes hadn't changed much, surprisingly. Lunamaria used to admire her savvy and sharp tongue, even if begrudgingly. Now, she could hardly bear it.

Agnes, in her usual manner, retorted challengingly, "Why? Is there a problem?"

"Do you actually like him, for real?"

That was the crux of it. If Agnes truly liked Kira, Lunamaria might not go as far as to support her but could at least turn a blind eye.

But what Agnes saw in Kira was his "specs" — the supreme commander of COMPS, the pilot of the Freedom, Lacus Clyne's partner — with little to no genuine interest in his personality.

Lunamaria pondered Agnes's actions—*was it desperation driving her, or something else?*

After a brutal betrayal by a former lover, it seemed Agnes was on a mission to find the ultimate partner this time around, though she appeared to have moved on completely.

However, smashing through Lunamaria's concerns with disdain, Agnes declared, "I have no intention of settling like you do."

Just then, Shinn arrived at the worst possible moment.

"What are you talking about?"

Shinn appeared, cheerfully oblivious, plates of food in hand, unwittingly stepping into a minefield of tension.

"It's nothing! Come on, let's go!"

"Eh?"

Irritated beyond measure, Lunamaria dragged an innocent Shinn away from the scene.

Orphee led Lacus to the palace's courtyard.

"There's something I want to show you," he said, his tone hinting at a secret. Stepping out from the stuffy room into the cool night air, Lacus breathed a sigh of relief.

As they walked through the garden, Orphee occasionally spoke, and Lacus politely responded, though her thoughts had begun to wander.

The haunted look in Kira's eyes when he said someone had to do it lingered in her mind. But even if they could capture Michael, would that be the end of it?

No, the world would produce a second, a third Michael, or perhaps a second, third Patrick Zala. How long would this cycle continue? And how long could they—could Kira—endure it?

Suddenly, Orphee's voice reached her.

"It seems the flowers here, splendid as they are, fail to catch your eye."

Only then did Lacus realize they were surrounded by a thriving mass of roses, blooming in their prime. They were in a magnificent garden, where roses of various colors and types were expertly arranged, climbing pillars and pavilions, blossoming as if spilling over.

She had been utterly discourteous. Worried she might have offended him, she looked at Orphee, who smiled kindly and offered her a pink rose.

"This bloomed just for you. Please."

It was a cliché, yet Lacus felt a touch moved, perhaps because his voice seemed sincere. She accepted the rose and thanked him.

"It's beautiful, thank you."

"I'm glad. Otherwise, the roses might have been disappointed and wilted," Orphee joked, making Lacus smile.

She brought her face close to the fresh, pure petals.

"Such a lovely scent..."

Revitalized, she took in her surroundings anew. The garden, bathed in moonlight, was filled with a rich fragrance, and standing there, she felt a sense of peace and beauty seeping into her.

"You truly suit a smile," Orphee said quietly.

It had been a long time since anyone had shown her such consideration. While Lacus felt a bit embarrassed, she also appreciated his kindness.

"I understand your worries," Orphee murmured as they ambled through the garden.

"Eh?"

"Isn't it true for everyone? Those living in the present, searching for a path to the future," he said, casting a somber glance at her. "People do not desire conflict. Yet, on the other hand, conflict persists."

Ah, Lacus thought, he understands too.

Orphee continued with a note of sadness in his voice.

"Whether Coordinator or Natural, we are all human... It's tragic that people would quarrel over such trivial differences."

"Yes..."

"But I believe the problem isn't the trivial differences, but rather an inherently unjust society."

"What?"

Lacus stopped in her tracks.

"Everyone is burdened by the shadow of war. Grievances and discontent take an ugly form in such times," Orphee said, reflecting. "Because wealth is distributed unfairly... Because the value of life varies... Because it's not a society where everyone is evaluated fairly... That's why people fight, isn't it?"

His voice was filled with youthful zeal.

"If we could present a society where everyone is needed, a fair and equal society, then perhaps we could overcome the differences between Coordinators and Naturals, and the world would surely move in a better direction... That's what I believe."

Lacus smiled.

"That's a wonderful thought. Indeed, it might be so."

She was charmed more by his earnestness than his ideals.

"To hear such words from a princess gives me confidence as one responsible for governance," he said, his smile relieved. He might have longed for such a conversation; domestic politicians could be potential adversaries, not confidantes. Lacus, being an outsider, was perhaps easier to talk to.

As she pondered this, Orphee's smile suddenly wavered.

"Oh, not again. That sensation..."

The rose garden vanished, leaving just the two in a space filled with warm light.



"I want to create a world without poverty or discrimination. That's why I was born..." His voice echoed in her mind. "And you too..."

Me? What...?

Before she knew it, Lacus had leaned into Orphee's embrace. He smiled gently, cupping her cheek, a comforting warmth spreading through her. If only they could melt into each other... A desire for that lingered in Lacus.

Yet, a dissonant note pulled her back to reality. Lacus blinked, suddenly stepping back.

The scent of roses and the cool night air returned.

What had happened? To be touched by a man she had just met and lose herself—it felt like a betrayal of her own self.

"I apologize, Lord Orphee. It seems the weariness of travel has caught up with me... I must take my leave now," she said, avoiding his gaze and hastily making her exit.

"Thank you for your hospitality today."

Without waiting for his reply, she fled the garden.

Kira moved away from the dark courtyard, walking through the corridor, the scene he had just witnessed refusing to leave his mind.

Lacus and that Orphee, leaning close, sharing an intimate gaze.

It looked like a painting come to life: a man and a woman standing in a rose garden bathed in moonlight. Lacus had looked up at the man with eyes brimming, almost melting.

Had she ever looked at him that way?

They walked and talked, Lacus holding a rose and laughing with joy.

He hadn't seen her smile like that in a long time.

Always looking at him with anxiety, with sadness.

When had she stopped smiling?

He realized it just moments ago.

The memory of her smile brought a pain that felt like his heart was being torn apart.

A smile now given to another man.

But who was it that had stolen that smile from her?

Kira quickened his pace as if trying to escape.

The music reached her even here, in the dimly lit corridor where Agnes leaned against a pillar, glaring through the windows into the hall. She despised everyone who was enjoying themselves without her.

Why couldn't they see her worth? She wasn't meant to be left alone, isolated like this. She had graduated from the officer's academy with top marks. Her parents were high-ranking government officials, and her social standing was far superior to Lunamaria's. She was beautiful, competent, and destined to lead. She deserved to be loved by everyone. Yet—

Her thoughts of indignation were interrupted by the soft approach of footsteps from behind. Startled, she turned around and found herself facing the captain of the Black Knights Squad she had met earlier in the day.

Shura... Shura Serpentine, was it? His sharp, knife-like features seemed somewhat softened now.

He bowed with efficient grace.

"Would you honor me with a dance, Moonlight Valkyrie?"

Her heart skipped a beat.

It had been a while since anyone had called her by that nickname, a name given for her remarkable service on the lunar front, though it was primarily for military PR purposes. But she had fought on the moon, too. Yet Shinn and Lunamaria acted as if they were the only ones who had battled. It was unfair.

So, it pleased her that someone in this terrestrial nation recognized her worth.

"I'd be delighted," Agnes said, taking Shura's hand.

Shura's dance was not as graceful as Orphee's but was powerful and skillful. Agnes was enchanted, surrendering to his lead. She could dance as beautifully as Lacus Clyne—no, even more so. She could also pilot a mobile suit in battle, something Lacus Clyne could never do.

As they danced, Agnes began to reclaim her pride.

When the music ended, Shura bowed respectfully, and Agnes smiled; her breath quickened. "Thank you, Commander Serpentine."

"Call me Shura," he insisted. A smile flashed across his knife-like lips, making Agnes's heart race.

"You were wonderful... Shura."

"So were you."

Glancing back over his shoulder as he was leaving, Shura said, "The strong are beautiful."

Watching his retreating, well-formed back, Agnes felt a flutter of excitement she hadn't felt in a long time. Yes, she was strong. She was beautiful. Far more so than Lacus Clyne.

As expected, Kira was alone in the maintenance bay, working on the Proud Defender. Agnes approached him from behind, offering a gesture of kindness.

"I brought you a late-night snack."

"Thanks. Just leave it there," Kira responded without looking up, his attention fixed on his work. Agnes knew why he was spending time with machinery at such an hour—it was trouble with Lacus.

After placing the tray down and not leaving immediately, Kira finally turned to her. "What?"

"I feel sorry for you, sir," Agnes said, feigning concern. "Her... dancing all cozily with other men in front of everyone... and you're about to head into dangerous battlefields..."

"That's... both of our jobs..." Kira replied with a forced smile, but Agnes could see through his facade.

"How can you not be angry? She's taking advantage of your kindness!" Agnes tried to stir his anger. Then she noticed a figure approaching down the hallway—pink hair, Lacus Clyne. Kira hadn't noticed her yet.

Perfect timing.

"Look at me," Agnes whispered, edging closer to Kira, ensuring Lacus couldn't hear. "You want to get back at her, don't you?"

She smiled slyly, but Kira looked confused.

"What do you mean—"

As Agnes moved even closer, lips almost touching his, Kira pushed her away roughly. "What are you trying to do!? You—"

His face was filled with anger and disgust. Agnes was shocked; she had thought anyone would be pleased to be kissed by her.

She hadn't expected to be looked at as if she were a venomous creature. As Kira turned to leave, Agnes grabbed his arm and shouted, "Why her?! I would never do that! Send the one I love off to battle while I safely watch from afar!"

"It's not like that!" Kira retorted sharply, leaving Agnes frozen in place. "You don't understand anything!"

He shook off her grip violently and left.

"You're the one who doesn't understand!" Agnes thought bitterly, nursing her wounded pride.

Everything I said was true. He's just avoiding it.

I'm far more valuable than some woman like that!

I'll make him regret treating me this way... for sure!

Kira was baffled.

He couldn't fathom why Agnes had suddenly acted that way. However, his attention was caught by a cart left in the corridor and understanding dawned upon him as he saw the late-night snack on the tray. The rice balls shaped like Haro made it clear who had prepared them.

Lacus had been here.

Did Agnes do that just to show off to Lacus?

Rushing to follow Lacus, Kira found no trace of her in the corridors. He ran down from the ship to the dock, scanning the lakeshore, where he spotted a lone figure in the dark. Approaching, he realized it wasn't Lacus but stopped in shock when he recognized the face.

"Chancellor Tao...?"

Why was the chancellor here at this hour?

Orphe was gazing at the moon.

"A beautiful moon tonight. In the darkness, it brings a supreme sense of tranquility. Don't you think?"

Kira, caught up in his own turmoil, had no patience for such poetic reflections.



"I'm sorry, some other time..." He attempted to pass by hurriedly, perhaps disrespectfully, when Orphee coldly remarked, "Do you honestly believe you have the right to chase after her?"

Kira stopped dead, facing Orphee's icy stare, a stark contrast to his affable demeanor earlier.

"I dare say... you're not worthy of her."

He said it with a pointed edge.

"Destruction, hatred, and death—that's all you bring about. Am I wrong?"

"What?" Kira drew in a sharp breath, unable to respond.

"What did you take from the world when you killed Chairman Durandal?"

Orphee's gaze, filled with what appeared to be hatred, bore into him.

What did Kira see looking into them? Was it loathing?

"Order, peace, a society without conflict—can you say your actions have compensated for what people have lost?"

"What're you--"

Kira began to tremble, realizing he couldn't deny it. His life had been one of combat. Opposing the Destiny Plan and killing Durandal had plunged the world into greater chaos. His actions were purely destructive.

"The world presented by the Destiny Plan is no longer attainable. You know that, right? Everyone wants to decide for themselves, find what they can do, what they're desired for," Orphee said with a cruel smile.

"*Was that true?*" Kira wondered. Had he disregarded the hopes of the majority for his ego?

That was his greatest fear.

"She is the light leading to such a world. Only those who can guide the world belong by her side," Orphee said with conviction. "I can do it. Create the world she desires—a world of stability and harmony, free from the cycle of battle. / can."

"What?"

Kira was torn between thinking it was impossible and considering it might be true. What about Lacus? She indeed sought peace.

"You *can't* do it. All you can do is fight," Orphee stated definitively, leaving Kira speechless.

Images of Lacus's sorrowful face haunted him; he was the source of her sadness.

"And when peace comes, what will you do? Will you take her hand with your bloodstained hands?" Orphee challenged him, and Kira swallowed hard.

His hands were indeed stained with blood, soaked in irredeemable sin. If he truly loved Lacus, would letting go be the right thing? Should he step back and leave her to someone capable of making her happy—this man who claimed he could bring peace?

As Orphee walked away leisurely, Kira was left alone under the moonlight, wrestling with his thoughts.

In the royal barracks, adjacent to a massive structure, was a hangar for mobile suits. Along the wall, an array of black mobile suits with a demonic appearance, each adorned with horns, stood in eerie silence. Among them, one suit, distinguished by wing-like protrusions on its head and extended shoulder parts, was illuminated by a light, under which a figure could be seen working intently.

Suddenly, the figure stood and turned sharply.

"Who's there?!"

The challenge echoed through the vast emptiness, sharp and alert.

Stepping into the light hesitantly was Agnes. The person she had approached—Shura—looked surprised.

"It's you?"

Rushing to him, Agnes threw herself into his embrace.

"Am I not beautiful? Do I lack allure?" she cried out, her voice choked with tears.

"Why can't I be the one?!"

Despite being confronted with such raw emotion, Shura remained composed. He gently lifted her face, brushing away her tears. "You are beautiful, Moonlight Valkyrie," he affirmed.

Hearing those words, Agnes broke down even more intensely. She had longed for such acknowledgment, craving someone to recognize her worth.

Shura held her gently, providing comfort. The gaping wound in her heart began to mend slowly. Agnes clung to him tightly, like a person drowning, grasping for salvation.

As Birdy sliced across the moon, Lacus watched its path fade into the distance, her thoughts adrift. Agnes's words echoed hauntingly in her ears.

—I would never do that! Send the one I love off to battle while I safely watch from afar!

Perhaps she was indeed heartless, she contemplated. From the very beginning, when she first entrusted Kira with the Freedom, sending him off to battle, believing it was his choice.

Yet, the thought that she might be abnormal for not holding him back in tears but instead sending him off to war, knowing full well what it entailed, troubled her deeply. Here she was, at the end of it all, with Kira worn by the battles and herself powerless to help.

Approaching Lacus as she sat in a gazebo by the lakeside was a figure.

"Can't sleep?" asked the voice, causing Lacus to startle and turn.

"Chancellor Orphee," she said, trying to rise hastily, but Orphee gestured for her to remain seated.

"Please... think of me as nothing more than a shadow cast by the moon," he said kindly, a comfort in the moment.

Sitting back down, Lacus and Orphee shared a silent vigil to the moon, pondering humanity's folly from its serene, untainted glow.

"How can all of this ever end?" Lacus murmured, voicing the heavy question. "Why is it so hard for people to live without fighting, to forgive each other?"

A futile question, perhaps, but it was her deepest wish, not something she could impose on others. Yet, she believed many others shared this desire, a simple wish humanity seemed incapable of fulfilling, likely as Durandal had predicted.

Orphee's hand moved gently to rest upon hers, the familiar ring catching the moon's light, shimmering silver.

"It can be ended... by us," he whispered, perhaps devilishly. Yet, to Lacus, it seemed angelic, Orphee's warmth and the mingling lights of the moon and lake tenderly enveloping her.

Orphee smiled, "I am here to help you solely for that purpose."

His voice carried a poignant tone, stunning Lacus.

"Who are you?" the words once again slipped from her lips.

Orphee's smile brightened. "I am Orphee Lam Tao—someone who can stand alongside you and bring peace back to this world..."

Could such a thing be possible? But...

"Yes... it can be done. By us," a conviction beyond reason affirmed within her.

"The world is yours, and you belong to the world," whispered echoes of a forgotten time suggested. Yes, Lacus and Orphee had been side by side, far longer than they could remember, from the very inception of their beings.

Visions of maternal smiles, children's laughter, and the first dawn's awakening flowed through her as Orphee's gaze remained tender.

"I was born for this purpose, to fulfill the mission bestowed upon me. And you as well," he assured.

In the shared warmth of their resolve, Lacus felt a profound relief, realizing she had finally found her way to him—the path to a happiness grander than she ever dared to dream was about to begin.

"How did it go?" Meyrin asked Athrun upon his return.

Settling into a chair and removing his disguise sunglasses, his expression was grim.

"Cagalli was right... her suspicions were spot on."

Seeing his expression, Meyrin stood up.

"Coffee? It's not from the tiger blend," she offered.

"I'll take some," he accepted.

Pouring coffee from the pot into two cups, she brought them over. The familiar aroma seemed to soothe frayed nerves.

"Thank you," he said, taking his cup and beginning to speak. "This country... on the surface, it appears noble, but that's just a facade."

Tucked carefully away was a slum, where a segment of the populace received no benefit from the government. Armed police preemptively quashed protestors planning to act upon COMPS' arrival, arresting many and

shooting some on the spot. Athrun, having infiltrated Foundation, had firsthand witness of the brutal purge.

The placards held by the demonstrators bore the words: "Oppose the Destiny Plan."

Meyrin gasped, realizing the dark underbelly of Foundation's prosperity hinged on the Destiny Plan. Adopting it promised undeniable benefits: increased productivity, simplified decision-making, clearly benefiting some. But the reality of its implementation was another matter. Inevitably, if people were selected by genetics, Coordinators naturally dominating Naturals was a given. A minority of Coordinators monopolizing key positions, entirely usurping Naturals' opportunities—resistance from those who found this disagreeable was understandable.

"What did you manage to find out?" Athrun inquired.

Her expression turned troubled.

"Well... Aura Maha Khyber became the adopted daughter of the previous emperor in C.E. 72 from a distant relation within the Khyber family, the Kaidu clan... However, there's no record of a girl of the appropriate age in the Kaidu family. But..."

She turned her laptop screen towards him.

"In C.E. 25, there was a girl named 'Aura'..."

"Unrelated, I'm sure. The years are too far apart. Maybe her mother, or..."

"Right," she agreed.

"So, we're back to not knowing much..."

The Khyber family itself traced back to the era of the Kipchak Khan, a royal lineage with a storied history, but the information had become considerably muddled through annexation by Eurasia and the chaos of war.

"But, I've been looking into the former emperor's financial transactions... Look at this," Meyrin said as she quickly called up more items her laptop before pointing at the screen.

Athrun's eyes widened at the sight.

"My god..."

"I have Terminal investigating now. No reply yet, but..."

Athrun sighed deeply, leaning back in his chair.

"It seems we need to expedite that end of things."

That night, in the deepest sanctum of the palace, adorned with opulence where few dare tread, they gathered. At the edge of a bed framed by golden columns, Aura sat daintily, with Redel and Daniel perched at her feet, leaning against her knees from either side. Orphee and Shura settled onto the same bed while the rest stood around Aura in a loose assembly.

"The princess looked stunning," Redelard, or Redel, the sole female member of the Black Knight Squad and Ingrid's sister—though such bonds bore little significance here, where all were brothers and sisters in spirit—remarked, utterly enchanted.

"Indeed. Far more beautiful in person than on screen," Liu, usually so sardonic, did not hide his admiration this time. Even the hair buzzed Griffin seemed excited like a child.

"And she seemed so kind, almost divine," Daniel, his voice muffled by a mask, snorted but unusually refrained from any complaint.

Shura glanced at Orphee.

"You 'felt' it, didn't you, Orphee?"

"Yes... not diminished by the long hiatus... she is undeniably ours..." Orphee said, his gaze drifting dreamily.

Seeing his expression, a sharp pain pierced Ingrid's heart. Everyone here was buoyed by joy and anticipation—all except Ingrid. Orphee, Shura, Redel, Liu, Griffin, Daniel, and Aura—all were her dearest "family." Yet, at this moment, Ingrid's heart was tightly sealed, careful not to let her true feelings show.

"Never... they must never know... The emotions buried deep within my heart..."

Aura, who had been gently stroking the heads of Redel and Daniel by her side, spoke up. "It's been a long journey. You've all endured so much..."

Redel looked up at her adoringly while Daniel rested his head against her knee. Strangely, Aura, despite her youthful appearance, seemed almost maternal to them.

"Let us go, my children... to a new future," Aura said, as if singing.

"As dictated by your destinies... everything as it was meant to be from the beginning," she continued, their faces alight with unrestrained joy.

Aura looked at each of them with a mother's gaze, smiling gently.

"The world awaits you."

Chapter.03

As the first light of dawn crept over the horizon, the operation to capture Michael was already casting its long shadow. Lacus, from the strategic command center nestled within the palace walls, bid farewell to the departing Archangel, its silhouette receding against the expanse of the sea.

From the Millennium, Kira's Freedom, Shinn's Justice, and the Gyan units piloted by Hilda and Agnes launched, aligning their course with the Archangel's path.

A flicker of unease took root in Lacus as she watched the machines dwindle into dots against the horizon.

—*When you return, let's talk... properly this time.*

The words she had imparted to Kira that morning echoed back to her.

Kira had offered a stiff smile in response, his face etched with the fatigue of battles yet fought.

They had been too close, assuming understanding where there was none, their coexistence a careful dance of avoidance to spare each other pain. Lacus harbored deep regrets for having drawn Kira into an endless conflict, for if the battle could not be concluded—if peace remained elusive—she wished for him to step down, to leave COMPS, to abandon the cockpit of his mobile suit and return to a semblance of normal life, to preserve the gentleness within him even if it meant letting go of his hand.

Blinking back the moisture in her eyes, Lacus straightened, her resolve firm. This was not the time for sentimentality. The strategic command room was occupied not only by Aura and Orphee but also by her secretary, Ingrid, and seated opposite her were two Eurasian officers.

Though the operation was a joint effort on the surface—COMPS, Foundation, and Eurasia—the actual foray into the Eldora district was a venture of COMPS alone. Eurasia, wary of Foundation and perhaps rightly so given their history of independence, suspected this was not merely an act of aggression against them. Not even COMPS was unconditionally trusted. The prior strategy meeting had made it clear: entry was permitted only into the Eldora region.

"Any crossing of the military boundary would be seen as an act of invasion, warranting immediate retaliation, whether you're from COMPS or Foundation."

Thus, the Eurasian officers were akin to military overseers, vigilantly monitoring for any untoward actions from COMPS or Foundation, believing

them to be pawns of the PLANTS, ever-poised to encroach upon their territory. No amount of denial would change that.

Despite their suspicions, Lacus knew gratitude was due for their allowance of military action into Eldora.

On the strategic map before them, the luminescent markers representing the Archangel and the COMPS mobile suit squad inched closer to the Eldora district, nearing Foundation's military boundary, already teeming with the Foundation Forces, including the Black Knights squad.

Lacus held her breath, her gaze fixed on the advancing light points as they approached the line that demarcated friend from foe, peace from war.

As the Murasame squad launched from the Archangel, missiles soared from the earth below, aiming for the fighter-form Murasames and the Archangel itself.

"Helldart, Wombat, Igelstellung, begin interception!"

Murrue's commanding voice echoed through the bridge, a clarion call amidst the chaos.

Missiles plummeted, blossoming into fiery blooms across the Eldoran sky, marking the commencement of hostilities.

The Archangel took the lead, coordinating the front lines, while the Foundation forces undertook the evacuation of civilians and fortified the border to prevent the escape of Blue Cosmos. Across the military demarcation zone, Eurasian forces were expected to deploy in kind.

Kira, leading his own squadron, issued orders.

"Shinn, Agnes, Hilda, neutralize the enemy mobile suits! We're heading for Michael's command post."

"Copy that!"

Acknowledgments crackled back, a chorus of determination.

Michael, ensconced within a fortress amidst the Eldoran mountains as per Eurasian intelligence, remained Kira's primary target.

Mu, commanding the Archangel's Murasame squad, dispatched his own orders.

"Shikishima squad, cover the Justice and Gyan. Mahoroba squad, on me!"

They advanced, crushing ground-based anti-air defenses en route.

Suddenly, a Blue Cosmos mobile suit squadron emerged as they approached a supply depot, converging for a counterattack. The Justice transformed from its flight mode and, together with the Gyan, launched an assault.

The Freedom, leading the vanguard, became the focus of enemy fire, but Kira, with almost precognitive agility, evaded the beams and disabled enemy armaments with passing shots.

The ruins of the fortress loomed closer when Kira, sensing a killing intent, ascended sharply.

A torrent of thick beams surged, scything through forest and town with incendiary fury. Cutting through the rising smoke, a massive black shadow revealed itself, taking Kira's breath away.

It was the Destroy.

Its massive disk was absent from its back, and one arm was missing. It was likely assembled from scavenged parts, yet its threat remained undeniable.

Kira warned his following Murasame squad to fall back, but it was too late. Another thick beam from the Destroy's chest cannon fired, clipping a Murasame's wing and sending it spiraling down—a mere graze demonstrating devastating power.

"Like hell, I'll let that happen again!"

Shinn's enraged voice pierced the tumult.

The Destroy advanced, unleashing beams as flames cleaved through the cityscape, dyeing the sky in shades of crimson.

As the citizens of Eldora city fled towards the border, they were met by Foundation soldiers at checkpoints, desperately trying to organize the evacuation. Yet, seeing their city engulfed in flames behind them, the refugees panicked, pushing forward in a frantic bid for safety.

From his vantage point in the Black Knights' squad's Shi-ve.A, Shura watched the teeming crowd below.

"Help us!"

Amid the desperate cries for help, he noticed a man and a woman, both carrying backpacks from which a red light blinked ominously. Zooming in on his monitor, Shura saw the man's face twisted in fear, sweat streaming down his face as the light on his backpack blinked faster and faster.

Then, in an instant, a flash of light exploded, consuming the man and spreading, engulfing the surrounding people.

Explosions rippled through the dense crowd, tossing Foundation soldiers and military vehicles aside.

Shura let out a deliberate cry of anguish. He understood perfectly what was happening and what this tragedy meant for them.

Similar explosions were occurring throughout the city.

"What's happening!?" Shinn exclaimed, staring at the monitor in shock.

Was this an attack? But the explosions were happening in civilian areas, unrelated to their forces or military bases.

A woman appeared on the monitor, trying to rid herself of her backpack in fear, just before it too exploded.

Shinn gasped in horror.

"They're targeting civilians!" Hilda's voice came through, thick with anger. It took a moment for Shinn to fully grasp the gravity of the situation.

"What despicable cowardice!" Orphee exclaimed, rising to his feet as the horror unfolded on the monitor.

Lacus struck with cold dismay, watched intently.

Blue Cosmos had coerced civilians into bearing bombs, likely forcing the captured populace into this grim servitude, their explosive burdens rigged to detonate should they attempt removal. Words like 'cowardly' failed to encompass the sheer malevolence of the act, leaving Lacus feeling nauseated by the evil.

"All vehicles and infantry, pull back!" Shura commanded from the border, his voice cutting through the chaos.

"What the hell have they done!" A pilot's voice roared with fury.

With attacks from the Destroy and explosions using civilians, the city bled fire from every corner, its streets littered with civilians—some fallen, others frantically fleeing the encroaching flames.

"We must immediately rescue the injured in Eldora city!" Orphee ordered, then sharply turned to the Eurasian officers.

"This is acceptable, yes?"

Initially, Foundation forces were to stay at the border, not crossing into the buffer zone of Eldora. Yet, witnessing the catastrophe, the Eurasian officers, albeit with reluctance, nodded in agreement.

"We have no choice. Rescue operations in the Eldora district are permitted."

Hearing the command, Shura responded, "Understood."

Their agents had infiltrated the area, but Blue Cosmos's actions were more brazen than anticipated, facilitating an undeniable cause to cross the border, simplifying their task. Shura, without uttering a word, communicated with his team.

"The op is a go."

Silent acknowledgments returned.

"Leave it to us!"

"Understood."

"Annihilation."

The Black Knights' squad, their dark machines poised against the sky, launched towards Eldora.

As Kira engaged the formidable Destroy, the dire situation within the city reached him even amidst the chaos of battle. Weaving through the relentless net of beams aimed at him, he closed in on the massive enemy machine.

"Take this!"

Shinn's Justice, fueled by rage, charged forward, deftly dodging beams and hurling his shield boomerang at the enemy.



In perfect sync, Kira also released his boomerang. Shinn's weapon pierced through Destroy's beam shield, shattering the remaining arm, followed by Kira's boomerang, decapitating the monstrous machine.

Together, they plunged their sabers into the behemoth's core, retreating just as it erupted into a towering inferno.

"We did it!" Shinn exclaimed, but Kira's expression immediately tightened.

—*We're not done yet.*

Michael was still out there.

Overlooking the Destroy, ablaze like a colossal torch, Griffin brings his formidable Black Knights' squad machine, the Rud-ro.A, to a halt. Below him, Freedom and Justice, icons of resistance, move with purpose.

Though Griffin had crossed borders under the guise of aiding Eldora's civilians, his gaze did not wander to the city streets below.

His focus was singular, locked on the radiant machine with wings spread wide—the Freedom. Slowly, Griffin extends the tendrils of his mind.

Quietly, methodically, he searched for the vulnerable prey's psychic signature. And then, as if anchoring himself, Griffin swiftly linked to the target's mind.

A sinister whisper echoed, "Plunge into darkness, Kira Yamato..."

Suddenly, an unknown force assaulted Kira, blurring his vision.

—*What's happening?*

His head felt oppressively heavy as if being forcibly held down. The rocky remnants of the fortress on his monitor doubled and blurred, seeming to drift away. For a moment, dark emotions surged from within, enveloping everything in a tumultuous vortex. Heat flushed through his body, followed by an empty, hollow sensation.

—*Who am I?*

Kira found himself haunted by visions: a sorrowful Lacus, a triumphant Orphee stealing her away, and his own inability to pursue, hindered by the dead clutching at his legs from a sea of blood. Durandal's face loomed, offering a cold smile.

—*What I say is the truth, isn't it?*

Suddenly, the hallucinations dissipated, leaving Kira gasping for air alone in the cockpit.

Everything was normal, yet he was drenched in cold sweat, oblivious to his own state.

Then, within his sights, the figure he sought appeared.

"Michael?"

Against all odds, the silhouette of a man boarding a vehicle within the depths of the fortress was unmistakably real to Kira. Intent on fleeing alone, abandoning the fortress.

—/I won't let you escape!

Shinn noticed the abrupt turn of the Freedom, veering away from the fortress ruins.

"Commander?"

He couldn't fathom what had occurred. They were on the verge of capturing Michael.

As he kicked away an attacking Dagger and returned fire at an enemy vehicle, he questioned, "Commander, what's happening?"

The response he received was perplexing.

"I'm securing Michael! Shinn, cover me."

"What? But... huh?"

Shinn looked around, bewildered. It was clear Michael was here; the enemy's concerted effort to halt their advance was proof enough. Yet, could Kira be mistaken?

"He's getting away!"

Kira's voice was tinged with urgency.

Then Mu's voice cut in, "What's happening, Kira? You're nearing the border. What are you doing!?"

Watching from above, Griffin sported a smug smile. He had fallen for it completely, as easily as twisting a baby's arm.

Even Kira Yamato, against our capabilities, was no more than an insect.

"Keep chasing the nonexistent Michael. Play the fool."

Straight ahead...

Griffin's gaze followed another boundary line in the distance.

On the Archangel, communications officer Himeko announced, "Commander Yamato's unit is changing course to 105 Charlie, heading towards Eurasian territory."

"What?" Murrue turned to the monitor in surprise.

Freedom's signal was indeed moving away from the combat zone towards the Eurasian border.

She quickly grabbed the communicator.

"Commander Yamato, what's happening?"

"I've spotted Michael. I'm going to capture him!"

Murrue was shocked anew.

Michael had escaped the fierce battle zone? But it didn't make sense. The Freedom was flying at nearly top speed; any pursuit would require a jet or mobile suit, yet no such target was visible.

What had Kira found?

Murrue's confusion stemmed from her deep trust in Kira. She switched channels, calling for Mu.

"Lieutenant La Flaga, report!"

They needed to verify the situation urgently as Freedom approached the border.

"Warning! Freedom, you are approaching Eurasian Federation territory. Alter your course immediately!"

The Eurasian border forces issued a warning.

Foundation headquarters, meanwhile, was in turmoil.

"Why is he headed to Eurasia?"

Orphee glared at the monitor, frustrated.

A Eurasian officer shouted in anger, "What's the meaning of this, President!"

Lacus desperately called out, "Freedom, turn back now! Kira!"

The Eurasian forces at the border issued orders.

"Start firing warning shots!"

"Please wait!" Lacus cried out in distress.

This had to be a mistake. It was unthinkable for Kira to forget their prior agreement and invade Eurasia.

Yet, the border forces didn't heed her pleas, showering him with gunfire.

Dodging the barrage, Kira spat out, "Still resisting?"

In his vision, Michael fled, and mobile suits blocked his path.

With a vacant look, Kira locked onto multiple targets.

"Commander!"

"Kira, stop!"

"No, Kira!"

Shinn, Mu, Murrue—all their voices of restraint went unheard.

"I'll end this here!"

With Kira's cry, Freedom unleashed its full arsenal.

The Freedom's beams incapacitated several Eurasian mobile suits in a relentless assault, leaving Lacus frozen in disbelief at the scene unfolding on her monitor.

A Eurasian officer stood up, shouting, "This is a clear act of aggression!"

The command center was engulfed in an unusual tension, with Ingrid stepping forward protectively as if to shield Aura.

Lacus continued her desperate calls, "Kira! Kira! Can't you hear me!?"

The response she received only heightened her concerns.

"It's Michael! I can't let him escape here!"

But Michael couldn't possibly be there; only the Eurasian military was present.

Kira wouldn't make such a mistake.

Orphee, in a frantic state, attempted to explain to the accusing Eurasian officers.

"This is not our intention! This is Commander Yamato's unilateral action!"

"You planned to drag COMPS into this from the beginning, didn't you? If so, we will take countermeasures!"

To outsiders, it seemed a pretext for invasion, expanding territory under the guise of pursuing a nonexistent Michael, with Foundation and COMPS supposedly in collusion.

Orphee looked palely at Lacus, suggesting, "This being the case—Princess," Lacus felt a chill.

"Please wait. There must be a reason. Commander Yamato is—"

"Clearly in a delirious state," Orphee interrupted coldly. "Or possibly—treason."

"That's just not possible!" Lacus vehemently disagreed.

"Unfortunately, the current situation suggests otherwise," Orphee pointed to the monitor showing Freedom's continued assault on the Eurasian forces, occasionally whitening the screen with intense gunfire.

Treason was unthinkable, but delirium? If Kira truly saw the nonexistent Michael, had his kindness finally broken him? Was the feared scenario unfolding?

"If COMPS cannot resolve this situation, let us handle it," Orphee implored Lacus.

"All our diplomatic efforts will be in vain! Human casualties will only escalate... all because of one person's rampage!"

If Eurasia perceived this as an invasion and retaliated, the recovering Foundation would be thrust back into war, and innocent citizens would suffer.

Not just that, the PLANTs could be dragged into this, potentially sparking a global conflict once again.

Lacus, as a woman who loves Kira, wanted to scream 'no' with all her might. Yet, she was the President of COMPS; she had decided to fulfill this role.

"Understood," her role forced her to speak these words, left with no other choice.

"Please... stop Kira..."

Through the communicator, Kira heard Lacus's voice, faint and seemingly at the brink of despair.

"Does that mean permission to attack General Yamato?"

Orphee sought confirmation, and Lacus's reply was faint, almost lost,
"Yes..."

Kira was in disbelief.

"Lacus?"

"Wait, President Cly--"

Mu's attempt to intervene was lost to static. The notion that Lacus had authorized an attack on him was inconceivable.

Why?

For a fleeting moment, under the moon's luminous gaze, the memory of Lacus and Orphee in an embrace flashed through his mind's eye.

Aboard the Millennium, the communications officer Abbey voiced her surprise.

"We're experiencing severe signal interference. All comms are down."

Captain Konoe's expression darkened. The situation was as clear to the Millennium as it was bewildering. Kira's unexpected move was followed by Lacus's pressured command to attack and then as if on cue, a total communication blackout.

"It's NJ Dazzler jamming," Albert announced, analyzing his instruments. "This technology hasn't been operationalized, yet... How did they solve quantum sputtering control? This isn't the work of Eurasia or Blue Cosmos."

His rapid-fire mutterings were incomprehensible to Konoe, who didn't grasp a word of the technical jargon or care how they planned to resolve any quantum conundrums. However, the last part was crystal clear. If neither Eurasia nor Blue Cosmos was behind this, they were in dire straits.

Konoe acted swiftly.

"Launch Lunamaria's unit! Bring the sniper rifle and the communications thread!"

"Go, Shura. Fulfill your role," Orphee's go-ahead was clear.

Everything was going as planned. Shura responded briefly, "Roger."

Griffin and Riddel's excitement was palpable.

"We'll finish this in two minutes!"

"Kyahaha! Die!"

Their dark machines surged toward the Freedom, embodying a mix of calm and exhilaration.

Finally.

After a long period of lying in wait, they were about to leap onto the stage of history.

And for that—first, you.

Freedom—Kira Yamato!

The cockpit's alarms blare into life, rousing Kira from his daze. On his monitor, an oddly shaped black mobile suit closes in.

"The Black Knights?"

A red laser beams from its head, locking on. Kira tries to evade, but the enemy is faster.

In an instant, his rifle is pierced by a beam, followed by his shield, linear gun, and thrusters being systematically destroyed.

"Stop! Why are you—" he shouts, managing to land and desperately defending against the onslaught.

Then, a voice echoes directly in his mind, "Why? Look around you!"

Things he hadn't noticed before now come into sharp focus and Kira gasps.

The surrounding landscape has changed; the rocky hill that once marked a fortress is gone. Scattered around are mobile suits and the wreckage of anti-aircraft guns—not of Blue Cosmos, but likely Eurasian regular forces.

"What's going on?" he wonders, unable to do anything but feel bewildered.

The stark realization that he's responsible for the destruction, yet what he's seeing now is completely different from before, overwhelms him.

As he stands frozen, the Black Knights' unit Rud-ro.A pounces.

"We will kill you!"

"Sorry! Princess Lacus doesn't need you anymore!" a girl's gleeful voice strikes him like a blow.

In a forest somewhat away from the battlefield, two Rud-ro.A stand hidden, enveloped by silence—the conflict already concluded.

Deep within the woods, in a clearing, two armored vehicles equipped with missile launchers are parked. Surrounding them are countless bodies.

Each soldier, taken out with a single precise shot, eyes wide open in shock.

Inside one vehicle, a soldier is held at gunpoint, the muzzle pressed against his temple by a member of the Black Knights' squad, Daniel.

"Passcode," Daniel demands, the captured soldier's eyes bulging with terror. Without waiting for a verbal response, Daniel fires.

The soldier's body, now limp, is carelessly tossed aside, landing atop the already bloodied bodies of his comrades.

No need for spoken answers—a thought is enough.

Daniel inputs the passcode gleaned from the soldier's mind into the launch system. The passcode is accepted, and the launch sequence appears on the monitor. He quickly sets the target location and timer.

After completing his task, Daniel steps out of the vehicle, just as Liu emerges from another.

Everything is going as planned.

They sprint through the forest like shadows, board their units, and leave the area.

"Commander?"

Shinn looks up, driven by an inexplicable anxiety.

He parries an incoming Dagger, slicing through it with his shield's blade before leaping into the air. Although the battle rages on below, an indefinable urgency propels him skyward.

"Shinn, what's wrong?"

Mu's Murasame follows, calling out to him, but Shinn can't articulate his feelings.

Something terribly wrong is happening—he just knows it.

Suddenly, a black unit, a Rud-ro.A, blocks Justice's path.

Shinn tries to dodge, but the two Rud-ro.A coordinate to block his way and attack.

"Get out of my way!"

Shinn, infuriated, fires his rifle, but the beam ricochets off the black unit's armor.

"You haven't learned a thing. I thought we proved you're no match for us!"

A voice rings in his head.

Right. Beam weapons are ineffective against these units.

Beams were shot at him, and Shinn barely manages to block it with his shield.

"Shinn!"

Hilda tries to come to his aid but is hit by another Foundation unit's attack, damaging her machine.

"These guys... I knew it!" Mu shouts, dodging the Foundation unit's assault.

"It's a trap!" Murrue commands from the bridge of the Archangel.

"Advance the Archangel. Maas and Herbert units, cover our allies' retreat!"

The situation had shifted dramatically. The Foundation suits, which had supposedly crossed the border to rescue civilians, had started attacking COMPS openly.

Why they had taken such an action was unclear, but Murrue had a sinking feeling.

Communication was still cut off. There was no way to inform the Millennium or Lacus, who was at headquarters, about the situation.

"Launch signal flares! We're going to rescue Kira and the others."

Could Foundation be involved in Kira's actions? It's unthinkable that Kira would attack Eurasia otherwise.

The Freedom, it seems, had been damaged by attacks from the Shi-ve.A and Rud-roh.A. They had to intervene and recover Kira somehow.

As the Archangel heads into the battle zone, two mobile suits are seen taking off from the forest.

"Heat signatures resembling mobile suits. Distance 17,000."

Chandra's report catches Murrue's attention.

"Black Knights?"

The black units appear to be Rud-roh.A. Neumann, the helmsman, questions their presence.

"They're way behind the Eurasian forces. Why are they there?"

"Ah, the jig is up?" Daniel murmurs unashamedly upon sighting the white vessel ahead.

Liu shrugs.

"No problem. We just have to deal with them, too."

Just like the ones they had taken care of in the forest. All witnesses must be eliminated.

As Liu accelerates towards the Archangel,

"It's all the same, huh? What a hassle..."

Daniel follows, complaining. He understands, too.

They were never at that place.

Any evidence of their presence must be thoroughly erased.

They must not be connected to what comes next...

Something was launched from the forest ahead.

"Heat source detected, believed to be a missile!"

Chandra's words cause Murrue to catch her breath. It's right from where the two Rud-roh.A had taken off.

"Switching to optical imaging."

A low-flying missile appears on the monitor.

"What is that?!"

"A GLCM Mark 70 cruise tactical nuclear missile! From the Eurasian forces!"

The entire bridge crew turns pale.

Could this be Eurasian retaliation? Or—

Murrue panics.

They're unable to respond from their position. With communications down, there's no way to inform the Millennium.

Is there anything they can do—?

Then, the next report comes in.

"Two Black Knights units are heading towards our ship!"

A Eurasian officer, pale-faced, ends the call. Turning back to Lacus and the others, he speaks.

"From the homeland. A tactical nuclear missile launch from within Eurasia has been confirmed."

For a moment, the entire command center falls into a stunned silence.

Lacus asks in disbelief, "The target?"

"The target is... here."

Everything feels like a nightmare.

Orphee snaps back to reality and begins issuing orders.

"Evacuate all personnel! Issue evacuation orders to the entire city! Move as many civilians as possible underground."

The operators, who had been frozen as if in a play, spring into action. They relay Orphee's instructions loudly, the area buzzing with frantic activity.

It's impossible—Lacus thinks in despair—there's no time to evacuate everyone...

The image of the beautiful city viewed from above flashes in her mind.

All of it—

Orphee places a hand on Lacus's back, urging her.

"Please, this way."

"But..."

Lacus looks towards the people hurriedly evacuating. Urged by Ingrid to hurry, she quickly follows them. Aura is here, too. She can't interfere with their efforts to protect their sovereign.

With a heavy heart, Lacus runs down the corridor with Orphee and the others.

Meanwhile, near the border, the Eurasian forces were also in chaos.

"An accidental launch? Can we really dismiss it as that? It's a nuclear missile! Which fool—"

The commander's face turned red as he yelled.

No response came from the nuclear missile vehicle that was supposed to be on standby behind their position despite repeated calls.

"It's no use! We can't establish control over it!" the operator reported in a panicked voice.

Blood drained from the commander's face.

This would undoubtedly become an international incident.

If it was revealed that a nuclear weapon had been fired towards a country on the same continent—this couldn't be brushed off as a mere accident.

"Major, there's a direct communication from the Foundation Palace!"

"Connect—"

Before the commander could finish his instruction, a black mobile suit landed in front of the command vehicle, aiming its guns at them.

In the next moment, they were incinerated by a torrent of beams.

Meanwhile, the Archangel was in the midst of battle.

Two Rud-roh.A had suddenly attacked.

"Gotfried 1 and 2 hit!"

"Air combat! Fire the Igelstellung and Wombat! Start damage control!"

Murrue shouted, steadying herself inside the shaking vessel.

Their beam cannons were disabled, and they resorted to Vulcan and missile counterattacks, but the Rud-roh.A dodged, leaving only after images, and all shots missed.

Maas and Herbert's Gelgoogs launched in a flurry.

Another beam hit directly, shaking the ship violently.

"Igelstellung and Helldarts, inoperable!"

"Multiple heat sources resembling missiles are rapidly approaching!"

With no weapons left to counter, they were bombarded with missiles from what appeared to be Foundation GINN units. Murrue screamed desperately.

"Deploy flares! Hard to starboard, full speed!"

The flares triggered the missiles to explode prematurely, creating numerous blossoms of fire around the ship, shaking it even more as the Archangel gradually descended.

Under relentless attack, Murrue was certain.

They had seen something they weren't supposed to, and now they were being targeted for elimination.

To erase the witnesses.

So, what now?

From the Foundation capital, on the Millennium, Lunamaria's Gelgoog was preparing for an emergency launch.

"Battle coordinates 020 Whiskey, 138 November," Albert announced the incoming missiles' coordinates.

"Acknowledged!"

Lunamaria, despite her anxious expression, launched resolutely. The communication cable stretched between the Millennium and her, a lifeline in the midst of jamming. With communications relying on wired connections, the Gelgoog landed on the shore, readying its sniper rifle as Konoe commanded.

"Close the bridge! Dive quickly!"

"Aye! Vent open! Millennium, rapid submersion!"

As shutters covered the sides, the ship submerged into the lake.

With a nuclear missile incoming, they would normally want to flee, but their last line of defense was Lunamaria's Gelgoog. They couldn't just run away when all other forces were deployed elsewhere.

Konoe wondered if even this had been anticipated.

Lunamaria's Gelgoog crouched, rifle aimed, her heart racing, hands slick with sweat.

Why is it always me caught in these situations?

She wanted to complain to someone, anyone.

What's happening at the front? Without communications, there's no way to know how Shinn and the others are doing.

But worrying about them wasn't an option now.

The lives of everyone in the capital depended on her.

"There it is."

The flying object was caught in her scope, approaching low over the river leading to the lake. The missile changed its angle abruptly, just before the lake, ascending. The targeting system barely managed to track it.

Lunamaria narrowed her eyes, held her breath, and pressed the trigger to fire.

The beam stretched from the gun barrel towards the ascending missile. It destroyed the missile over the lake.

Lunamaria exhaled the breath she had been holding.

The bridge of the Millennium erupted in cheers.

"We did it!"

Arthur jumped up in joy.

However, Albert quickly dampened the mood with his urgent shout.

"A second missile has changed course!"

"What!?" Arthur panicked, rushing to the monitor.

Another missile was seen changing its trajectory, seemingly evading the sniper shot, and moving away from them.

Albert gave the order.

"You've got to pull back, Lunamaria! You can't snipe this one!"

Descending in an elevator, the group reached an underground hangar where a shuttle was parked. Lacus, who had expected to find a shelter, was surprised but followed Orphee and the others aboard.

A pilot was already in the cockpit, and the shuttle was ready for launch.

Orphee, taking his seat, commanded hastily.

"Depart as soon as ready!"

Confused, Lacus took her seat and fastened her seatbelt at the encouragement of others.

Almost simultaneously, the shuttle started moving and accelerated.

Exiting the dark underground tunnel, the view opened up.

For a moment, the twinkling buildings of the capital, Ishtaria, were visible through the window. Lacus thought of the people there and felt a suffocating tightness in her chest.

Please... please...

Despite knowing it was futile, she prayed fervently.

That everyone could evacuate to safety...
That the missile would fail to detonate...
That interception would be successful...
Please...

Another missile?!

Lunamaria felt a shiver of dread.

The brief moment of triumph turned into anxiety.

"I won't know until I try..."

Ignoring the order to evacuate, Lunamaria fired her verniers, jumping up to secure a clear line of sight.

Was the second missile flying low like the first, or was it obscured by the expansive forest, making it hard to spot? But it would have to ascend just before reaching its target, just like the first.

She decided to wait for that moment!

Lunamaria steeled herself, knowing the precision of her sniping would drop significantly while in flight, and she had only a moment to aim.

But she had to try!

The missile burst from the forest.

Lunamaria fired her rifle in quick succession and launched the linear cannon.

"Here goes!"

But it was too far.

The beam missed the missile, and the linear cannon rounds fell short, tracing a futile arc in the air.

"Damn!"

Lunamaria cut her verniers, plunging towards the lake, consumed by a terrible sense of failure.

As she hit the water and the suit was swallowed by the lake, she saw a tremendous flash through the water's surface.

A moment later, the Millennium was rocked by the shock.

Inside the lake, the water churned like a stormy sea, and the crew clung to anything nearby, stifling their screams.

Amid the turmoil, Konoe instinctively looked upwards.

If such an impact could be felt under the lake, what was happening outside?

It was easy to imagine, yet a reality he didn't want to confront.

The shuttle's monitors starkly displayed the grim reality unfolding far below. A glowing orb of light swelled, consuming Ishtaria in its hungry embrace.

Lacus bit her lip hard, staring at the scene. Her prayers had gone unanswered. Ingrid turned away, a look of sorrow on her face. That beautiful city—its resurgence, prosperity, and history—all vanished in an instant, along with the lives of tens of thousands, all due to a single missile.

"Is that—!?"

Kira noticed the towering mushroom cloud rising in the direction of Foundation.

What exactly was happening?

Was Lacus safe?

But he had no time to ponder further. He swung his beam saber at the advancing Shi-ve.A, which easily blocked the strike with its shield. As Kira lept back and fired his linear gun, the Shi-ve.A, anticipating the trajectory, closed the distance with a twist and slashed the Freedom's linear gun in two with a beam blade from its foot.

"Damn!"

Kira found himself relentlessly driven into a corner.

Black smoke billowed from various parts of its once-white hull as the Archangel continued its descent.

"Gotfried, Igelstellung all destroyed! Engines stopped! Fire is nearing the ammunition depot!"

The ship was done for. Murrue made the call.

"Detach the engines! Abandon ship! All hands, evacuate!"

Thus, the vessel that had survived two great wars and brought them this far... was going down. But there was no time to dwell on this somber thought.

Murrue yelled as the engine-less ship shook,

"Brace for impact!"

The ground rushed up to meet them.

The Archangel plunged nose-first into the earth, carving out the soil as debris shot up along its sides. Murrue clung desperately to her seat, enduring the violent shock. The ship skidded across the ground, its right wing breaking off in a twist as the ammunition depot detonated, spewing flames.

Maas and Herbert's Gelgoogs were locked in combat with Liu and Daniel's Rud-ro.A, even as the Archangel went down.

"Letting them do as they please while the Cap'n is away—"

Despite their precise shooting, the Rud-ro.A's incredible mobility meant that the beams simply bounced off their black armor, leaving not a scratch.

"This must be that Femto-tech armor!" Herbert groaned.



"Exactly. And now you die seeing it," a triumphant voice echoed in their heads.

What are these guys?!

Maas, drawing his saber, charged at the enemy. The Rud-ro.A's cloak-like equipment spread out, emitting a red glow.

"?!"

Maas's saber should have pierced the enemy machine—but there was no resistance, and his Gelgoog passed right through the black unit.

What the—!?

As he tried to turn, a beam blade pierced the Gelgoog's cockpit. The Rud-ro.A he thought he had hit had somehow moved behind him.

Similarly, Herbert was caught off guard by illusions, leaving his side wide open for a devastating slash.

"Damn, this is... a monster...!"

"Sorry, Cap'n..."

Their murmurs of regret were swallowed by the flames of the explosion. The end for these seasoned warriors was tragically swift.

"Maas! Herbert!"

Hilda watched in shock as the suits of her comrades fell. She couldn't believe that those two, always so brash and full of life, could be taken down so easily. Their boisterous laughter and the banter they shared flashed through her mind.

—*You bastards, even the gods of hell don't want you!*

—*That's just plain rude! Can't speak for you, but I'm headed to heaven.*

Both Hilda and Maas laughed at his audacity.

Despite facing countless desperate battles together, they had always survived... until now. And now, the Archangel had been brought down, a ship that had navigated through numerous fierce battles.

Hilda clenched her fists tightly.

Sure enough, Foundation harbored monsters.

As the bridge crew boarded the elevator, Neumann and Chandra were seen saluting before the doors closed. Murrue took one last look around the now empty bridge, where every instrument signaled distress or was already dead.

Considering the many perilous situations they had endured, it was a wonder this hadn't happened sooner.

She knew she had to evacuate as well.

Just as she was about to push aside her sentimentality, a black unit landed in front of her, aiming its rifle.

Her skin crawled.

In the moment before the rifle's barrel glowed with the imminent release of a beam, the captain's seat ejected, sending Murrue tumbling to the lower deck.

"You bastards!"

Mu launched missiles and transformed his Murasame, charging at the two Rud-ro.A.

—*The Archangel!*

The pristine white behemoth, his once home and refuge, lay in ruins, engulfed in flames and smoke.

Had Murrue and the others managed to escape?

Striving to buy time for any survivors, Mu fired his rifle relentlessly. But the Rud-ro.A, moving as if teleporting, closed in on the Murasame faster than he could react, slicing off an arm along with its rifle.

"Damn it!"

As the other Rud-ro.A joined the attack in swift coordination, Mu was disarmed and, in a last-ditch effort, fired a grenade at point-blank range.

The explosion sent both combatants reeling.

After watching the spiraling Murasame fall, Liu checked his watch. It was time for the "launch."

"Looks like we're out of time," he remarked.

Daniel responded with a resigned "Finally."

They had eliminated the witnesses. Though some might still survive, what was coming next would finish the job for them. Liu and Daniel turned their units and departed from the scene, leaving destruction in their wake.

Shinn also noticed the Archangel emitting black smoke.

"The Archangel, it's--?!"

He gasped in disbelief but was quickly snapped back to reality.

"Don't get distracted!" taunted a voice in his head, mocking him.

What the—!?

Without a moment to ponder, a Rud-ro.A was upon him.

—*Oh shit!*

He attempted to defend, but the enemy's blade was faster, slicing the Justice's torso in two.

"Ah!"

As the monitors flickered out, signaling an imminent explosion, Shinn pressed the eject button. After a tremendous G-force, he was thrown into the air, alone, watching as the two halves of Justice fell below.

Yet, the danger hadn't passed. A Rud-ro.A pursued him, its giant hand reaching out. If caught, it would be the end.

Despite desperately maneuvering the escape pack's verniers, capture seemed inevitable.

—*Not like this!*

In his moment of fear and rage, a massive whip-like object slashed through the air, striking the Rud-ro.A.

It was Gyan's heat rod.

The heat rod coiled around the Rud-ro.A, shocking it with electricity. For a moment, the Rud-ro.A was immobilized. Below it, the fallen Justice. The Gyan launched all its missiles at the entangled Rud-ro.A. Then, swiftly detaching the heat rod, it moved towards Shinn.

The cockpit opened.

"Grab on, kid!"

Hilda leaned out, offering her hand. Shinn grasped it and leaped into the cockpit.

The Justice exploded, and the Rud-ro.A was obscured by flames.

Clinging to the shaking cockpit, Shinn held on tight.

Separated by the explosion, Griffin clicked his tongue in annoyance.

The Gyan was already retreating.

He could pursue and deliver the final blow, but time was running out.

Though Griffin was known for his impulsive actions among his peers, he wasn't foolish enough to risk his life in vain pursuit.

He decisively left the scene.

It didn't matter much in the grand scheme of things. Having faced Shinn Asuka in combat, he was certain that Shinn was no significant threat.

Whether the small fry lived or died was of no concern to him.

Somehow, Murrue had made her way to the Archangel's rear deck, but there she slumped down, overwhelmed. Ahead, the deck was torn open and sparks mixed with smoke billowing up.

Something was still fiercely burning below, and the heat reached her through the floor. Soon, this area might also collapse into flames. Yet, there seemed nowhere to run.

She covered her head with her jacket to shield herself from the sparks, coughing violently.

Was this the captain's fate, to go down with her ship?

But she wanted to live.

No, she needed to live — to tell someone what Foundation had done.

And to discern what they planned next, which surely wouldn't be anything good.

They had to be stopped.

Just then, the sight she had desperately hoped for appeared.

A damaged Murasame landed, and its cockpit hatch opened to reveal Mu leaning out.

"Sorry for the wait!"

Hearing his voice, Murrue burst into tears, though mostly due to the smoke.

"You're late!" she complained, even as she climbed into the offered hand of the Murrasame.

Kira continued his struggle against the Shi-ve.A.

The Shi-ve.A wielded its saber with swift precision, and its cloak writhed and struck at Freedom like a living creature under a relentless onslaught. Freedom's systems were pushed to their limits, with power and PS armor nearing critical lows as alarms blared in the cockpit.

"You cannot win," a voice in his head declared. It was Shura's.

Kira instinctively retorted, "What—!"

"It is your destiny," Shura proclaimed triumphantly.

The saber's downward strike severed Freedom's right arm, and then, the Shi-ve.A's chest opened, launching a barrage of needles.

"What—!?"

Kira hadn't expected this attack. Freedom took the hit head-on. The needles pierced the unit, and the phase-shift armor finally failed.

Kira twisted his body at the last moment, avoiding impalement. But now, combat was impossible. Power completely drained, the monitors darkened one by one.

Then—

"You're mine to take!" Agnes declared, launching herself at Freedom with a cry that was a mix of humiliation, rage, and hatred, all mounting atop the blade of her Gyan.

The blade sliced through the PS-downed armor with ease, severing arms and legs in a grim dance of destruction. The suit, reduced to a mere stump, fell helplessly.

The cockpit hatch blew off, revealing the man inside, his face registering shock, which Agnes observed with a triumphant disdain.

"How pathetic. To think such a man could ever harm me is unforgivable. Serves you right!"

With a high and mighty pose, she raised her saber, ready to bring it down on Kira in a final, cleansing blow, as if to erase her own stain completely.

But an impact threw off her stance at the last moment.

"What?!"

She had been attacked from behind. Turning in alarm, she saw a mobile suit emerging from the river, its surface roiling with spray.

"Who the hell is that?!"

Shura squinted, trying to identify the new intruder.

The bulky suit, equipped with a flight unit, resembled an aquatic mobile suit unfamiliar to him. His targeting system flashed UNKNOWN.

Launching missiles from its head and slowing with a spray of water, Agnes's Gyan raised its shield to block the missiles, but the successive beam shots targeted the gaps precisely.

Shura launched himself in from the side and intercepted the beams, a reluctant admiration slipping from his lips.

"Impressive..."

As he advanced, the enemy charged too. As they passed each other, the enemy's claws clashed with Shura's sword, and sparks flew wildly. The enemy suit fired missiles in passing, dodging his attacks with a spin.

"Well played!"

Shura felt his blood boil, captivated by the unfamiliar mobile suit's combat prowess given the lack of a challenge with the Freedom. He craved a stronger adversary—a desire to prove himself as the supreme combatant.

Inside the downed Freedom's cockpit, Kira's figure was visible.

"Kira!"

"Athrun?!" came the noise-filled response, bringing Athrun a moment of relief, but he had no time to dwell on it.

The Shi-ve.A's descending blade met his claw, and he countered a beam cutter with his wing's beam cutter, narrowly avoiding a flurry of slashes with a backward leap.

— *I can do this!*

The brief exchange left him breathless, facing an adversary of terrifying capability.

Shura froze, recognizing the pilot of the opposing mobile suit.

"Athrun Zala?"

He had analyzed countless combat videos, identifying Athrun Zala as the strongest of all pilots, and now he stood before him. Thrilled by the serendipity, his excitement was short-lived as an interruption came.

"Shura! Time's up!" Redel's voice chimed in.

Frustrated at having to leave a worthy opponent, Shura acknowledged the priority of their plan.

Glancing at the Gyan, he saw Agnes crying inside the cockpit; emotions of frustration and emptiness emanated from her.

"Coming?" Shura called out.

Agnes looked up, responding, "Yes, I'll go with you."

She was a competent pilot, after all. Shura decided to take her along, not wanting to waste her skill.



Suddenly, the Shi-ve.A ceased its battle and, as if cradling Agnes's Gyan, took flight.

Kira was left bewildered by such abrupt action, and Agnes's betrayal compounded his confusion.

"Agnes... why...?"

Was it because he had rejected her offer? He couldn't understand; everything was a mystery.

Athrun's mobile suit landed nearby.

"We need to move, Kira!" Athrun called out as the hatch opened.

Looking up, Kira saw a disc-shaped flying object descending.

"I've got everyone from the Archangel with me!" Meyrin's voice announced.

The Archangel, too?

What about Lacus?

Had she betrayed them as well, like Agnes?

Clutching at his tumultuous thoughts, Kira dragged himself into Athrun's cockpit.

"Hurry!"

In the remains of a mountain fortress, surrounded by his aides, a man walked towards an idling helicopter. This man was Captain Michael, the very person Kira and his team had been searching for, intending to capture.

The man planned to abandon his base and the soldiers continuing the resistance, seeking to escape alone.

His future plans involved spreading death and destruction across the world. However, just as he was about to board the helicopter, a brilliant flash lit the sky above.

The man turned just in time for the blinding light to sear his face, followed by a blast wave, heated to thousands of degrees, that obliterated him, the helicopter, and the entire rocky mountain.

It was as if a second sun had appeared in the sky above Eldora. Shinn, who had been attempting to escape underwater aboard Hilda's Gyan, looked up in shock. Following the flash, a blast wave licked the water's surface, sending shockwaves through it. Hilda struggled to control their mobile suit as it was pushed by the current, nearly crashing into the riverbed.

"What was that!?" Hilda muttered in disbelief.

Shinn felt a cold sweat trickle down his spine.

"No way!"

He, too, had seen the mushroom cloud that had risen from Foundation just now.

Could it be... Eldora, as well?

The nuclear warhead that detonated above Eldora incinerated everything left on the battlefield.

The downed Justice and Freedom, still operational mobile suits, and even the wounded colossus, the Archangel, laid out on the ground, were engulfed in the scorching light.

Their armor melted under the intense heat, and the subsequent blast wave left nothing of their original form.

The nuclear fire scorched the forests and swept away cities as if they were castles made of sand.

Naturally, this included all the people who were too late to escape...

The massive mushroom cloud was visible even from the shuttle ascending through the stratosphere. The dark, reddish-black cloud occasionally bursts with jets of orange light, like molten metal.

Nothing—no one—would be left beneath it.

Lacus was so shocked she couldn't even scream.

"Kira..."

The lonely face from their parting haunted her mind.

"Please stop... Kira..."

The words of betrayal she had uttered tormented her.

Yet, Lacus had never truly believed Kira could lose, that Kira could die. But no amount of regret could change the outcome now.

She had abandoned the man she loved to the flames—none other than herself.

Observing the same flames, Orphee secretly smiled. Those were the fires of sacrifice. Everything was proceeding as it had been destined.

The old world would burn away, making room for the birth of a new world today.

Yes, everything would be reborn anew...

Afterword

In the latter half of 2019, an unexpected message from Director Fukuda reached me via social media. The offer was thrilling: to contribute to the screenplay for the SEED movie. As a fan of SEED myself, my initial excitement at the prospect of a movie quickly turned into a fervent desire to see it brought to life, especially after reviewing the plot left by Morosawa.

Typically, I tend to dwell on the worst possibilities in my day-to-day life, yet when push comes to shove, I impulsively leap forward, driven by a desire to engage. This reckless optimism, seemingly characteristic of my generation, contrasts sharply with my lack of benefit from the economic bubble. The very fact that I work as a novelist means I can be quite the daredevil to begin with.

But I digress. Driven by my eagerness to see the project succeed, I ventured into screenplay writing, an area outside my experience. Despite potential shortcomings, the guidance of the director and producers helped shape our collective efforts into something tangible.

And now, four years later, I've finally finished the novel version. Returning to novel writing feels like I'm back in my element. The experience reminded me of when I first undertook writing for the SEED TV series, inspired by novelizations of foreign dramas I admired. These adaptations, crafted by renowned science fiction authors, managed to transform the original content into engaging standalone novels.

That's the kind of thing I wanted to write.

So, with the novels, I tried to capture that same feeling I had as a fan. As a fan, I didn't want the original story tampered with too much. But I wanted to enjoy the world beyond what the animated footage offered. Thankfully, it seems we succeeded in providing fans with a new way to appreciate the SEED universe.

Revisiting the SEED world after two decades brought a mix of nostalgia and anxiety. I've found myself forgetting minor details, such as the correct spelling of "cockpit" in the SEED novelization. It's frightening to realize I had completely forgotten...

I guess I'm showing my age. I think I wrote the entire first Gundam SEED novel in about a month back then. Trying to work at that pace now would surely do me in.

The anticipation of how fans will receive this new addition to the SEED world fills me with nervous excitement. I hope it reflects some measure of growth on my part.

This time, not only the illustrations but also the cover art is handled by Tomofumi Ogasawara. His work for the novel version of SEED beautifully captured the characters and mobile suits, and his illustrations for SEED FREEDOM promise to bring the world of the movie version to life in a uniquely enchanting way.

As of writing this, I have yet to see the completed film. Like any other fan of SEED, I eagerly await the day I can experience the finished work, holding onto the hope that it captures the essence of what has made the series so beloved.

Liu Goto

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM SEED FREEDOM

VOLUME.02

ON SALE MARCH 26th