



小説 機動戦士

ガンダム SEED FREEDOM

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM SEED FREEDOM

下

Liu Goto

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

Zeonic|Scanlations

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

Vol.2

Written by
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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.

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Chapter.04

Just days after the tragedies at Ishtaria and Eldora, the COMPS member state representatives held an emergency meeting.

"We've confirmed what appears to be the wreckage of the Archangel 1.5 kilometers east of the second blast site," Toyah delivered his report with a steady voice, betraying no emotion despite the gravity of his words.

"The Freedom, Justice, and our other mobile suit contingents from the operation remain unaccounted for. They're not responding to our hails either. We... presume they were all caught in the explosion."

On the monitor, the weary faces of Atlantic Federation President Foster and PLANT Supreme Council Chairman Lament materialized, their heavy exhales bridging the distance, a shared gesture of despair and exhaustion palpable even through the digital divide.

It was a scene of utter devastation. That's what it amounted to. While the Millennium forces docked at the Foundation capital, Ishtaria, they somehow emerged unscathed, and all other forces involved in the operation were consumed by the hungry flames of the nuke that rained down on Eldora.

Chairman Lament, his voice a careful blend of diplomacy and underlying tension, broke the charged silence.

"So, President Clyne safe, I gather?"

Cagalli's nod was subtle, the motion feeling stiff and unnatural.

"Yes. According to the Millennium's report, she escaped along with other Foundation officials. And what of the PLANTs? Any news?"

Lament's response, a simple shake of his head, deepened the gloom. "No," he stated, his face a mask of stoic concern.

Cagalli's brow furrowed, her gaze drifting off as the unspoken implication hung in the air - Lacus was missing, a silent alarm rang clear in her mind. Surely, if she were safe, the PLANTs or Orb would have been contacted by now.

It didn't add up.

"In any case, regarding COMPS' response to this incident--"

Cagalli tried to steer the discussion but was cut off by Foster's sharp tone.

"Response?" she spat, eyes blazing with barely contained fury. "Can we afford to be so tepid at a time like this? Eurasia has lodged severe protests, claiming this is all because Commander Yamato violated the treaty and crossed the military demarcation line!"

A small crack appeared in Cagalli's composure. Why should Eurasia's accusations dictate their actions? They were just trying to heap all the blame on Kira to dodge the world's condemnation.

Lament's voice rose in response, the fury in his tone palpable.

"That still doesn't justify firing nukes! It's a betrayal of all humanity!"

Cagalli wholeheartedly agreed. The nuclear strike had shocked every nation on Earth, dominating the news in a hysterical frenzy. Because this time, the planet's surface had been targeted.

But what about when the Earth Alliance turned nukes on the PLANTs?

The thought left a bitter taste. Still, Cagalli sensed more to this calamity than met the eye.

She leaned forward, imploring, "I'm not convinced about Commander Yamato either. The reports raise too many questions! None of it makes any damn sense!"

"The truth remains cloaked in darkness," Lament sighed in resignation. "Unless Yamato or Michael survive to speak..."

Foster interjected with a sardonic edge, "How convenient. No one to hold accountable."

Lament's eyes flashed with anger.

"What are you implying?"

But Foster ignored it, pressing on accusingly, "Whether Yamato truly acted on his own. This incident provides the perfect chance for the PLANTs to interfere in Eurasian territory-"

Lament's fury was palpable. "I will not tolerate such baseless accusations! Our soldiers were the ones sacrificed!"

"It was Earth's citizens who were sacrificed!" Foster shot back, her voice rising to match Lament's.

"By Naturals firing on Naturals!"

As the debate spiraled into a melange of blame and speculation, Cagalli felt her restraint snap, her hand slamming against the table with enough force to rattle the monitor.

"Is this really the time for that? Besides, as if Kira would ever do such a thing!"

Her aide beside her held his head in despair. Foster regarded her with utter coldness.

"I see. Reluctant to implicate your own, are you? In that case, our nation no longer intends to be involved with COMPS."

"We, too, will step back," Lament said, his voice equally terse. "We won't stand to have salt rubbed in our wounds like this."

The leaders' faces vanished from Cagalli's monitor, signaling the breakdown of negotiations. Slumping forward, she buried her head in her arms, haunted by a single thought.

What had she done?

Elsewhere, the Millennium had docked at Orb's Onogoro Island military facility. Having taken shelter in the lake, it sustained little direct damage from the nuclear blast, though the shockwave had caused significant harm in its wake. Lunamaria's Gelgoog underwent repairs, and her own survival was a miracle amid the devastation.

Beyond that, there was no fortune to be found. The once beautiful Ishtaria, once vibrant and beautiful, was now a monochrome wasteland of ash. Witnessing it firsthand left Lunamaria deeply shaken.

To think a single bomb, in a single instant, could obliterate all traces of human life and history...

And the same fate befell Eldora.

Lunamaria picked up Lacus's pink Haro as it rolled to her feet, the robotic pet now as alone as the child it belonged to.

She retreated to the room, missing its owner, and sank to the floor, cradling the Haro in her arms.

"Why won't you come back?"

Falling sideways onto Shinn's bed, Lunamaria clutched the Haro tighter.

No one had returned.

Kira, Agnes, Hilda, and the others, the Archangel crew...

And... Shinn.

They had all been scorched away, vanished, by that second nuke that fell on Eldora.

Even now, sorting through Shinn's effects, Lunamaria couldn't believe it. Couldn't accept it.

"Shinn, you idiot!"

Tears welled up, streaking down the bridge of her nose.

Always - no matter how dire the battle - Shinn had made it back. But this time...

A gnawing guilt consumed her, the irrational yet piercing thought that somehow this was her fault.

If only she had shot down that second missile...

Of course, that was irrelevant. The nuke that hit Eldora was a different one. If anyone was to blame, it was whoever fired the damn things in the first place. It wasn't her responsibility.

She knew that rationally, but the pain remained unbearable. She needed Shinn here to absolve her of fault.

She longed for him to be at her side, wearing that stupid grin of his.

—*Shinn! Why aren't you here?*

"I see. So it was Foundation that orchestrated this charade..."
Konoe sighed.

Albert swiveled his chair around to face them.

"Given the timing of the jamming, there's a ninety-two percent chance it's black. The work of the Black Knights, no doubt."

Arthur, who had been listening with a puzzled expression, suddenly clapped his hands.

"Ah, black as in Black Knights - wait, what?!"

He seemed to grasp the implications belatedly, rearing back in an exaggerated manner.

"You mean Foundation WAS behind that nuclear attack?!"

A heavy silence engulfed the bridge, every pair of eyes fixed on Arthur. He hastily covered his mouth with both hands, but the words, once uttered, couldn't be taken back.

Even someone as carefree as him had apparently realized it. This was far too dangerous a topic to voice aloud. Of course, everyone currently on the bridge was a trusted crew member, but still...

"But we have no means to prove it," Konoe reflected, his expression turning grave.

It wasn't an accusation they could make without evidence. To claim Foundation had dropped nukes on its own citizens...

Albert stated matter-of-factly, "The Millennium has orders to return to base. We have zero mobile suits left. The Archangel is presumed shot down, the crew's survival chances bleak."

In other words, they had no opportunity or way to prove it and no witnesses.

But Konoe cocked his head.

"I wonder about that."

What about that last factor - witnesses?

"Do you really think that lot would die so easily?"

Albert met Konoe's gaze. The prickly technical officer's eyes widened for a second at Konoe's words, but he soon seemed to start calculating in his head.

In any case, Konoe thought, it would still take a few days to return to base. There was no telling what might happen in the meantime.

Kira woke in a dark room.

Last time, it was bright... The thought drifted through his still-drowsy mind.

Bright, aglow with warmth and vibrant greenery. That's right, it had been a greenhouse. That's where he saw Lacus's gentle smile...

Kira slowly sat up. Sharp pain lanced through his body, yet it felt muffled as if dampened by a thick membrane.

The room was unfamiliar, and Lacus was nowhere to be found.

"Oh, Commander. Did I wake you? Sorry." Shinn's voice came from the side, looking apologetic as he was in the middle of getting ready.

Despite evident injuries, the rest seemed to have restored his vigor.

It took a moment for Kira to register their surroundings - a double room, though he couldn't clearly recall arriving here. Fragments of memory surfaced: escaping in Athrun's Z'gok, the ensuing daze of fatigue and confusion.

"Where are we...?" Kira's words came out as a rasp, his voice struggling to take shape.

"Orb. On Akatsuki Island..." Shinn replied, his expression also laden with unspoken frustration and regret.

"Akatsuki Island, huh..."

The name hung in Kira's mind as they left the room, heading for the recreation area. It seemed they had come full circle, returning to this place once more.

As they approached, the sound and light of a television spilled out into the hallway, and the news broadcast a beacon in the otherwise quiet space.

Someone was already there, watching.

"Foundation, including the Eldora region, estimates casualties at fifty thousand, with over a hundred thousand injured or missing. The Eurasian military has requested all forces to remain on standby in anticipation of retaliation. To all citizens--"

Kira and the others entered just as Murrue noticed and turned off the television. She, Hilda, and Neumann were seated in a booth at the corner of the room.

"Are you two okay now?" Murrue asked, her voice strained as she attempted to mask her concern.

"Yes, we are," Shinn replied, but Kira didn't want to be humored. He made a switch action gesture with his hand, turning the TV back on as the news continued.

The screen showed the remains of an utterly destroyed city. It was hard to believe this wasteland was the same place they had seen just days ago.

On the screen, a young child wailed, calling for their mother.

Kira couldn't bear to watch directly, lowering his gaze.

Was this all his fault?

The announcer's voice continued. "COMPS' activities have been suspended indefinitely—"

"What?!" Shinn exclaimed, turning to Murrue and the others for confirmation, "Is it true COMPS is suspended?!"

The answer came from behind them.

"It is," Athrun said as he and Meyrin entered the room. He continued in a restrained tone, "Cagalli tried her best, but right now, the whole world's condemnation is focused on us."

"Those bastards... Dammit!" Shinn clenched his fist, slamming it down on the back of the sofa.

So the calamity they had just seen - the whole world considered it all COMPS's fault?

Was that Foundation's intention all along?

Athrun went on, "The Millennium, the only ship we have left, is currently docked at Orb. We haven't informed them of the situation here."

At least the Millennium was safe. But-

"What about Lacus?" Kira asked, still looking down. Athrun answered hesitantly, "She apparently escaped on a Foundation shuttle."

On a Foundation shuttle...

The image of Lacus embracing Orphee flashed through his mind again, haunting him.

"She..." Kira murmured in a dry voice. "...betrayed us."

Confusion clouded his thoughts, yet one bitter truth pierced through: Lacus had accepted the order to attack him.—Princess Lacus doesn't need you anymore!

The Black Knights girl's mocking voice wouldn't leave his ears.
I'm... not needed anymore? By Lacus...?

—*You can't do it. All you can do is fight.*

Because all he could do was fight?

And in the end, he had caused such destruction.

Engulfed in a tide of remorse and loss, Kira could only bow his head, the weight of his reality too heavy to bear.

Athrun placed a single photograph in front of the gathered group in the recreation room. "This is what Terminal's investigation turned up," he said, his voice grave.

Shinn leaned forward, curiosity etched on his face, as Murrue carefully examined the photograph. It showed several figures in white lab coats.

Murrue frowned, seeing a blonde woman in a lab coat like the others.

"Is that... Aura... the Empress?"

The woman, with 'Aura' noted in the corner, bore an uncanny resemblance to the child empress they had recently encountered in Foundation. But-

"This photo was taken nineteen years ago when she was at the genetic research institute on Mendel," Athrun explained, his revelation eliciting a chorus of gasps from around the room.

"Nineteen years ago?!"

Shinn's eyes widened, his gaze darting back to the photo. The woman pictured was clearly an adult, her features fully formed. It didn't make sense. Aura the Empress shouldn't even have been born then. It was as if time itself had been reversed.

Athrun continued, his tone measured but filled with underlying tension.

"She herself may have been a subject of some experiment. It's just speculation, but as you know, hardly any records remain of the Mendel research."

Mendel, the infamous colony at Lagrange 4, had once been a bustling hub of cutting-edge genetic research. It was shut down a few years ago after a large-scale biohazard incident with numerous fatalities. But there were many mysteries surrounding the circumstances, and the fact that the institute's data had been thoroughly destroyed meant that what had actually been done there was still unknown.

Even Chairman Durandal was said to have been involved in the Mendel research.

"So, her apparent age isn't what it seems?" Murrue asked, half skeptical.

Athrun nodded.

"Probably not. And there's more. She was also a researcher." He paused, letting the weight of his next words sink in. "Her research theme was creating a species surpassing Coordinators."

A species surpassing Coordinators - the phrase echoed in Shinn's mind, conjuring images of the Black Knights squad, their extraordinary combat abilities, and the haunting 'voice' that had invaded his thoughts during battle. Could it be...?

"It's likely that everything was Aura's - their plan," Athrun said.

Murrue's bitter expression mirrored the realization dawning on everyone's faces.

"The nuclear attack, too, right?"

"What?!" Shinn blurted out, his voice raw with disbelief.

Murrue recounted how they had seen Foundation's Rud-ro.A take off from behind the Eurasian military, how it had persistently attacked them after being spotted, and how Eurasia's nuclear missiles had been launched right around where they had taken off from.

"No way! They attacked their own country?!"

Shinn's question hung in the air, the implications almost too much to bear.

Using Michael as bait to lure in COMPS, having them cross into Eurasia under cover of battle, and pinning the blame for the nuclear attack on COMPS—that was Aura and the others' plan?

But what did they gain from their own nation taking that much damage?

Shinn couldn't comprehend it, but Athrun's response was chillingly pragmatic, "At the very least, having nukes fired gives them a pretext."

"What...?"

"A pretext for them to attack Eurasia."

Shinn gasped.

Just then, a distressed woman's voice blared from over the recreation room speakers.

"Captain Zala! Come to the control room immediately!"

A little before that.

A huge structure was released from a transport ship moving through space. Like celestial limbs, the arcing structures slowly converged and interconnected, forming a colossal ring that gleamed briefly, reflecting a shard of Earth's light.

But as quickly as it had appeared, the ring began to fade from view, its edges blurring and dissolving into the darkness until it vanished entirely, as if the void had reclaimed it. Within minutes, both the structure and the transport ship had vanished as if returned to the original nothingness.

However, they had merely become invisible, their presence still undeniable.

This enigmatic vanishing act was not isolated, repeating at multiple strategically positioned locales across the vastness of space.

A chain of hidden links connecting the far side of the moon to Earth.

As the final piece fell into place, a giant muzzle began to open on the lunar surface, a maw ready to unleash untold destruction.

"Deflection rings 1, 3, and 6 are now fully operational at their designated coordinates."

Orphee watched the progress on the monitor before him, Aura and Ingrid at his side.

"Target aiming correction, plus 2.3. Requiem firing criticality T-minus 60. System operating normally."

This was Artemis Fortress. Orphee and the others had left Earth by shuttle and were at this fortress. The Black Knights squad members who had safely withdrawn from Eldora were with them as well.

And, of course, most precious of all, their princess.

Everything was proceeding according to plan.

Orphee thought as he gazed at the critical firing muzzle. It had been a long time...

"Requiem firing sequence ready," the operator announced the long-awaited words.

Orphee smiled with elation.

"Blessed be the divine retribution..."

Then, with a silent yet profound intensity, the divine flame destined to end everything was unleashed.

The searing laser tore through space from the moon's far side, passing through the rings concealed by Mirage Colloid, bending and leaving the remains of destroyed rings behind. Relayed through multiple rings, the white laser light traversed space in an instant.

Ahead of it was a shining blue planet.

The monitors depicted a harrowing sight: an incandescent fireball engulfing the surface, its ruthless expansion captured in stark detail.

Shinn and the others watched, transfixed, their breaths caught in their throats as the scene unfolded before them.

The footage, captured by a distant satellite, showed the fireball expanding with terrifying speed, its edges roiling and pulsing with an almost living malevolence. Clouds scattered in its wake, vaporized by the sheer force of the shockwave as the conflagration voraciously consumed everything in its path.

"Moscow..." Erica Simmons muttered, her voice raw with a blend of bitterness and disbelief.

The Eurasian capital - how many people were in that light?

Murrue said in a trembling voice, "This is Foundation's 'retaliation'... already?"

Shinn couldn't tear his gaze away from the screen, his mind reeling as he tried to process what he saw.

"A nuclear... attack...?"

But Athrun shook his head, his expression twisted with a mixture of disgust and grim certainty. "No," he said, his voice low and intense. "This is something else..."

Shinn's gaze snapped to Athrun, whose expression was a mix of horror and indignation as he uttered the ominous word.

"Requiem."

Immediately after the Moscow tragedy, an emergency leadership summit was convened. Cagalli received it in the government's information conference room.

She had already anticipated this situation, having gotten early intelligence from the Archangel crew. But even before that - from the moment Foundation made their offer - she had felt something amiss. That's why she had asked Athrun and his Terminal colleagues to start digging into Foundation.

But even she hadn't expected the country to act so quickly. This meant she had to assume the worst-case scenario among the ones she had imagined.

"Wasn't Requiem supposed to have been dismantled?!" The Eurasian representative's voice boomed with indignation from the comm screen, fist slamming against the table.

The East Asian Republic representative lambasted, "This is a blatant violation of the ceasefire agreement by the PLANTS!"

Cagalli clenched her jaw, a spark of irritation flaring in her chest. These were the same old refrains, the same unproductive finger-pointing. Couldn't they see that this was no time for petty accusations?

But even as the thought crossed her mind, she knew it was inevitable that suspicion would fall on the PLANTS.

After the war, the Requiem surface facilities had been mostly dismantled, but the underground reactors were impossible to dismantle. So, it had been decided that PLANT would use them peacefully as power reactors. According to Terminal intel, those power reactors had ended up being used by the military due to the machinations of Defense Committee Chairman Jagganath, but...

The Eurasian rep's voice rose again, shrill with barely contained panic.

"Such retaliation is absolutely unacceptable!"

Fear dominated the room—panic, even. The Requiem was a terrifying weapon capable of targeting any city on Earth. And now, it was in the hands of Foundation, an unknown entity that had already demonstrated its willingness to use it. If this wasn't fear, what was?

Suddenly, a flurry of movement from Atlantic Federation President Foster caught Cagalli's eye. Foster leaned in, whispering urgently to her secretary.

"What was that? Put them through immediately."

Moments later, the central monitor flickered, static giving way to a hauntingly familiar scene - the nuclear explosion that had rocked Foundation's capital just days before.

Cagalli's frown deepened, a sense of foreboding settling in her gut as the figure of Orphee Lam Tao appeared on the screen.

"We have been exiled from the Earth... by the hateful nukes unleashed by Naturals," Orphee's somber narrative began.

"Our desire for peace and stability has once again been trampled by Naturals. Why?!" He pounded his fist on the desk in a display of raw emotion.

"Our nation has officially adopted the Destiny Plan advocated by the late PLANT Supreme Council Chairman Gilbert Durandal."

A murmur ran through the assembly, many having suspected yet dreading this revelation.

But for Orphee himself to state it outright...

"A society truly just and equal, by genetics, where embracing our roles as inscribed in our genes has allowed us to transcend poverty,

achieve independence from the last great war, and realize a miraculous recovery."

The speech was being broadcast worldwide.

Even in the PLANTs, Orphee's face appeared on street screens as people stopped to listen.

"But the indolent will not stand for it! They spurn evolution, wallow in envy, cling to old hatreds, and slaughter each other, slaves to their ugly base emotions. Though they live on the Earth, a land of plenty, they are little more than parasites greedily consuming its bounty! We ask - why must we walk alongside such benighted fools?"

Yzak Joule, now an intelligence officer at PLANT headquarters, grimaced at the monitor, his expression as if he'd tasted something bitter and repulsive.

As Orphee's fiery words echoed, Dearka Elsmann burst in, urgency etched in his features, and whispered a dire update to Yzak.

"Jagannath has made his move."

"Dammit!" Yzak exploded, springing to his feet with a fury that echoed the tumult in his mind.

Orphee's speech intensified, "Fellow Coordinators in PLANT, we stand united as brethren, destined to usher in the next chapter of human evolution."

A chilling realization dawned on Cagalli. This was a calculated ploy, a sinister attempt to reignite the old animosities between Naturals and Coordinators. Orphee was fanning the flames of conflict, trying to divide them once more.

"Like you, we are the pinnacle of genetic engineering," Orphee continued, his tone almost reverent. "A new echelon of Coordinators known as Accord."

He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in.

"The role engraved in our genes is to guide the world as mediators of humanity."

The air in the conference room seemed to crackle with tension, murmurs rippling through the gathered leaders.

"Accord?"

"What the hell is that?!"

On a monitor showing the muttering leaders, PLANT Chairman Lament turned as if called to from the side. Just before the feed cut,

Cagalli caught a glimpse of Yzak Joule approaching, his face grim as he leaned in to whisper something to the chairman.

Good. ZAFT Intelligence seemed to have gotten a jump on things.

Some kind of action was likely occurring within PLANT now.

Orphee's voice rose again, even more strident than before.

"We were given life for this purpose. Even Lacus Clyne, one of your leaders, is our brethren."

What?!

Even Cagalli couldn't hide her shock at this.

"She, too, is with us now as one who will guide humanity. Our will is her will, and our wish is her wish."

Damn!

Cagalli ground her teeth.

So this was why the Foundation wanted to secure Lacus!

Forcing Eurasia to fire nukes to create a fait accompli, neutralizing COMPS - those were just means to an end. Their true goal had been Lacus Clyne all along.

"Come, our Coordinator brothers. The age of contradiction and tyranny by the old humanity is over!"

Many Coordinators were probably swayed by those words.

What Orphee was saying was just a rehash of the rhetoric used by past leaders to incite war.

But if you added Lacus Clyne to the mix...

Such was the depth of trust that the people of PLANT placed in Lacus.

Lacus Clyne, who always pulled them out of the mire of war.

Lacus Clyne never fell for Durandal's righteous-seeming lies and chose the path of justice.

So surely whoever Lacus Clyne supported must be in the right.

That's how people would see it.

Lacus herself had never claimed 'we are justice.' She always asked people to think carefully for themselves.

But the harsh truth is, many shun the burden of thought, terrified of the responsibility that comes with making their own judgments.

So, instead, they want Lacus Clyne to lead them.

Foundation had obliged that wish.

Orphee's tone turned icy.

"To all nations of Earth. Immediately disarm, recognize the Destiny Plan, and implement it. You have five days."

Only five days!

Cagalli clenched her fists.

"Dissent will not be tolerated. Any nation defying our edict will invite the wrath of Requiem, all in the sacred name of Lacus Clyne. The fires of Megiddo shall rain upon their heads."

Orphee's face, alight with malevolent satisfaction, faded from the screens, leaving a chilling silence in its wake.

"This is insane," Cagalli seethed, her fury bubbling over at the perversion of Lacus's legacy.

—*How dare you use Lacus's name! How dare you invoke it for such an ultimatum!*

It was as if a treasured friend's legacy had been tarnished, an intimate betrayal that ignited a fierce resolve within her.

Switching mental gears, she began issuing rapid-fire instructions to those beside her.

As Orphee's speech echoed through the airwaves, a convoy of military vehicles screeched to a halt in front of the PLANT administration building. Doors flew open, and armed soldiers poured out, their boots pounding against the pavement as they moved with practiced precision.

The security personnel who tried to respond were caught off guard and quickly subdued.

As the troops made their way to the upper floors, a unit of ZAKUs descended from the sky, their massive forms casting ominous shadows across the building's facade. They took up positions around the perimeter, sealing off any chance of escape.

The council members, convened in urgency to address the escalating Foundation crisis, found themselves abruptly and efficiently detained by the intruding forces.

But when the soldiers stormed into Chairman Lament's office, they found it empty.

Upon receiving this news on the bridge of the Nazca-class battleship Burckhardt, Jagannath clenched his jaw, his frustration palpable.

"Damn that Lament," he growled, his voice rough with anger. "Quick on his feet!"

Jagannath's ZAFT fleet had already left PLANT and was en route.

The coup d'état within PLANT, meticulously timed to coincide with Foundation's declaration of war, resulted from clandestine planning with the country, a detail known only to a select few.

Jagannath forced himself to take a breath and push down the agitation rising in his chest. So they hadn't been able to capture the chairman. A minor flaw, nothing more.

Everything else was proceeding exactly as planned.

Under the protective escort of Yzak's unit, Lament made a hasty retreat from Aprilius One aboard an emergency escape pod. The shuttle docked with a distinctive pale pink battleship, the Eternal.

As Lament entered the bridge with Yzak and the others, he found former Chairwoman Eileen Canaver and former council member Ezalia Joule waiting. The captain and crew saluted the chairman.

"Ms. Joule, Representative Canaver, thank you," he said, his voice heavy with gratitude as he approached them.

"I'm relieved Yzak was there to assist," Ezalia remarked, casting a proud yet concerned glance at her son, whose expression mingled exasperation with a hint of unwavering resolve.

Lament sighed, his shoulders slumping under the weight of his responsibilities. His thoughts seemed to drift back to the PLANTs he had left behind, to the chaos and uncertainty that surely reigned in his absence.

"But we have no choice but to wait and see how the unrest at home plays out for now..."

Ezalia and the others nodded, their expressions grim.

"We understand, Mr. Chairman," Ezalia said, her voice low and serious. "In the worst case, Requiem may be aimed at the PLANTs again..."

That had to be avoided at all costs.

Strategically, it was advantageous to feign acceptance of the Foundation's recommendation, presenting a facade of compliance to mislead adversaries. Ironically, it was preferable for the anti-Natural faction led by Jagannath to be at the forefront in this situation.

"For now, we must assess the situation and hide ourselves. As for arranging that--" Lament glanced over.

Dearka answered, "It's not ideal, but there's a resistance supply base at the decommissioned Boaz that Miss Lacus entrusted us. We'll go there."

"Understood."

Five days left.

As Lament gazed through the viewport at the distant, blue orb that was their mother planet, a mixture of concern and determination settled over him.

Would the situation change in that time? Or would things go according to the Foundation's - those Accords' - designs?

It had to change.

Otherwise, the future would vanish.

As Lacus entered what appeared to be a command room, Orphee swiveled around, his face breaking into an unsettlingly broad smile.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting alone for so long, Princess."

After leaving Earth by shuttle, Lacus had fallen asleep and found herself transported to an unknown room. After leaving Earth by shuttle, she had fallen asleep, only to wake in an unknown room. The lingering grogginess and the realization that her drink had been drugged confirmed her suspicions. This was no mere relocation, but a calculated abduction.

The room she had been confined to was a luxurious suite, complete with an attached bathroom. Yet despite the comfortable trappings, Lacus knew she was a prisoner here. When Ingrid finally led her out earlier, the stark corridors revealed the truth - this was a space fortress, another something secretly built by Foundation.

What struck Lacus as odd was the inconsistency in her treatment. Her communication device had been confiscated, yet there was no sign of a thorough body search. She was still wearing the same clothes as when abducted, with the slumbering Blue inside her pocket. She was no expert on abduction protocols, yet she found it peculiar that her captors hadn't relieved her of her personal effects.

During her confinement, Ingrid visited Lacus frequently, each time treating her with a peculiar mix of concern and formality, as if she were an esteemed guest rather than a prisoner.

"Have some food," "Change your clothes."

Lacus had eaten the food despite her lack of appetite. She needed to maintain her strength, to be ready for whatever lay ahead. But she had refused the proffered change of clothes. If help was coming, slim as the chances might be, she needed to be recognizable, ready to move at a moment's notice.

The "change of clothes" Ingrid brought was a frilly dress more suited to a fairy tale princess than an escape attempt. Lacus wondered if it was deliberate, but apparently not. When she refused to change, Ingrid seemed disappointed but didn't force the issue.

The treatment she was receiving felt inconsistent. They could have done it while she slept if they wanted her to change clothes. They forcibly abducted and confined her, yet acted as if trying to curry favor with her.

Orphee approached her with open arms, his gesture one of false welcome, his smile failing to reach his eyes. Aura, seated at the desk, was smiling too, and even Shura, standing beside her, had softened his usual cutting expression a little.

But Lacus refused to play along with this charade.

"If you wish to apologize," she said, her voice firm and unyielding, "I request that you return me as soon as possible."

Of course, she didn't expect it to be granted, but Orphee's laughter caught her off guard, his expression one of aggrieved amusement.

"Return? Your rightful place is here."

Aura also laughed.

"That is your mother's wish as well."

"My mother's?" Lacus asked, caught off guard.

"You were born for the people. To be loved by all and show them the way."

Aura's voice, childlike yet imbued with a disturbingly adult cadence, carried a singsong satisfaction as she unveiled the unsettling truth.

"That is how I created you."

Lacus gasped. "You... created me?"

The ring that Orphee clutched so prominently against his chest shimmered ominously. Its design mirrored the one Lacus had cherished, a gift from her mother.

A wave of dizziness overwhelmed Lacus as the room seemed to whirl around her, her legs faltering beneath the weight of the revelations.

Kira was in a deserted chapel.

It was a place that had once been filled with the voices of Reverend Malchio and the orphans, always the sound of children's chatter and Malchio's calm tones. With Malchio gone, the chapel stood abandoned and dilapidated, its once warm ambiance replaced by the eerie whispers of wind and distant waves.

He reminisced about the days spent here with Lacus—unassuming days imbued with a quiet peace and contentment that now felt like distant echoes.

Those days would never return...

Yet, a nagging doubt lingered—had those days been truly filled with happiness?

Amid those peaceful days, hadn't he always felt a sense of guilt for having run away?

And what about Lacus?

How had she felt? Was she really happy, worrying about Kira and staying by his side?

Looking back now, it all felt like an illusion.

"Kira!"

Jolted from his reflections by Athrun's voice, Kira looked up, finding his friend's familiar, concerned face in the doorway.

Everyone gathered in the recreation room. They needed to discuss Orphee's speech and ultimatum. Mu wasn't there, but Erica Simmons was present.

Athrun picked up where his previous explanation had been cut short the other day.

"The Destiny Plan that sorts people by genetics and assigns roles based on aptitude. Durandal and Aura created those who would manage that system and lead the people. Those are the Accords."

In other words, those with the most superior genes would stand at the top of a world ruled by genetics.

A knot of bitterness tightened in Kira's stomach as he took in Athrun's words.

—You cannot win. It is your destiny.

It was just as Shura had said. Because their genes were superior to his own, Kira had lost.

"And the key figures among the Accords," Athrun said, his gaze locking with Kira's, "are Orphee Lam Tao... and Lacus."

Kira's eyes widened.

"Lacus?"

Athrun nodded, his expression grim.

"That's why they abducted her."

A pause, heavy with implication.

"Because she was instrumental in their plan."

Aura's voice was laced with triumph, her eyes gleaming with the certainty of their envisioned future.

"The Destiny Plan that Durandal began—you two are meant to stand at the pinnacle of all humanity, the final pair of pieces that fit together."

Orphee approached Lacus slowly, his steps measured and deliberate.

"You and I shall govern this world together."

He took her hand, his touch sending a jolt through her stunned body.

"You feel it, don't you?"

Once again, that overwhelming sensation engulfed her, an intense feeling of destined connection transcending mere words. It was a soft, pleasantly warm light wrapping around her like a cocoon.

"Together... with you...?" she repeated, her voice distant, as if in a trance.

Orphee leaned in, his whisper sweet and seductive.

"We are destined to be drawn to each other, bound together..."

That's right. This was resonance.

A resonance was felt because they had been fated partners since before birth.

The temptation was irresistibly sweet.

Every cell within Lacus, each one meticulously crafted by her genes, trembled with an intrinsic yearning for its counterpart.

But...

Suddenly, she thought she heard Kira's voice.

—Lacus.

It was her heart. Her will.

Lacus tore herself away from Orphee.

He stared at her, dumbfounded, as if he couldn't comprehend her rejection.

Having regained her own heart, Lacus shuddered, the memory of that invasive sensation still fresh on her skin.

These people were trying to steal 'me' from myself. Could there be any greater violation?

With a voice fortified by her unwavering resolve, she declared, "The one I love is not you!"

Orphee's expression twisted in shock and indignation, as if the rejection had struck him physically. He probably never imagined being rejected.

After a moment, he composed himself, his voice turning cold.

"So, you're worried about Kira Yamato? Unfortunately, he is no longer of this world."

Orphee's words struck like a hammer, crushing Lacus's spirit as she grappled with the unbearable thought.

Orphee's mocking laughter echoed in her ears.

"Did you not say it was fine to shoot him?"

"Oh... Kira!"

Lacus's knees buckled, and she collapsed, overwhelmed by the crushing weight of Orphee's words.

Her own words had taken the life of her beloved. That fact could never be changed.

I betrayed Kira!

The fireball that had engulfed the earth flashed through her mind, swelling and consuming everything in its path.

Had Kira been in those flames?

Orphee's cruel voice cut through her despair.

"In any case, he is no longer necessary. Not for the world to come."

Yet, within Lacus burned an unquenchable flame of defiance.

"It's not because..."

She raised her head, meeting Orphee's gaze with fierce determination.

"It's not because he's necessary that I love him. It's because I love him that he's necessary."

Even if she had lost Kira forever.

Even if she herself were to be scorched by the flames.

This feeling alone would never change.

Lacus held that love close to her heart, and she met Orphee's gaze head-on.

She saw Ingrid, who had been expressionless the whole time, suddenly change her demeanor with a start.

Orphee's face visibly darkened, and for the first time he raised his voice.

"Enough! Such deluded talk, like a Natural!"

But it wasn't just him. Aura and Shura also seemed shaken by Lacus's defiance, their perfect plan showing its first signs of strain.

Lacus sensed it.

The Destiny Plan that determined everything by genetics - if she followed it, Lacus should naturally accept Orphee.

Because that's how her genes were arranged.

But no matter one's birth, the days that followed nurtured and changed a person.

Even if she was a life created by Aura, even if her mother had entrusted her with some wish, who she was now wouldn't change.

This life was something she had built together with those around her. Something she had chosen to walk.

These people couldn't understand that.



They who yearned for a world where only unchanging, stable, predetermined behavior was permitted.

Athrun continued, his discomfort evident.

"According to our intel, a military coup is underway in the PLANTs."

"What?!" Shinn's voice cracked with disbelief.

"We don't have the details, but contact has been lost with the chairman and council members."

Murrue's brow furrowed, her expression clouding with concern.

"So... those who are in league with Foundation have seized control of the PLANTs?"

"Most likely."

Hilda's voice was a low growl, her anger palpable, radiating through the tense air of the room.

"It's Jaggernath," she spat. "That bastard hasn't forgotten his grudges from the great war. The kind who'd rather die than join hands with Naturals."

Shinn's mind conjured the image of the defense committee chairman's stern visage.

It was true, many Coordinators who saw that broadcast might sympathize with Foundation.

PLANT too had been hit with nukes by Naturals. The claim that they were subjected to the Naturals' unreasonable tyranny would resonate with them.

Especially if they had brought Lacus into their fold.

But it was all a deception, a twisted web of manipulation and cruelty. The Accords themselves had fired the nukes, incinerating their own people with nuclear fire to play the victim. And Lacus - they had essentially kidnapped her, using her as a pawn in their sick game.

Shinn couldn't understand it, and he would never forgive it.

The problem was - they were the only ones here who knew about the deception.

Hilda's voice broke through Shinn's thoughts, her expression grim.

"But... we are powerless to do anything right now. No mobile suits or ships."

Murrue sighed as well.

"In other words, everyone here is as good as dead, huh?"

A heavy silence descended on the room, each face a mask of despair and frustration.

Shinn's thoughts turned to Lunamaria.

She must think he was dead. She might be crying, calling him an idiot.

A sharp pang of longing pierced Shinn's heart. Every fiber of his being screamed to reach out to Lunamaria, to shatter the illusion of his death.

--I'm alive!

But doing so would put both them and Lunamaria in danger.

It was safer to stay dead, to let the world believe the lie. In their current state, with no power to oppose Foundation...

"In any case, let's analyze the situation," Meyrin's deliberately cheerful voice cut through the gloom. "We can decide what to do next after that."

Athrun nodded, glancing at her notepad.

"This is just a guess, but, the Accords can read our minds."

"Huh?"

Shinn blinked at Athrun's words. Read minds?

Come to think of it - Shinn recalled.

When fighting the Black Knights Squad, it felt like the enemy was predicting his moves in advance. And that 'voice' that had resonated directly in his head...

Athrun's voice lowered, weighted with concern, "They can likely manipulate thoughts, maybe even influence our deepest psyches."

"You mean... control minds?" Murrue said.

Shinn started. "So the commander was--!"

Kira's rampage in Eldora. Even that was!

He glanced over at Kira, who had been downcast the whole time. Kira turned his face away, his expression a mix of guilt and pain.

At that time, Kira had said "Michael is getting away." He too had been shown an illusion by the Accords.

A flicker of relief passed through Shinn, out of place but undeniable. Knowing that Kira's judgment hadn't been wrong, that he wasn't to blame for the devastation...

"It was all staged, from start to finish..." Neumann's words hung in the air, laden with a newfound realization.

Hilda's voice trailed off as she stared at the ceiling, her words echoing the room's sentiment, "Sheesh... How do we even begin to confront an enemy like that?"

Confusion spread across the world.

A faction of society, disillusioned with the status quo and marginalized in their everyday lives, vocally supported aligning with Foundation and adopting the Destiny Plan.

Conversely, some vocal opponents decried the Accords as inhuman, viewing them as threats that surpassed even the Coordinators and calling for their eradication.

And then there were the ruling class, scrambling to protect their vested interests, and the masses who fled cities in blind panic, the specter of Requiem looming over their heads like a guillotine waiting to fall.

As riots erupted in the streets, fueled by fear and uncertainty, governments worldwide scrambled, deploying troops in desperate bids to maintain order.

Yet no government on Earth had yet agreed to disarm, their calls for citizens to "remain calm" ringing hollow in the face of the gathering storm.

Crowds gathered, spellbound, in front of Orb's street screens, as the broadcast the news.

Among them was Kuzzey Buskirk.

"Foundation has advised the nations of Earth to completely surrender, then disarm and implement the Destiny Plan, and if this recommendation is not followed, they will immediately fire the Requiem. They have further declared that in that event, no evacuation of civilians will be permitted--"

Everyone listened to the announcer's words with unease.

Kuzzey swallowed hard, his unease a living thing, coiled tight in his chest. Part of him longed for surrender, for the governments to bow to Foundation's demands and accept the Destiny Plan. At least then, the specter of Requiem would retreat, the threat of annihilation lifted.

And if Foundation had prospered so much under the Destiny Plan, perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing. To have your role determined by your genes, to be spared the wasted effort of pursuing the wrong path, the crushing weight of unrealistic hopes and expectations, to serve society according to your abilities, to be useful—wasn't that what most people, himself included, wanted?

But - Kuzzey's pessimistic side said - what if they decided useless people like you weren't needed?

He had felt inferior many times before. Compared to Coordinators like Kira, he was nothing...

These so-called "Accords" apparently had even more superior qualities than Coordinators.

Would guys like that spare a thought for Naturals like him who had no particular talent?

They probably wouldn't understand their feelings...

Kuzzey could only envision a grim future no matter how he looked at it, his unease growing.

Just then, the footage switched to show Cagalli.

"To the people of Orb. The Orb government is currently mobilizing all transportation, military vehicles, ships, and aircraft to evacuate citizens living in urban areas. I ask one thing of you all. Do not panic under any circumstances. If everyone remains calm and acts according to plan, the evacuation will be completed without fail. Of course, to avoid the worst-case scenario, we are continuing negotiations even now."

Cagalli spoke with quiet resolve.

"I, Cagalli Yula Athha, will spare no effort to protect you all. Please trust me and act accordingly."

Her golden eyes held a sincere light.

Kuzzey turned his back on the screen, dazzled by how admirable she had become.

When they first met, he only thought of her as a noisy, troublesome girl. Later, he was shocked to learn she was Orb's princess. After all, she had joined another country's resistance, eating the same food and living in the same places as ordinary soldiers. To think that rough-mannered girl was now the chief representative.

It couldn't be helped, he thought.

For now, following her words meant staying home.

At least Cagalli would probably understand his feelings a little.

News reached the Orb administration with dire clarity: the Earth Alliance's space fleet, dispatched from the lunar base, had been decimated by a singular, devastating strike from Requiem.

"Have the Orb space fleet depart separately, starting with the ships that are ready."

Aware of the strategic folly in amassing their fleet, Cagalli opted for a dispersed deployment, minimizing the risk of a singular, catastrophic blow.

But even as the orders were given, the situation continued to unravel, each new development more dire than the last. The forces capable of neutralizing Requiem had been drastically reduced. Control of the PLANTs had fallen into the hands of a pro-Foundation faction, gripping both the civilian administration and the military in its

influential clutches. No help could be expected from that quarter. If anything, hostility seemed all but certain.

With a countenance shadowed by concern, a cabinet member addressed Cagalli, "Representative, perhaps we should comply with Foundation's demands after all... To protect our citizens, it may be unavoidable."

Cagalli shook her head.

"It goes against Orb's principles."

"Yet we must weigh our principles against the stark reality of our citizens' immediate safety. Isn't their survival our utmost priority?"

"That may be true. But have you forgotten what happened last time, when we abandoned our principles and followed the Atlantic Federation?"

At Cagalli's words, the cabinet members flinched as if a sore spot had been touched.

To not invade other nations, to not allow other nations to invade, to not intervene in the conflicts of other nations. Those were Orb's principles.

By discarding them and yielding to the Atlantic Federation's power, Orb had been drawn into an unwanted war and suffered numerous casualties.

"If Orb abandons its principles and complies with the whims of other nations, in the end, it's the citizens who will be sacrificed. This is even worse than mere invasion. We cannot, under any guise or threat, justify the betrayal of our citizens' freedoms."

In Foundation's vision, the citizens of Orb—indeed, the citizens of any nation under the Destiny Plan—were not individuals with rights and dreams but mere cogs in a vast, soulless machine. They were living components to be slotted into place, their worth measured only by their utility to the whole. Could they, in good conscience, participate in such a plan?

But even as the moral quandary loomed, the immediate crisis demanded action. The evacuation of the citizens had to be prioritized, and every second was bought with sweat and determination.

Cagalli's gaze met each of her cabinet members in turn, her voice resolute as she imparted her directive, "There is still time until the deadline. I want each of you to do what you can."

"Let's rescue Lacus," Athrun said, his voice cutting through the gloom that had settled over the room.

"It's our only option. To break this situation and stop PLANT, we need her words."

Murrue's gaze swept the room, taking in the determined nods of the others. But Kira's voice, bleak and defeated, shattered the fragile consensus.

"It's pointless."

"Kira?" Murrue looked at him, puzzled.

"It'll be the same either way. No matter what we do..."

Kira was fed up.

"In the end, it just repeats. Suffering so much, being lost..."

Fighting... Fighting and fighting!"

The bitter truth of it all crashed over him like a tidal wave.

Everything they had done, every sacrifice made, every drop of blood spilled - it had all been in vain. Because fighting was the only thing he could do. But fighting to stop the fighting was a contradiction to begin with.

Ultimately, all he had brought about was new death and destruction.

"But nothing changes..." Kira's voice broke, raw with anguish. "Is it because I'm wrong?"

What I'm saying is the truth, Durandal had said.

I can do it, Orphee had said.

They had been right. He couldn't change people.

"Kira..." Athrun's expression darkened, a storm brewing in his eyes. Kira's fists clenched, knuckles white with the strain.

"That's why Lacus abandoned me and chose him."

The memory of Lacus's smile, directed not at him but at Orphee, tore through his heart like a jagged blade. The pain was as fresh now as it had been then, a wound that refused to heal.

"I'm not good enough!" The words burst from him, a dam finally shattering under the pressure. "I can't give Lacus anything she wants. Forget peace. I can't even make her smile! I can't make her happy! That's why she betrayed me!"

Mid-rant, Kira was abruptly silenced as Athrun's fist connected with his jaw, a physical jolt mirroring the shock of the interruption.

"Quit your pathetic whining!"

Kira's body was hurled backward, crashing to the floor with a jarring thud.

"It's all 'me, me, me' with you, not considering her feelings at all!"

Athrun spat out vehemently.

"Enough! If you hate fighting so much, stay here and rot in self-pity!"

Dazed by the blow, Kira's confusion morphed into a surge of anger.

"What do you know? I don't want to hear that from you!"

He stood up to punch back, but Athrun nimbly dodged, grabbed Kira's fist, and drove an uppercut into his chin.

"You think you're the only one fighting?!"

"What choice do I have? You guys are weak!"

"Screw you!" Athrun's roar shook the room.

"So you feel like you're shouldering the world alone, and you just drop it when things don't go your way?! Some hero you are!"

Those words pierced Kira's heart.

"That's not it!"

He went at Athrun again. His fists cleaved through nothing but air as Athrun, with practiced ease, dodged and countered, landing precise blows that further undermined his composure.

The rest of the group looked on with a mix of concern and unease, the tension palpable in their silent observation. Shinn, unable to contain himself, leaped into the fray with an angry shout.

"Stop it, Athrun! The commander is--"

But his words were cut short as a stray punch from Athrun sent him flying. As Shinn tried to rejoin the brawl in a frenzy, Hilda wrapped an arm around his neck to stop him.

"Let 'em go at it," she whispered, exasperated but smiling.

"It's what friends do, knocking sense into a pathetic guy."

Murrue seemed to agree, nodding vigorously.

Kira, his breath coming in ragged gasps, hurled himself at Athrun once more.

"I have to-- I have to do it! I don't want to... but I'm desperate!"

"Why don't you say it? Ask for help? Anyone! What can you do alone?!"

Athrun's fist connected squarely with Kira's face. Kira's back slammed against the wall, and he slid to the ground, drained of both physical and emotional strength.

Each word Athrun hurled at him resonated with an uncomfortable truth, frustrating Kira not because they were unjust, but because they unmasked his own failings.

Hot tears broke free, cascading down to his tightly clenched fists.

"I want... to see Lacus..."

The admission was a broken whisper, torn from the depths of his soul.

"Lacus... I just want her to be there, smiling beside me... I don't know what to do anymore...!"

He had thought he had to bear everything alone. He had desperately struggled to somehow regain the peace he had taken from the world by defeating Durandal.

All the while, unable to consider how Lacus felt, how the others felt.

His own selfish desires had blinded him to the truth.

Lacus must have been suffering just as much...

Athrun said sarcastically, "Lacus sure has changed a lot since we last saw her."

"Huh?" Kira looked up, startled.

"Saying she can't be happy or it's no good unless you do this or that."

Athrun shrugged in exasperation.

"The Lacus I know wouldn't have said that."

Kira's gaze fell, his voice barely above a whisper, "Lacus... wanted the world to be at peace..."

"But she didn't expect someone to just hand her 'peace' on a silver platter, right?" Murrue's words were a gentle admonishment.

Athrun added, "Didn't she want a partner to walk with her toward that goal? Step by step, even if small ones?"

They were right.

If he had been wrong, that's where it was.

He had been self-centered, ignoring Lacus's feelings. Ignoring her true wishes. Treating a loved one like that was a betrayal in itself.

If only he had talked it out properly sooner... with Lacus, and with the others...

Kira muttered, crestfallen, "Does Lacus... still feel that way... now?"

Athrun laughed.

"If doubt clouds your mind, Kira, then seek her out. Ask her, hear it from her own lips."

"Huh?"

Kira blinked, looking up to see the faces of his friends, each one etched with concern and determination.

"Let's go, Kira. Let's save Lacus, together."

Athrun extended his hand, a gesture of reconciliation and solidarity.

"Words have power. Some truths can only be shared through them."

With a newfound resolve, Kira reached out, clasping Athrun's hand. Together, they rose, a silent pact of solidarity forming between them.



Surrounded by allies, Kira realized he wasn't isolated in his struggle; here were people who shared his aspirations, ready to support and be supported.

Chapter.05

"We've analyzed the trajectory and narrowed down the area of space where the Foundation shuttle was headed," Meyrin announced as she displayed the information from the terminal onto the monitor. Three locations in the space between Earth and the Moon were highlighted.

Kira and the others had moved to the command room on Akatsuki Island and began discussing the specifics of Lacus's rescue operation.

Athrun leaned forward as he manipulated the display.

"Cross-referencing with Orb's data, Lacus is likely—" His words trailed off as he tapped a command, causing one of the marked locations to pulse with an insistent rhythm.

It was L1—a Lagrangian point between the Moon and Earth.

"Artemis Fortress... that'll surely pose a problem."

Beside him, Murrue's lips pressed into a thin line, her eyes darkening with unpleasant memories. Kira, too, felt a twist of unease in his gut at the mention of the fortress. For both of them, Artemis was a place haunted by the ghosts of the past.

The once-majestic Artemis Fortress, long since scarred by ZAFT's onslaught, had been towed here under the guise of peaceful repurposing. Yet, it had seemingly morphed into a military stronghold for Foundation, its impregnable defenses posing a daunting challenge to any who dared to breach its walls.

If its defenses were as strong as before, it would be difficult to even sneak in.

Kira spoke up, "If we use Birdy and Blue's quantum network, we can pinpoint Lacus's location."

It was a method of using quantum entanglement resonance for positioning.

Quantum patterns, akin to human fingerprints, served as unique identification markers based on specific quantum states. Birdy and Blue had quantum pattern identification devices built-in, with Kira and Lacus's data registered for user authentication.

"So, getting closer will reveal her location?" Murrue asked.

"If Lacus still has it with her, that is," Kira replied hesitantly.

Murrue responded with a reassuring nod.

"What about the ship? We don't have any mobile suits capable of proper combat," Shinn interjected, highlighting a critical oversight.

Murrue's eyes twinkled with a hint of mischief.

"We might just procure a ship, though the method could be... unconventional."

Kira couldn't help but mirror her expression, a flicker of understanding passing between them. He knew that look all too well. As always, her calm demeanor belied the radical actions she contemplated.

Erica chimed in cheerfully, "As for the mobile suits, I might be able to figure something out."

As they walked down the corridor, Kira glanced at Murrue, a question forming on his lips, "What happened to Mu? I haven't seen him around for a while."

"He's on a separate mission. A 'secret order' from Cagalli," Murrue replied.

A few steps behind, Athrun caught Meyrin's sidelong glances, her eyes flickering with unspoken words.

"What is it?" he asked, his voice low.

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking that people tend to say things like 'You're one to talk,' you know?"

Athrun had a feeling someone would call him out on it.

"I said that... well, it seemed right at that moment," Athrun muttered, his voice tinged with regret.

"Ooh, I'd love to tell Representative Athha about this," Meyrin teased.

"No, that's not..." Athrun stammered.

His words to Kira could certainly be thrown right back at him. He, too, was often preoccupied with his own feelings and insensitive to the feelings of others.

He offered a weak explanation, "I mean... I'm thinking of changing that part of myself, so..."

But Meyrin seemed to take pity on him, her expression softening into something more understanding.

"Hmm... But don't you think you went a bit too far? It seemed like there was some resentment behind it."

Before Athrun could respond, Hilda's voice cut through the air, sharp and sudden. She had been walking ahead of them, but now she turned, her single eye fixing them with a piercing stare.

"Don't worry about it," she said, her words a low whisper that somehow carried more weight than a shout. "If you hadn't punched him, I would've given him a couple of hits myself."

Her smile belied the unmistakable glint of steely resolve in her single eye, a silent promise of retribution.

Athrun and Meyrin exchanged a glance, a shiver running down their spines.

Athrun found himself sympathizing with Kira, his concern tinged with a detached curiosity as if observing from afar.

Upon entering the hangar, Erica flicked on the lights sequentially, casting an expanding glow over three towering mobile suits that stood like silent sentinels.

"These were loaned by Representative Athha for performance evaluation experiments with a new fusion reactor and equipment. I never imagined we'd need them for this," Erica explained.

Shinn caught his breath and leaned forward.

"Destiny!"

Kira, his voice laced with a blend of nostalgia and astonishment, muttered, "Freedom..." as if greeting an old friend.

The Destiny, Freedom, and Impulse stood there in their dull gray deactivated mode colors.

As if they had been waiting for their masters' arrival.

Erica continued, "The propulsion system and armaments are the same as before, but the control system has been updated to the latest version. It might not be enough to compete with the Black Knights, but..."

Indeed, these units were now outdated, and their specifications were far behind those of the Black Knights' machines.

"No," Shinn declared, a defiant grin spreading across his face, his voice resonating with unwavering conviction. "With these, we stand a fighting chance against those guys!"

The night sky over Onogoro Island cast the illuminated behemoth, Millennium, into stark relief as it loomed ominously over the harbor's dark waters.

Silently emerging between the pier and the ship's hull, a shadowy figure targeted the vessel, expertly launching a grappling wire towards it. The wire extended smoothly, its end adhering next to an inspection hatch.

With the wire firmly secured, the figure executed a swift, agile ascent, almost merging with the shadows as they climbed.

One by one, several other figures materialized from the darkness, each launching their own wire to ascend the vessel's towering side.

The first person to reach the top clung to the side of the hatch. With deft movements, the figure discreetly removed an access panel and connected a compact, sophisticated device to the exposed network of cables within.

As the rest joined, the device activated, its light signaling readiness. The initial figure nodded to the others, who, upon receiving the signal, manipulated the hatch to slip inside.

On the Millennium's bridge, Albert's eyebrow arched as he studied the monitor before him, noting the illuminated alert that indicated the presence of toxic gas.

"Captain," His voice cut through the stillness, drawing Konoe's attention.

"It's an injection attack," Albert reported, his words heavy with the weight of their implication. An intruder had infiltrated their computer system, cloaking their entry behind the guise of a false alarm.

Hearing Albert's report, Konoe let out a heavy sigh, the weight of the moment settling on him as he sank back into his chair.

"I see..."

—*So, they've finally arrived...*

He pondered whether to welcome the realization of his predictions or to dread the implications.

"All crew members, please evacuate the ship immediately. I repeat..."

The shrill blare of an alarm pierced the silence, propelling Lunamaria from her room into the chaos beyond.

"What's going on!?"

Her voice was swallowed by the cacophony, the automated announcement reverberating through the hallway like a dire prophecy.

"Emergency alert! Emergency alert! Toxic gas detected on B Deck."

Instinct took over, a chilling sense of foreboding coiling in Lunamaria's chest as her hand found the reassuring weight of her gun.

It could be a genuine accident, a twist of fate, but the nagging suspicion in her gut wouldn't be silenced.

With measured steps, she advanced down the corridor, her weapon poised, eyes sweeping the surroundings for any hint of danger.

The evacuation had left the passage deserted, an eerie stillness settling in the wake of the crew's departure. Lunamaria pressed forward, her body hugging the cover of the walls, every sense on high alert. And then--

"Don't move!"

The command was a hushed snarl, the press of something hard against her back sending a jolt of adrenaline surging through her veins.

An intruder?!

"Hands up, drop the gun," the man's voice was strained, muffled, a forced attempt at disguise. Lunamaria complied, her hands rising slowly, deliberately. As her assailant reached for the weapon still clutched in her grip, a plan crystallized in her mind.

--*Too naive!*

With a swift, practiced motion, she seized and twisted his wrist, unbalancing him and pulling him downward.

"Argh!" The man let out an undignified cry as he fell to the floor. His face was covered by a diving mask.

Lunamaria's elbow found his chin with a swift, brutal jab, and she was on her feet in an instant, her gun trained on his prone form. The man scabbled at his mask, desperation fueling his movements as he tore it free.

"Luna! It's me—Shinn!"

The words spilled from his lips in a frantic rush, the familiarity of his voice cutting through the haze of adrenaline, even as blood streamed from his nose.

"Shinn?"

Lunamaria's heart skipped a beat, her weapon wavering as she registered the familiar face beneath the mask, marred by a glaring nosebleed.

Shinn nursed his struck chin. His teeth seemed fine, but his mouth tasted of blood. He had never been able to beat Lunamaria in hand-to-hand combat. He had only intended a playful ruse to tease her, yet it had almost backfired disastrously, with him nearly meeting his end at the hands of his own girlfriend.

That was close.

"Ow... Huh?"

Looking up, he saw Lunamaria trembling, her head bowed.
Had he made her angry? This was bad.

Then, with a sudden surge of emotion, Lunamaria lifted her head, her face awash with tears, and threw her arms around him in a desperate embrace.

"Shinn!"

"Whoa."

As he watched Lunamaria sobbing, Shinn felt a pang in his chest.
Sorry for worrying you...

But his moment of empathy was cut short; a slap flew at him.

"Idiot! Idiot! Geez! I thought you were dead!"

"Ouch!"

Lunamaria alternated between slapping Shinn and pulling him into a constricting embrace, her actions bordering on a loving chokehold. Shinn tried to tap out and surrender, but Lunamaria didn't notice. Black spots began to dance before his eyes.

"I'm dying... seriously dying..."

Hilda paused to glance at the pair, her smile reflecting a mix of amusement and empathy at the sight of Shinn teetering on consciousness and Lunamaria's tearful outburst.

On the bridge, only Arthur leaped up in surprise as Kira and the others burst in, their faces obscured by masks.

"Don't move!" Murrue ordered, gun at the ready.

"Y-yes, sir!" Arthur obediently raised his hands.

However, Albert, who had been facing the monitor, calmly checked his watch.

"You're two minutes later than my calculations, Commander Yamato."

"Huh..."

Kira, feeling unexpectedly chastened, hesitated, his grip on the gun loosening momentarily.

The captain's chair swiveled around, revealing Konoe's wry smile as he turned to confront the newcomers.

"Captain Konoe...?"

"The preparations for departure are complete, Captain Ramius," Konoe said, glancing at Murrue's gun. "That dangerous thing is unnecessary."

Kira and Murrue exchanged glances and lowered their guns.
It seemed everything had been anticipated.

Kira felt a little guilty towards Athrun and Meyrin, who had gone through the trouble of sneaking them in.

As they removed their diving masks, only Arthur reacted with a startled "Ehhh!?" as if he had seen a ghost.

Arthur's over-the-top reaction sliced through the tension, injecting a moment of unexpected levity.

Konoe rested his chin on his folded hands, a mischievous smile on his face.

"So? Care to share your plan?"

At Artemis Fortress, Orphee and his team had quickly obtained the information.

"The Millennium has been hijacked?" Orphee inquired, striding into the control room with urgency, prompting an operator to look up with a nod of confirmation.

"Yes, sir. A notice has been sent to PLANT and the Atlantic Federation, and satellite images show a sudden increase in the movement of people and goods around the dock."

The images confirmed that large containers were being loaded onto the Millennium.

"Hmph!"

Orphee shared a knowing glance with Shura.

"Orb, as we expected."

They had predicted that Orb would take some action. Rather, it was just as they had hoped.

Everything was moving according to their calculations.

Except for one miscalculation--.

A flicker of irritation shadowed Orphee's thoughts, quickly suppressed as he refocused on the mission at hand, pushing aside any doubts with practiced resolve.

"Prepare to fire Requiem!"

They had to proceed with the plan no matter what.

Once the dust settled and they reshaped the world according to their vision, he was convinced she would see the truth in their cause.

That they were the ones who were right.

Kira and the others were gathered around the strategy panel on the Millennium's bridge.

"We'll infiltrate Artemis Fortress and rescue Lacus," Kira said, pointing to the fortress.

Athrun added, "We'll employ Mirage Colloid to evade detection, a tactic from Nicol's playbook we previously used against Artemis," Athrun clarified, referencing their past strategy to underscore its effectiveness.

Konoe nodded, tracing his finger over the panel, "And we'll break through the main fleet to the moon."

"Serving as a decoy, you mean," Murrue said, nodding. By positioning the Millennium as a threat to Requiem, they could shroud Kira and the others' true objective.

"If they figure out who we are, they'll attack Orb immediately. We'll neutralize Requiem before that," Albert explained at his usual rapid-fire pace as he operated the panel.

"Requiem itself is covered by a shield; it is impervious to conventional firepower. The beam relay points are camouflaged with Mirage Colloid, so their locations can't be predicted until it's fired."

In the simulation, numerous firing lines extended from Requiem, but Albert pointed to a single spot with a wicked smile.

"Except for one place."

A point on the far side of the moon blinked on the panel.

"Only the first relay point is always directly above Requiem - on the firing line. Without fail, right before firing."

By passing through relay points, Requiem could target anywhere on Earth. But beams could only travel in straight lines. With Requiem's muzzle fixed, the first relay point had to be on the line directly above it.

"If we destroy the first relay point..."

"We can at least buy some time."

The sheer magnitude of Requiem's destructive potential was a double-edged sword. The immense energy it consumed would necessitate a significant recharge period after each firing. Destroying the relay point would compound this, forcing its replacement before the next shot could be fired.

If they could somehow reach the main body of Requiem during that window...

"Evacuation of Millennium crew complete," reported Abbey Windsor from the CIC.

Through the viewports, the disembarked crew members could be seen, their arms raised in a solemn salute to their mother ship as the hatch sealed shut. Only a skeleton crew of volunteers and the rescued Archangel team remained.

Just as they were about to set sail, Konoe indicated his seat to Murrue.

"Well then - *Captain* Ramius."

"What? No, I couldn't possibly," Murrue said, flustered, trying to decline.

But Konoe's smile held a serene certainty.

"This ship belongs to neither COMPS nor ZAFT now. We're rebels - pirates, in a sense. The one who knows how to fight in a way befitting that should take this seat."

Kira nodded, his own respect for Konoe's cautious nature tempered by the knowledge that the battles ahead would likely require Murrue's quick wit and decisiveness.

Seeing their expressions, Murrue seemed to steel herself.

"All right. Then I ask that you serve as XO, Captain Konoe."

"Gladly," Konoe said, saluting.

Behind him, Arthur, who had suddenly lost his post, made a dumbfounded face.

At the helm, Neumann exuded an aura of calm professionalism as he initiated the launch sequence.

"All sections check complete. Main engine output rising. Thirty seconds to rated output. Ready to launch."

From the XO seat, Konoe ordered, "Cast off the lines."

"Connecting water jets."

With a shudder, the great ship stirred to life, the mooring lines falling away as it began its inexorable journey.

In a dignified voice, Murrue commanded, "Leaving port. Millennium, ahead, combat speed one."

As the ship surged forward, it sliced through the waters of Onogoro Island's harbor, stirring up towering waves. The eastern sky was beginning to pale, dawn mist caressing the sea that was turning a deep blue.

Several ship silhouettes could be seen on that sea. Orb's Aegis-class ships.

"Heave to! Millennium, heave to immediately! Failure to comply will result in your ship being fired upon!"

Murasames in fighter mode also appeared overhead, forming up to pursue the Millennium. Tension ran through the bridge.

But Murrue calmly faced forward and ordered, "Maintain course! Ahead, combat speed two!"

"What? But..." Arthur let out a startled cry.

But Neumann's hands were steady on the controls, his expression one of serene focus as he propelled the ship onward, heedless of the danger.

The Orb fleet and Murasame squadrons launched a barrage of missiles. They impacted all around the Millennium, one after another, at close range, throwing up white waterspouts. The ship shook violently, its form obscured by the spray.

For a moment, Arthur and the original Millennium crew went rigid with fear, but...

When the billowing water droplets cleared, the Millennium was unscathed, leaving Orb's territorial waters behind.

Orphee's face twisted into a sneer as he watched the events unfold on the monitor, his voice dripping with contempt.

"Hmph... what a farce."

The display before him was a well-worn script, Orb's go-to ploy in times of crisis. Their ships, their pilots, all players in a carefully choreographed dance, their weapons never intended to find their mark.

The precision with which they "missed" their target, not a single stray shot marring the performance, was a testament to their skill. But in Orphee's eyes, these men and women were better suited to the stage than the battlefield, mere actors playing at the art of war.

Orphee opened a communication line with Orb.

"It seems you've chosen to ignore our warnings, Orb."

Cagalli, her image flickering on the screen, momentarily let her guard down, eyes widening in a flash of genuine concern before she masked it with a layer of diplomatic surprise.

"What are you talking about? There should still be time before a response is due. We are currently consulting our parliament regarding your demands."

It was a stalling tactic, Orphee knew. Not just their military, but their head of state was quite the actor.

But Orphee had no patience for such theatrics, no desire to indulge in this game of shadows and lies.

"A transparent ploy. We're well aware of the Millennium's movements," he said coldly, "In ten minutes, we will fire the Requiem at your nation."

Cagalli half-rose from her seat in protest.

"Wait! The Millennium has been hijacked by someone! We just informed the PLANTs as well--"

Orphee cut off her excuses, glaring at his opponent through the screen. "I've made it clear. If there was the slightest movement, we would fire."

"It's a misunderstanding! We have nothing to do with this matter--"
Cagalli tried to continue explaining, but Orphee curtly terminated the communication.

The cabinet members and officials around Cagalli erupted into commotion. She rose to her feet, her voice cutting through the din like a clarion call.

"Hasten the evacuation of all citizens! Orb's military is to support this with all its might!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

At Cagalli's command, a renewed sense of urgency surged through the room, prompting officials to spring into action.

She was already in motion, her steps purposeful as she fired off a rapid succession of commands. "Move government functions to the Onogoro Island air defense facility."

"Cagalli..." Toyah, normally calm, stood frozen in bewilderment at the sudden developments.

Cagalli scolded him, "Hurry! We only have ten minutes!"

The ongoing evacuation efforts shifted into an even higher gear. People flooded into subway stations and underground shelters, while buses packed with evacuees crammed the main roads.

Astrays carrying buses full of refugees flew overhead, and at the port, warships loaded with buses and citizens on their decks were frantically trying to set sail.

The administration building was a hive of barely controlled chaos. Armored vehicles jostled for space at the entrance, their engines snarling as officials clambered into waiting helicopters, their destination the relative safety of Onogoro Island.

Cagalli, now clad in the sleek lines of a pilot suit, strode out of the entrance, her gaze sweeping the scene before her. As her eyes fell upon Toyah, she paused, the weight of the moment settling upon her shoulders.

"I'm counting on you to take care of things, Toyah."

As if grasping the weight of those words, Toyah gave a small salute. "Please be careful, Cagalli."

Cagalli nodded firmly, and Toyah headed for the helicopter with his military escort.

"Representative Athha!" The shout drew her attention, and she turned to see two young people in uniform racing towards her. Miriallia Haw and Sai Argyle.

"Strike Rouge and Cavalier Aifrid 2 are ready! Hurry!"

Cagalli nodded to her trusted comrades and headed for the underground hangar with them.

In the hangar, the pale pink Strike - Cagalli's former mobile suit - was waiting. Mounted on its upper body was a Cavalier unit, the same type that had been attached to Athrun's Z'Gok.

Miriallia and Sai boarded the Cavalier while Cagalli entered her mobile suit's cockpit hatch.

Closing the hatch, alone, Cagalli felt for her collar. She drew out a chain and tightly clasped the ring hanging from her neck with both hands. As if drawing strength from it.

"Father, stand with us now and protect our people," Cagalli whispered her voice a blend of determination and vulnerability. Her plea extended beyond the mortal realm, invoking Haumea, Orb's guardian deity, in a fervent appeal for divine intervention.

For now, prayer was all she had left.

In her heart, she also called out to her only sibling.

"Kira!"

Meanwhile, the Millennium had taken off and was accelerating to leave the atmosphere.

Arthur's eyes widened in alarm as he monitored the screen. "Captain, the—" He instinctively turned towards Konoe, then swiftly corrected himself, pivoting to Murrue with urgency.

"Captain, it's Foundation!"

Seeing Foundation's ultimatum to Orb, Konoe muttered regretfully, "So they won't be fooled after all."

Murrue said dryly, "They planned to fire on Orb from the start, given the slightest pretext!"

Their exchange of dark looks acknowledged the grim reality: this was a show of force, a demonstration meant to instill fear and control other nations through terror.

Not only that, Foundation feared Orb - its principles and the strength and will of its people.

Kira bit his lip hard.

Their actions had inadvertently put Orb in danger, yet from their current position, they were powerless to intervene.

—*What to do?!*

With a decisive flick, Kira engaged the communication switch.



As Orphee observed the launch countdown, he pondered aloud, not without a hint of inevitability, "Sooner or later, it's a nation we'd have to fire on anyway."

"This will make other countries realize it's not an empty threat," Aura said with a sadistic smile.

"Farewell, Orb!"

But just as he drew breath to give the command, the air was shattered by an unexpected communication.

"Foundation, do you read?"

Orphee felt his breath catch in his throat, his heart stuttering in his chest. It was a voice he never thought he would hear again, a ghost from a past he had thought long buried.

An operator reported, "Broadcast received on international distress channel."

The monitor flickered, the image resolving into a face that had no right to exist, a visage that defied the very laws of probability. A man who should have been dead.

"This is Kira Yamato with the Millennium."

"What?!" Orphee stared at the face in astonishment.

Behind Kira was unmistakably the background of a bridge, and in the captain's seat was Murrue Ramius, another who should also have been dead.

Orphee, his composure shattered, turned to Shura with a mix of accusation and disbelief, "Explain this, Shura! How is this possible?"

Shura, too, had a look of utter shock, forgetting his usual composure.

"There's just no way! You mean, back then he--?!"

"Pity, isn't it? I'm still breathing. Despite your attempts to bury me along with sacrificing your own people," Kira said in a voice dripping with sarcasm.

Murrue's initial surprise swiftly morphed into an understanding nod; she recognized Kira's abrupt tactic as a deliberate ploy.

This was no mere transmission, no private exchange between enemies. The international distress channel carried their voices to the far corners of the globe, a message heard by all who had the means to listen.

And for Foundation, such exposure could be nothing short of catastrophic.

Until now, they had deliberately continued to "play dead." They knew, with grim certainty, that if their existence were to be revealed,

if the world were to learn that witnesses to Foundation's dark machinations still drew breath, the full might of the nation would be brought to bear against them.

Kira had shattered that silence, torn away the veil of secrecy in one calculated move.

The implication was clear. Foundation would come for them, with every resource at their disposal.

With a subtle nod from Murrue, a silent accord passed among the crew—Konoe caught her gaze, giving Neumann a knowing look. In response, Neumann's nod was not just agreement but a silent vow of readiness.

"You claim to lead humanity, yet you act as mere butchers!" Kira's voice surged with a fierce intensity, his words a theatrical tone unlike him.

"We know the truth. We have evidence. We'll appeal this to the whole world!"

"You've lost! Accords or whatever you are, we'll absolutely crush the designs of you mass murderers!"

Orphee panicked at Kira's words, fearing the collapse of their moral high ground. They had declared war on Earth as victims hit by nukes, but he was more disturbed by this unexpected development—they, including Kira and COMPS members, were supposed to have perished in Eldora.

All obstacles should have been erased, all loose ends neatly tied.

"How dare you!"

At Aura's growled words, Orphee snapped back to himself.

"Mother..."

Aura's face was a twisted mask of fury, her teeth bared in a feral grimace as she stared at Kira's image with a hatred that seemed to radiate from every pore. It was a primal rage, a consuming fire that threatened to devour all in its path.

"Kill that failure!" she screamed, her words dripping with venom. "Requiem, target the Millennium!"

Orphee felt a surge of panic. Yes, leaving Kira and the others alive would hinder their plans. But Aura's rage stemmed from a more primal hatred.

Acting on emotion now would-

But Aura had already given the order.

"Fire! I command it!"

"High energy reaction detected on the far side of the moon," Albert reported.

Requiem had been fired.

Murrue issued orders in rapid succession.

"Activate Tannhäuser! Emergency deceleration!"

The ascending Millennium rapidly slowed down, almost to a standstill.

In an instant, a blinding light enveloped the ship, bathing the bridge in a stark, white glow that forced the crew to shield their eyes.

But instead of being swallowed by the huge vortex of light, the beam passed by the ship, causing a massive steam explosion in the sea below.

This strategic feint was Kira's design, drawing Requiem's deadly focus away from Orb and onto them—a high-stakes diversion that had paid off.

Unlike the Orb capital, the Millennium was too small a target, and moving to boot. It was like aiming a cannon at a fly.

It seemed unlikely to hit, but it was still a gamble.

And they had won that gamble.

Murrue gave the command.

"Fire!"

The Millennium's bow cannon roared to life, discharging a concentrated electromagnetic stream that carved a path through to space. As the positron cannon created a vacuum in their course, the surrounding air rushed in all at once, and the hull accelerated on that pressure wave.

The Millennium opened all its thrusters to full and ascended into space.

"We've lost the Millennium due to the electromagnetic pulse!" an operator reported.

Upon hearing the report, Orphee's composure shattered; he slammed his fist against the console, his outburst echoing a deep-seated frustration. "Damn it!" he roared, the words heavy with defeat and anger.

The electromagnetic pulse generated by the positron cannon had disrupted their sensors, making it impossible to track the Millennium's location.

Everything had gone awry; the fact that Kira Yamato was alive and had survived again this time and that they had missed firing on Orb.



This had given Orb a reprieve. They would fortify their defenses and launch a counterattack.

But most irksome of all was Kira Yamato.

—*The one I love is not you!*

Lacus's cry resurfaced, fanning Orphee's fury.

If she learned of Kira's survival...

Orphee shook his head vehemently.

No. She would never find out.

If he killed Kira first, the end result would be the same.

Boaz Fortress, a former PLANT military base. Now officially decommissioned, it secretly housed a Clyne Faction outpost. Not that they had anticipated a situation like this. They, too, had hoped the things they had hidden there would gather dust, unused and forgotten, but...

Sitting in the cockpit running system checks, Yzak muttered, "I can't believe they kept these old models around, even if retrofitted with nuclear power."

"I like 'em," Dearka replied with a hint of nostalgia. "The Zaku's control system is easy to use."

The machines they had boarded were old models, but their power systems and controls had been upgraded. They were units that Yuri Amalfi, Ezalia, and others had remodeled for testing using decommissioned machines.

PLANT's central authority was still under Jagannath's control. But they had to leave that to the others.

Yzak and company had to deal with the ZAFT fleet somehow. They couldn't let them fire the Requiem again.

"Geez! What the hell is he doing?" Yzak cursed the absent party in frustration.

Dearka, as if seeing through his feelings, said, "The moon's a long way from Earth."

"I don't want to hear excuses like that!"

"Hey, don't tell me..."

As Dearka grumbled, launch preparations were complete.

"Yzak Joule, Duel, taking off!"

"Dearka Elzman, Buster, launching!"

The two took off from Boaz in their first beloved machines. Both the Duel and Buster were equipped with Meteor units.

With the thrust from the massive add-on equipment, they dashed toward the moon in an instant.

On the deck of the Millennium, which had safely left the atmosphere, launch preparations were underway for the combined form of the Cavalier and Z'Gok - the Amazing Z'Gok. The Freedom was mounted under the Z'Gok in a carried position.

In the Cavalier's cockpit, Kira was talking with the bridge.

"Well then, Murrue, we're off."

Murrue smiled.

"Alright. Be sure to bring back Lacus."

"Will do."

From here, they would act separately from the Millennium. Kira, Athrun, Meyrin, and several Orb soldiers led by Kisaka were headed for Artemis, while the Millennium was headed for the moon.

Kira thought of something and switched the comm.

"Shinn."

At his call, Shinn's face, already on standby in the Destiny, appeared on the monitor.

"I'm counting on you with the Millennium," Kira said.

Shinn blinked in surprise for a moment, then broke into a broad grin.

"Yes, sir!"

Hilda's voice flew at Shinn, who had nodded vigorously.

"Good for you, kid."

"He's so simple, really," Lunamaria's comment, laced with mock exasperation, couldn't hide her fondness.

Kira turned around after cutting the comm to find everyone in the Cavalier grinning gleefully for some reason. He felt a little uncomfortable.

"Was that weird?"

Meyrin hurriedly shook her head, and Athrun answered in an amused voice, "Nah, it's fine."

Kira turned back to the front, disgruntled.

Perhaps this meant he had finally acted like a proper commander.

He should have trusted Shinn and the others more. He realized that now.

It felt a little like he was doing exactly as Athrun had told him, which didn't sit quite right, but...

The Amazing Z'Gok silently detached from the Millennium, and soon its form vanished, cloaked by the Mirage Colloid.

"Your meal, ma'am."

Ingrid carried the tray into Lacus's room as usual. Seeing her, Lacus offered a gentle smile.

"Thank you," she said in a subdued voice.

With her pink hair and white skin, Lacus looked as sweet and ephemeral as spun sugar, as if she might dissolve and vanish at any moment.

And yet, she had stubbornly refused Orphee.

The thought stirred a mix of bitter resentment and - strangely - a glimmer of hope within Ingrid, plunging her into a maelstrom of emotions she couldn't quite grasp. And as she served the meal, those emotions spilled forth, a torrent of words that seemed to come from somewhere deep within her, a place she had never dared to acknowledge.

"Why?"

Lacus looked up at her question.

"Pardon?"

Confronted directly, Ingrid nearly drowned in the vortex of her emotions.

Why are you so lovely?

How can you be so resolute?

Why... why are you Orphee's chosen one?

But what left her lips were words furthest from her true feelings.

"Why won't you accept your destiny, Princess?"

Ingrid found herself echoing the rhetoric she had been conditioned to believe.

"We were given power and purpose when we received life. Isn't it our happiness to follow that path and live as needed by others?"

Lacus's expression hardly changed at her impassioned speech. She answered firmly, "I believe every life has the right to choose its own path. This is not the fate I wished for."

"Do you wish this conflict to go on forever, Princess? For everyone to keep struggling, lost, and in pain?"

Ingrid was indignant.

This person was as cold and aloof as the moon in the sky. So different from her fluffy, sugary appearance, without a shred of pity or compassion.

"You don't know your own good fortune, Princess!"

You've been acknowledged as Orphee's consort, and yet!

Tears pricked at the corners of Ingrid's eyes, her voice dripping with scorn.

"You could rule the world... Why won't you accept Orphee?!"

Lacus gazed straight at Ingrid with clear eyes.

"Are you content with that?"

Ingrid caught her breath. She felt as if her heart had been laid bare. Can she tell?

This person who can't even read minds.

The feelings I've kept tightly locked away, hidden from even my closest comrades?

The feelings I've harbored for so long... so very long... of loving Orphee?

The sound of the door opening behind them shattered the moment, jolting Ingrid back to reality, and she stepped aside.

As Orphee's presence filled the room, Ingrid fled as if escaping.

"Have you cooled your head?" Orphee brushed past her as easily as a pebble by the roadside, extending his hand to Lacus.

"Isn't it about time you realized your mission and took my hand?"

Seeing the ring gleaming on his finger, her mother's words echoed in Lacus's mind.

"The world is yours, and you are the world's, as long as you are born into this life."

Had it been a wish, a desperate plea for her child to save the world, to devote herself as an Accord? Or had it been an act of mercy, a mother's last, desperate attempt to rescue her daughter from the fate that awaited her?

There was no way to know now.

But it made no difference either way. This life was not her mother's. It was Lacus's own.

Facing Orphee, Lacus steeled her heart.

Never again would she let this man invade her soul.

"My answer remains the same, no matter how many times you ask. The one I love is not you."

Her icy reply made Orphee's eyes blaze.

"Kira Yamato is dead!"

"No, he is not."

Her firm declaration made Orphee's gaze waver for an instant.

"Why... won't you accept reality?"

Orphee quickly continued, but Lacus's heart leaped.

Kira was alive.

Yes... she had known.

That Kira would not simply vanish like this...

Lacus smiled.

"Because I believe in him."

Believe.

That Kira was alive, that he still loved her, that no matter what, he would come to save her.

To believe, to keep on believing, even in the face of impossible odds - that was the one thing she could do.

"Why?!"

Orphee flew into a rage, seizing Lacus's shoulders and roughly shoving her down onto the bed.

"Why him?! That failed creation unfit to be an Accord?!"

Lacus quailed inwardly with fear, but she armored herself with an unyielding gaze, refusing to let Orphee see the tremors of her heart.

"Because he is the one I chose to love."

"He couldn't create a single thing you desired. Not even a peaceful world! You think someone like that deserves to be at your side?!"

"Love needs no qualifications. Can you not understand even that?"

Why had she fallen in love with Kira - even Lacus herself didn't know.

Because he was kind. Because he was sad. Because she liked his smiling face...

She could list any number of things she adored, but they felt different from reasons.

Simply because Kira was Kira. That was all.

Why think that you wouldn't love, that you shouldn't be loved, unless you could do something, unless you met some criteria?

Love was not a commodity to be exchanged.

It was a gift from the heart that could never be bartered away.

They couldn't comprehend it.

Probably because they had always been force-fed a completely different set of values.

Because they were Accords, beings superior to all else - beings who would not be acknowledged, would not be loved, unless superior to all else. Likely by their creator.

That's why Lacus's words were incomprehensible to Orphee, as if spoken in some alien tongue.

Orphee groaned with a cornered look, his hand going to Lacus's chest.

Fear rose in her throat. No matter how much she reasoned, she was no match for his strength. This man could hurt her however he pleased. Could she keep resisting even then?

Lacus closed her eyes, desperately trying to control her breathing. She mustn't give in to fear.

Opening her eyes with a sharp glare, Lacus looked at Orphee with disdain.

"You may make people submit by force, but you can never make their hearts submit. No matter what you do to me, you cannot erase Kira from within me."

Orphee recoiled as if he had been struck, staggering back, his hand falling away from her skin.

"Why...? You were born to rule the world with me! So why won't you accept me - my love?!"

His voice was raw, anguished.

Pitiful man.

But Lacus felt no sympathy.

"The 'Lacus Clyne' you love is not me."

Orphee's face was a mask of confusion, of uncomprehending pain. He stumbled from the room, a broken figure.

Lacus let out a ragged breath, covering her face with trembling hands. Tears spilled out, unstoppable.

The 'Lacus Clyne' they wanted - a 'thing' that would accept them with a gentle smile and fulfill the role they had arbitrarily decided, exactly as told. Proof that would wholly affirm their existence, their rectitude.

The real Lacus's wishes and heart had no place there.

It was the same.

Lacus suddenly recalled.

—*So what is Lacus Clyne really?*

That girl's - Meer's - anguished murmur.

Feeling responsible for her death, Lacus had vowed not to run this time. She had tried desperately to fulfill her role as "Lacus Clyne."

But what, or who exactly, was this "Lacus Clyne?"

Certainly not herself.

Only now did Lacus finally realize her own mistake.

PLANT's idol, the songstress of salvation, the upright and pure President of COMPS, 'Lacus Clyne' - she had tried to confine herself into those roles.

But that wasn't who she was.

She might have played those roles not by desire but by necessity.

But her true self was just an individual who loved the simple everyday life of cooking, tending flowers, and playing with pet robots. Her greatest happiness would be living quietly with Kira, unnoticed, in some corner of the world.

Somewhere along the way, she had left her own happiness behind, becoming shackled by duty.

Both herself and Kira - in that they were no different from them.

She had to escape.

She had to resist.

The power that would steal 'herself' from herself would force her into a role.

Lacus resolved anew, determined to be her true self.

Ingrid stood frozen, leaning against the wall by the door.

"Are you content with that?"

Lacus's words echoed in her mind.

She had always watched Orphee.

From the moment of her birth, he had been her sun.

Even in the sterile confines of the research lab, even in the stark, impersonal halls of the educational facility where she had spent her childhood, Orphee had shone like a beacon, a source of warmth and strength that lifted the spirits of all those around him.

When they had left the safety of the facility and ventured out into the strange, unfamiliar world above, it had been Orphee who had kept them together, who had given them purpose and direction.

And when Durandal had died, when their path had seemed to vanish into the mists of uncertainty, it had been Orphee who had remained steadfast, his convictions unshaken, his brightness undimmed.

He was the chosen one, the sun that illuminated the world, the savior who would lead them all to a brighter future.

When had she begun to harbor special feelings - forbidden feelings - for him?

Before she knew it, those feelings had taken deep root in Ingrid's heart, and by the time she noticed, they had corroded her beyond repair.

The sound of the door opening jolted her from her reverie, and she hastily straightened, schooling her features into a mask of impassivity even as she bowed her head to hide the tears that streaked her cheeks.

But Orphee barely spared her a glance.



"I'm heading for the moon. I'm leaving the defense here to you and Shura."

"Yes..."

Orphee's voice was tinged with dejection. Tears welled up again in Ingrid's downcast eyes.

His pain hurt her heart. She didn't want to see him, the one who should rule the world, being rejected and wounded.

But... if she saw his wish fulfilled, saw him joined with Lacus, her heart would ache even more fiercely.

It was hell either way.

Even if he didn't end up with Lacus, she knew there was no hope for herself.

That was fate.

"Why won't you accept your destiny, Princess?"

Her own words mocked her now.

Ingrid's own fate was to support Orphee alongside the other comrades and fulfill her role by following his orders. She was like Orphee's limbs. Limbs couldn't possibly fall in love with the body.

She knew that.

"We were given power and purpose when we received life. Isn't it our happiness to follow that path and live as needed by others?"

The words she had spoken suddenly felt hollow.

The others were satisfied with that. They followed their destiny, were needed, and seemed to live happily.

But... what about me...?

"It's not because he's necessary that I love him. It's because I love him that he's necessary."

The moment she heard Lacus's words, it felt like her eyes had been opened.

Those were words Ingrid had never known.

"Are you content with that?"

Over and over, Lacus's words confronted her with a concept that was completely new, that she had never known before.

It was both hope and curse.

Foundation's fleet was deployed on the Earth-facing side of the moon.

"The Chancellor is on the bridge."

As Orphee entered the bridge, officers and soldiers aboard the flagship, a Vanaheimr-class interplanetary battleship named Gullveig, saluted in unison. Orphee settled into the commander's seat, eyes swiftly scanning the array of screens to assess the situation.

"Status on the Millennium and other hostile fleets?"

"The remnants of the Orb lunar fleet and Earth forces are heading for Requiem and are expected to engage the ZAFT fleet deployed in front."

On the far side of the moon, Jagannath's fleet was deployed as if guarding Requiem. Approaching them were the remnants of Earth's forces that had lost their main strength after being fired upon by Requiem the other day and a ragtag fleet of the Orb military.

He could leave that to Jagannath. After all, a hodgepodge of mere Naturals posed no threat.

More importantly-

"The Millennium is heading straight for us. Estimated time until contact, approximately four minutes."

At the officer's report, Orphee's eyebrow twitched upward.

The Millennium was the key.

It wasn't just that they were living witnesses who knew inconvenient facts about them. The fact that they had survived that nuclear attack made them a force that could become an unforeseen obstacle.

And, of course, Kira Yamato was there.

He knew he must erase that man from existence, no matter the cost.

Lacus's cold gaze resurfaced, searing Orphee's chest from the inside.

He wouldn't hold back, even if it was just one ship.

In a clear tone, Orphee issued orders in rapid succession.

"All fleets, CW formation. Reverse thrust, match relative velocity. Twelve-gun positron cannons, aim at the enemy ship's predicted course!"

—*This time, I will snuff out your life for good, Kira Yamato!*

The Millennium, of course, had also spotted the enemy fleet. "Activate bridge shielding. Level one battle stations," Murrue commanded.

The bridge retracted, and the front windows closed.

On the monitor, enemy silhouettes spread wide as if to swallow the space ahead, starkly underscoring the vast disparity in forces.

Konoe muttered, "We can't use our positron cannons with this formation."

Sure enough, there were small gaps in the enemy fleet where their course would take them. The enemy was well aware of that.

"No problem. We have a new weapon," Albert said, the only one with a fully confident attitude in this situation.

"Deploy heat-resistant, shock-resistant crystal armor!"

Murrue's eyes widened in confusion at the unfamiliar weapon's name, turning to Konoe for an explanation.

Konoe raised an eyebrow and shrugged slightly. Did it mean they'd be okay, or was it a plea for leniency? She hoped for the former.

As Albert operated the controls with barely contained excitement, gel spewed from various parts of the ship. The gel completely enveloped the hull and quickly began to harden through a chemical reaction. Before long, the Millennium was encased in crystal-like material.

Murrue continued her countermeasures.

"Initiate tactic Badgiruel."

"Missile timing input complete."

Missiles were launched from the rear tubes and drifted into space by inertia.

This was a tactic Natarle Badgiruel had used before. Back then, they had been the ones struggling against it.

"Launch anti-beam depth charges," Murrue issued orders in rapid succession.

"Activate Tristan and CIWS. Load missile launchers with Neidhardt and Dispars. Break through the center at maximum combat speed!"

The depth charges were fired, deploying a cloud of anti-beam particles in front of the Millennium. But there was no way this could defend against attacks from such a huge fleet. They could only pray that Albert's "new weapon" would prove useful.

Their only strength was speed. The Millennium, having continuously accelerated at maximum combat speed from Earth to here had reached a velocity exceeding missiles.

They had no choice but to dash through in one go.

Murrue's glare hardened as the looming fleet grew larger, a defiant challenge in her eyes.

"Fire!"

Upon Orphee's command, the Foundation fleet unleashed its attack.

From the behemoth battleships, missiles launched in a relentless barrage, complemented by the steady pulse of beam cannons from the medium-sized vessels. At the same time, positron beams burst forth from the main guns of the battleships, piercing through space.

The fleet's laterally spread lines of fire converged mercilessly on a single point—the Millennium's predicted arrival.

The Millennium plunged itself into that torrent of energy.

"They're not even evading?!" Orphee exclaimed, his voice tinged with incredulity.

Even as evasion seemed futile against the concentrated barrage, the Millennium accelerated, hurtling straight into the onslaught.

In the torrent of beams, the anti-beam particles evaporated in an instant, and the crystal surrounding the Millennium glowed white-hot.

But amazingly, it was still holding out.

Moments later, a swarm of missiles converged on their position.

"Dispars, CIWS, commence interception!" Murrue ordered, and the Millennium's point-defense systems spat fire at the countless incoming missiles.

When the leading missiles detonated, a cascading series of explosions followed, each amplifying the next. A tremendous explosion enveloped the Millennium, shaking the huge hull like a leaf.

"Can it withstand this?" Konoe asked anxiously.

"Of course," Albert replied calmly, the only one unfazed. But beside him, Arthur was pale-faced, muttering something - a prayer or a curse.

Murrue also prayed in her heart.

The next moment, the Millennium emerged from the raging mass of energy, trailing the remnant gas of the vaporized crystal.

The Millennium's emergence sparked a wave of murmurs across the Gullveig's bridge. They hadn't expected it to slip through unscathed after taking such a volume of fire head-on.

Before Orphee could issue the next attack order, the Millennium closed in on the fleet and fired its beam cannons. Striking a medium-sized ship, the Millennium exploited the ensuing gap, slicing through the fleet's center at breakneck speed.

Ships trying to turn around exploded belatedly.

"What was that?!" Orphee barked.

An officer answered in a flustered tone, "Missiles, sir - probably fired by the enemy with a time delay."

Similar explosions occurred throughout the fleet. It seemed the pre-programmed missiles had automatically tracked and hit their ships. A clever little trick.

"Not bad, you brigands!" Orphee spat, then issued instructions.

"Scatter high-speed guided missiles along the enemy's predicted course! All ships, come about! Pursue the enemy at full speed!"

"High-speed missiles approaching. It's a pursuit. The enemy fleet is turning," the report came in without a moment's respite.

Murrue ordered interception.

"Fire Dispars!"

The high-speed missiles were trying to catch up from behind.

"Ship, 180-degree turn. Left drift, match relative velocity!"

To face an enemy chasing from behind, they needed to point the bow backward. The Millennium turned while sliding sideways, continuing to fire interceptor missiles. Enemy missiles detonated in fiery blooms encircling the ship.

The Millennium captured the enemy fleet in its sights while reversing.

Murrue gave the order.

"Launch all mobile suits!"

"Catapult connected. All systems online. Superconducting capacitors one through ten, critical state reached. No abnormalities in guidance system."

Amidst Abbey Windsor's announcement, Shinn moved his beloved machine into launching position. The Destiny was equipped with a railgun. A countermeasure against the Black Knights Squad machines that were immune to beams.

Shinn was brimming with motivation.

Compared to the new Justice, the Destiny's firepower was inevitably inferior, but it fit his body like a glove. That was only natural, as it was a machine Durandal had built for Shinn.

It was far better than the Justice with Athrun's image. When piloting the Destiny, he felt no sense of losing, even against the Black Knights.

And Kira had told him. To leave the Millennium to him.

So he would absolutely protect the Millennium to the end!
The launch signal lit up.
"Path clear. Destiny, you are clear for launch."
Shinn gazed forward and shouted proudly.
"Shinn Asuka, Destiny, taking off!"

In the Destiny's wake, Lunamaria's Impulse and Hilda's red Gelgoog soared into the fray.

"Guidance system online. All Silhouettes, launch!"

The Impulse's Blast, Sword, and Force Silhouettes were then launched, and the Impulse equipped the Blast Silhouette.

The three mobile suits accelerated toward the enemy fleet. Their forces were far too few against the enemy's numbers, but they had no choice but to do their best.

Meanwhile, Murrue had also donned a combat suit.

"I'm heading to the combat bridge. The rest is in your hands."

"Good luck," Konoe nodded, looking up at her.

"Main bridge, switch to combat mode," Murrue announced.

The captain's seat and Neumann's helm rose as the hatch in the ceiling opened. The seats were housed in a canopy above the bridge. A booth with a 180-degree view of the surroundings. Murrue shivered with anticipation as if she could feel the battle on her skin.

They were just the decoy. But she had no intention of ending up as only a decoy.

An operator's voice rang out on the bridge of the flagship Gullveig.

"Enemy ship launching mobile suits. Three units!"

Orphee leaned forward, his attention sharpening.

"Intercept them--no, wait."

His gaze locked onto the monitor, studying the advancing machines—Destiny, Impulse, Gelgoog.?

Orphee extended his mental feelers.

They were still too far to grasp clearly. But...

"Where is Kira Yamato?"

A shrill alert pierced the command room's tense atmosphere within Artemis Fortress.

"Approaching mobile suit detected. Single unit!"

The operator reported and switched the monitor. A familiar mobile suit appeared in the center of the screen.

"It's the Freedom!"

"What?!"

Aura leaned forward, her eyes widening in surprise, while Shura let out an incredulous gasp.

"How did it find this place?"

But the only thing that appeared in the void was the Freedom, alone. There were no motherships or support units within a detectable range.

Did they intend to bring down Artemis Fortress with just a single unit?

Its foolishness left Shura dumbfounded beyond exasperation.

This fortress, once called impregnable, was completely enveloped by a lightwave barrier. The so-called "Umbrella of Artemis." How did it plan to attack with a single mobile suit against the "umbrella" that could withstand any attack, beam, or conventional?

Aura said mockingly, fanning herself with her open fan.

"But to think he would challenge us alone on a single steed to save the princess, isn't it moving, Shura?"

Reading her intent, Shura bowed his head.

"Then it would be foolish to face him as a group. I shall go."

"Crush his foolish hopes to dust."

"As you command!"

Shura exited the command room with a faint smile.

The opponent was already as good as defeated once before.

Kira Yamato was nothing to fear.

Foundation fleet's mobile suit teams received launch orders.

"The Destiny, really?" Liu shook his head, his exasperation palpable after reviewing the enemy's data. "What a bunch of jokers."

"Maybe they'll be somewhat worth killing?"

"Just right for training the troops."

The Accords chatted casually.

Agnes waited sullenly in the Gyan's cockpit. Suddenly, Redel called out in a teasing voice, "Agneees, they're your pals, right? Can you handle it?"

"Shut up! Of course, I can," Agnes snapped back, her voice sharp with rising anger.

"Scaaary! Kyahaha!" Redel's raucous laughter grated on her nerves.

Agnes had been irritated all along.

At Shura's request, she had started working with them.

They were a superior race called Accords, created to rule the world.

That was fine. She had no attachment to COMPS anyway, and if she had to choose, it was better to side with the winners. Everyone wanted to back the winning horse.

But when she heard that Orphee's consort was Lacus Clyne and that they were the pinnacle of all humanity, Agnes was outraged.

Even here, that woman again!

And the Accords worshipped that woman like a goddess, constantly going on about "Princess this, Princess that."

It was supremely annoying.

She remained silent, wary that voicing her discontent might incur Shura's displeasure.

Besides, it seemed Lacus Clyne wasn't getting along well with Orphee. She was practically imprisoned, little more than a hostage in all but name.

The Accords seemed worried, but for Agnes, it was a welcome development. If only they would wash their hands of Lacus already.

In any case, even after joining the Accords, she felt she wasn't being viewed very favorably. Shura wasn't paying as much attention to her as she had hoped, and was now separated from her, assigned to Artemis's defense.

And now, the COMPS bunch was alive and coming at them.

That fact further incensed Agnes.

She thought she had cleverly maneuvered herself onto the winning side.

They were a truly, absolutely infuriating bunch!

Agnes tightened her grip on the control stick.

Anyone who got in her way, even Lunamaria, would not be forgiven!

Shura's Shi-ve.A launched. The lightweight barrier of Artemis Fortress turned off in one section for him to pass through.

It had been waiting for that moment.

The Amazing Z'Gok, hidden by Mirage Colloid, slipped through the gap the Shi-ve.A had passed and entered the interior of the "umbrella."

It was the very tactic Athrun's friend Nicol Amalfi had used. That single intrusion had brought the fall of the reputedly impregnable Artemis Fortress.

In other words, overreliance on excessive defensive weaponry led to carelessness.

The Amazing Z'Gok approached the fortress unnoticed by anyone, entering the dock through the port. Inside, medium-sized battleships were moored. There, the suit deactivated its Mirage Colloid and unleashed a barrage of missiles and beams.

The medium-sized ships exploded, flames engulfing the dock. The Amazing Z'Gok passed through and advanced further in.

"I won't let you escape this time!" Shura spat out, his eyes narrowing as the Freedom approached.

This was a contest already settled. The man should have died in Eldora.

The Shi-ve.A and Freedom closed in at high speed and clashed. Both sabers were caught by both shields, separating a moment later. Shura fired his shield anchors at the Freedom's back, but it nimbly evaded, making him click his tongue.

The Freedom, contrary to its earlier bravado, was now on the defensive.

—*Tenacious bastard!*

Shura felt irritation as he pursued the enemy.

Meanwhile, the command room operators casually observed the duel between the Shi-ve.A and Freedom, a sudden explosion, drew their attention.

"Sudden noise inside the defense line!"

Everyone wore suspicious expressions. The overconfidence from being protected by the "Umbrella of Artemis" prevented the word "enemy attack" from coming to mind.

Aura asked, "What is it? An accident?"

"Probably... a fire in Dock One."

Ingrid rose abruptly, a sense of foreboding tightening in her chest.

"I'll handle it," she told Aura and ran out of the command room.

What was this uneasiness in her chest?

Kisaka and a squad of Orb soldiers, disembarking from the Amazing Z'Gok, pushed into the facility at the back of the port. They

shot down the Foundation soldiers, who were caught off guard before they could respond and advanced further in.

Upon reaching the control room, Kisaka opened a terminal box and connected a device he had brought to the cables.

On her monitor in the Cavalier's cockpit, Meyrin watched the data stream in, her fingers dancing rapidly across the keyboard in a race against time.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry..."

She injected a virus into the fortress's control system, seizing it. From within the system, she selected the desired item.

"All bulkheads, force close!"

All the base's openings began to slowly shut. At the same time, the bulkheads in the corridors descended one after another.

Meyrin finally cut off the communication system as well and breathed a sigh of relief.

Meanwhile, Kisaka deftly opened the air supply system's ventilation duct, tipping a bag's contents into the swirling currents within. Out of the bag came countless Haros. The ball-shaped robots bounced around haphazardly, advancing through the duct, and upon reaching the circulation device at the back, they released gas all at once.

The gas was sucked into the circulation device and sent to the base's main facilities.

Having finished the tampering, Kisaka jumped down from the vent. One of the soldiers ran up to him.

"First Lieutenant Kisaka!"

Kira's voice broke through, urgency palpable. At his cue, Birdy darted from his shoulder, guiding them deeper into the fortress's heart.

"Let's go!"

Kisaka took the lead as Kira and the others ran into the depths of the fortress.

Around that time, the command room had finally grasped the gravity of the situation.

"It's no good! We've lost control! System down!"

A pale-faced operator hammered at the keyboard in vain, desperation etched on their face.

"We appear to have intruders."

"How?!"

Amidst the commotion, Aura yelled at the soldiers.

"What are you doing?! Call Shura back!"

"Communications are down..."

The soldier who tried to answer suddenly slumped over the console like a puppet with its strings cut. Like dominoes, the soldiers around him succumbed, collapsing in quick succession.

Attempting to rise and discern the chaos, Aura's strength ebbed away, and she succumbed to unconsciousness, her head hitting with a dull thud.

Meanwhile, Ingrid, who had changed into a pilot suit and was heading for the dock, noticed the closed bulkheads and stopped.

She saw the soldiers who had been trying to open the bulkhead suddenly lose strength and collapse.

With a sharp intake of breath, Ingrid snapped her helmet's visor shut.

Knockout gas had probably been released. A sealed space fortress would be helpless if its air circulation system were targeted.

She understood the cause of her unease.

He had come.

To take Lacus back.

"I don't understand..." Ingrid muttered to herself.

"Why?"

Why did they defy fate?

Having fought once and seen their inferiority, why engage in such futile acts?

Why could they believe Lacus still loved him?

And Lacus, too; why could she believe he was alive and still loved her?

Everything was beyond Ingrid's comprehension.

But now she had to deal with reality. Orphee had told her to "handle it."

Ingrid extended her thoughts and called out.

"Shura, we have intruders."

Shura, in the midst of battle, gasped at Ingrid's "voice." As he reflexively tried to turn his machine around, the Freedom promptly separated its DRAGOONS and attacked.

A diversion.

Instantly understanding their infiltration method, Shura glared at the enemy before him.

"You!"



He had been completely deceived by the preconception that Freedom = Kira Yamato.

This was not Kira Yamato. It was a decoy.

Shura opened a communication channel and called out.

"Athrun Zala, I take it?"

They had used two decoys. The Millennium and the Freedom. Keeping their attention drawn there, in the meantime - taking advantage of the opening created by Shura's sortie - Kira Yamato had infiltrated Artemis Fortress in a different machine.

A mocking voice returned from the Freedom.

"I thought you could read minds? Not very useful, huh?"

A wave of anger washed over Shura, his head throbbing with rage.

"I'll kill you!"

Shura charged the enemy at maximum output and swung his saber down. The Freedom parried with its shield and retreated.

An intense clash continued, too fast for ordinary humans to even perceive.

Ingrid entered Lacus's room and shot the lock with the handgun she held.

She turned and pointed the gun at Lacus, who had stood up in surprise.

"I can't hand you over."

Apparently, the gas hadn't reached here.

Lacus showed no sign of being intimidated by the gun pointed at her. Understanding its implied meaning, her expression brightened.

"Kira has come, hasn't he?"

Ingrid felt anger as if witnessing a scene of betrayal.

"What are you so happy about?"

She walked up to Lacus, the gun still trained on her.

If only she had shown fear, Ingrid might not have felt so irritated. This woman's emotions were abnormal.

Why was it all about another man when Orphee was right there?

She didn't understand.

Ingrid vented her frustration.

"They too... because having you would give them an advantage in battle - that's why they risked danger to come and steal you away. That's all, isn't it?!"

Even when told that, Lacus tilted her head calmly.

"Is that so?"

"Even Orphee... because you're superior, that's why he loves you."

Ingrid ranted on.

"Isn't everyone like that? They want what's superior. They want it by their side. Because it has value, it's needed. That's why it's loved, right?!"

Lacus acted as if Orphee and Ingrid's values were wrong.

But even non-Accords were all the same. They acted in their own self-interest. They loved because they wanted offspring, because they wanted a comfortable life, because they could boast to others, because it was useful. It was a basic principle of living things.

But Lacus looked straight into Ingrid's eyes and asked,

"Is that truly 'love'?"

Was it sadness glimpsed in those eyes or pity?

True love?

She didn't know. But she understood hatred.

At that moment, Ingrid fiercely hated Lacus.

Should I really shoot her dead?

So no one could have her. Not even Kira Yamato - or Orphee.

At the very least, if it came to letting her fall into Kira Yamato's hands, Orphee, too, would probably say to kill her instead.

She was his precious "consort," but if she went over to the enemy side, they would lose the PLANT's support, and the tide would turn sharply against them.

Or... was that wrong?

The sound of the door being destroyed cut off Ingrid's hesitation. Several figures could be seen in the corridor.

"Lacus!"

Hearing Kira's voice, Lacus's expression turned to one of joy.

"Kira!"

With swift, decisive movements, Ingrid drew a knife and, circling behind Lacus, pressed the blade against her neck in a threatening hold.

"Stay back!"

Kira Yamato, who had been about to rush over, stopped dead in his tracks.

"If you move even a little, I'll gouge her eyes out!"

Ingrid pointed the gun at the intruders while angling the knife's tip toward Lacus's face. She saw Kira's face pale under his helmet.

"I could slit her throat too! If she can't sing anymore, can you still say you love her?!"

'True love'? Nonsense!

If something like that existed, prove it.

If she lost her beauty, her intelligence, her lovely singing voice - all of it - this woman would have no value left.

After a breathless instant, "Yes," Kira quietly nodded.

"Even if those eyes can no longer see, even if that voice is lost, Lacus is Lacus. I love all of her."

"Kira..."

Lacus's eyes glistened, and her voice trembled.

This was a side of Lacus Ingrid had never witnessed.

She stood frozen as if struck by something.

"It's not because he's necessary that I love him. It's because I love him that he's necessary."

That's right...

That's what I wanted to hear. What I wanted to know.

What 'true love' was.

I had nothing. Not even the right to love Orphee like Lacus did.

But.

Even so, it was okay to love.

Even a futile act that brought no benefit, even so, it was okay to keep holding this love.

That's what she had wanted to know.

For a moment, Ingrid's attention wavered. At that instant-

"Birdy!"

Something like a green bird flew from behind Kira. As if in response, a blue bird flew out from under Lacus's hair.

"Blue!"

Caught by surprise, Ingrid's attention shifted there for a second. As her grip loosened, Lacus moved.

As if throwing herself, Lacus fell onto the knife Ingrid held.

"Wha-?!"

Ingrid reflexively deflected the blade. In that gap, Kira charged in, caught Lacus in his arms, and pulled her away. Ingrid pointed her gun, but before that, the Orb soldiers' guns spat fire.

Her gun was knocked away, and Ingrid swung her knife down. But the blade only grazed Lacus's hair before an Orb soldier tackled her, sending her flying.

As she tried to stand up, she saw a gun muzzle in front of her.

"Tch!"

With a gun pointed at her, Ingrid was immobilized. In her line of sight, Lacus and Kira were tightly embracing.

"Kira!"

"Lacus! What a reckless thing to do!"

Lacus looked up, gazing at Kira with tear-filled eyes.

"I love you too... so much."

The bird-shaped robots also flew around above their heads as if rejoicing in their reunion.

She had failed. Even though she had been told to protect Lacus. But...

She couldn't help but think it was beautiful.

They left the room, nestled against each other. At the very end, Lacus glanced back a little.

"I'm sorry."

Ingrid felt a pain like her heart was being torn out and screamed.

"Go!"

The soldiers followed after them.

Left alone, Ingrid crumpled to the ground, her sobs echoing in the empty room, a release of pent-up emotions.

She envied them, able to embrace each other without reservation.

A sense of defeat and jealousy - and not just that, various emotions raged within her body. Self-reproach for failing her mission. Joy and pain at knowing true love. And a sense of loss.

She felt as if something truly precious had flown out of her hands.

"Hurry!"

Approaching the port with Lacus in tow, they heard Meyrin's urgent voice emanate from the Amazing Z'Gok's intercom.

Kira and the others quickly boarded and left the fortress behind. Immediately after their departure, the bombs Meyrin had set went off, flames erupting from the port entrance.

The "umbrella" of the lightwave barrier vanished from Artemis Fortress. The Amazing Z'Gok dashed through the now unobstructed space at full speed.

Shura, still engaged in battle with the Freedom, noticed the fortress spewing flames.

At the same time, he saw a mobile suit with additional equipment escaping from there.

Kira Yamato!

Shura ground his teeth. If that guy had come out, it meant Lacus had been taken.

They had been completely had! What the hell was Ingrid doing?!

The Freedom he had been fighting was also trying to withdraw with that one machine.

Like hell, he'd let them escape!

Shura wanted to fight them. Athrun Zala, Kira Yamato - he wanted to battle them and crush them to dust.

But he had to save Aura.

Loyalty to their own "mother" was ingrained in Shura and the others down to their bones. That took priority above all else, and Shura turned his machine around, feeling torn.

To think he would be made to put on such a blunder again.

Seething with a mix of humiliation and resolve, Shura steered his machine toward the inferno engulfing the fortress.

Chapter.06

Amid the silent expanse between Artemis Fortress and the moon, the cockpit hatches of Freedom and Z'Gok, locked in a ballet of inertial flight, swung open. Pilots emerged, their paths intertwining as Kira returned to Freedom and Athrun to the Z'Gok, each slipping back into their familiar steel skins.

Settling into his seat and closing the hatch, Kira switches on the comms.

"Take care of Lacus. I'm heading to Requiem."

Even with the Freedom's speed, the battlefield beckoned with no moment to spare.

On Kira's monitor, Athrun's face materialized, his expression grave as he delivered a stern warning.

"They're formidable adversaries. Stay sharp."

Kira acknowledges with a solemn nod.

"I won't lose this time. Because I'm not alone."

Lacus's image beams from the Cavalier's monitor, a beacon of strength and resolve. In her gaze, Kira finds unwavering support, a reminder that he is not fighting alone. He's walking in step with Lacus and backed by a cadre of steadfast companions, companions he can trust and rely on.

Athrun, Meyrin, Kisaka, and others, as well as Shinn and Murrue, are fighting on a different battlefield - without them, he could never have gotten Lacus back.

"Kira... please be careful."

Lacus implores, her fingers crossed in silent prayer, her smile a bastion of trust. Echoing her gesture, Kira nods with vigor.

"I will!"

Being able to see her smile again... it seemed like a miracle.

With renewed resolve, Kira steers Freedom toward the Moon.

Elsewhere, Orphee's fury was a tempest. Shura's report offered scant solace.

Attacked by Kira Yamato and Athrun Zala, Artemis fell, and Lacus was taken.

Aura and Ingrid escaped safely and were headed this way along with Shura, but such a loss was irremediable.

—*Why?!*

The question tore through him. The plan had been flawless, premised on their unmatched prowess, their clear superiority. Yet, from unnoticed crevices, discrepancies had blossomed, spiraling into a maelstrom of miscalculation, culminating in the loss of Lacus Clyne, their key to everything.

This shouldn't be happening!

With a clenched fist, Orphee commanded, "Fire Requiem! Burn Orb to ashes!"

"Roger! Firing Requiem. Target, Orb capital Olofat."

The deflection ring completed its positioning, and targeting was secured.

This time, for sure, he'd wipe Orb off the map.

"Receive the consequences of your actions, Kira Yamato!"

Orphee's words were laced with venomous wrath, each syllable dripping with a vengeance as the countdown echoed his rising fury, a stark prelude to his envisioned retribution.

"Firing sequence initiated for Requiem: ten, nine, eight, seven..."

The Requiem's colossal muzzle yawned menacingly, its core pulsating with an ominous glow.

And then, in the void—

In a space where there should have been nothing, a single mobile suit suddenly materialized, its armor glimmering gold, reflecting the moonlight. It's the Akatsuki equipped with the Zeus Silhouette.

"Finally, my turn, huh."

Mu murmurs, poised in the cockpit.

This is the 'secret mission' entrusted to him by Cagalli. Launched from Orb with the Mirage Colloid Pod, Mu had stealthily navigated Akatsuki to the moon in inertial flight.

The Akatsuki rotates the Zeus Silhouette barrel from behind and connects it to the main body. Then, it swings the long cannon around and takes aim.

The Zeus Silhouette was developed as additional equipment for the Destiny, implementing a positron cannon. However, it was deemed too destructive and only prototyped, never seeing actual combat use.

"Aligning vertical axis, correcting margin of error. Charge reaching critical threshold!"

The crosshairs capture the Requiems target - the deflection ring floating directly above it.

The muzzle glows white as it reaches criticality.

With a steely resolve, Mu clenched his fist around the trigger, his shout echoing through the cockpit as he unleashed the decisive strike.

"Fire!"

Cries of shock echo across the Gullveig's bridge.

"A mobile suit appeared near the Requiem firing point!"

"What?!"

With a mix of disbelief and rising alarm, Orphee's eyes narrowed, his gaze fixed intently on the monitor as he processed the unexpected threat.

A solid projectile is launched from the cannon held by the golden mobile suit. The barrel glows red hot as the mobile suit swiftly detaches the equipment.

The projectile seemed to vanish into the void. But in the next instant, the Mirage Colloid dissipates, and the deflection ring explodes and vanishes in a burst of light.

However, the Requiem is already on the verge of firing, with the golden mobile suit exposed in the direct path of the colossal muzzle.

—*You fool!*

Orphee cursed, but before his words could settle, a burst of dazzling white light from Requiem enveloped the mobile suit.

Surrounded by a torrent of immense energy, Akatsuki raged against the storm, its shield raised in defiance, but its armor began to peel and evaporate under the assault.

Despite the Akatsuki's advanced anti-beam coating, doubts lingered—could its defenses truly hold against such a monumental onslaught of energy?

"Uooooohhh!"

Mu braced against the shock and fear, surrounded by a cacophony of warning lights.

Akatsuki's armor deflects the fierce beams, casting them outwards in a chaotic dance of scattered light. Stray shots from the reflected beams pierce several ships guarding the Requiem, causing explosions.

Similar 'stray shots' rain down on the Requiem itself, its muzzle's protective shield enveloped in a blinding light.

When the torrent of beams finally dissipated, the Akatsuki still stood resolute.

"Mu!"

The sound of Murrue's terrified cry pierced the chaos, anchoring Mu back to reality and prompting him to exhale the breath he didn't realize he was holding.

"Oh, man... It's a tough job making the impossible possible."

"He did it!!!"

A wave of jubilation swept through Millennium's bridge.

Murrue's shoulders sag in relief.

Most of the Akatsuki's gleaming armor was stripped away, showing signs of taken damage, but at any rate, Mu is alive.

The detached Zeus Silhouette returns and reconnects to the Akatsuki, carrying the unit.

The Requiem itself is protected by a guard unit and shields, making it difficult to attack directly. But as long as the deflection ring is destroyed, the beams fired from the Requiem will head straight into empty space. Their daring maneuver had diverted the deadly trajectory of at least one shot, granting Orb a momentary reprieve from annihilation.

And the Akatsuki, with its beam-reflecting armor, was the only one capable of this mission.

Still, Murrue thought, having witnessed such scenes repeatedly, she wished this to be the last.

Mu likely shared the sentiment.

For now, they had secured a fleeting respite.

"Primary relay point destroyed by attack!"

"Deflection ring deployment ship immobilized."

"Requiem outer hull damaged! Beam convergence system damaged!"

Damage reports continued streaming in.

The realization struck Orphee like a physical blow—a cascade of miscalculations, each deviation from his meticulous plans gnawing at his composure.

Orb should have been a memory by now.

Kira Yamato and those meddling COMPS people should have all disappeared.

Lacus Clyne should have been smiling by his side, promising him a bright future.

Yet here they were—

"Heat sources approaching Requiem. Eight in total."

Snapped back to reality by the report, Orphee regained his composure.

Calm down. Requiem is still under my control.

"Begin repairs immediately!" he commanded.

The Requiem hasn't taken critical damage. The deflection ring was expendable, a minor loss. Orb has merely extended its lifespan by a few hours.

It's all just the enemy's death throes.

Those refusing to relinquish their wealth and authority are trying to obstruct the path to true peace.

"Damn you... those relics of old humanity!"

You filthy lot mired in greed!

Orphee wrestled with his surging irritation.

"Deactivate camouflage."

Aboard the Kusanagi, the flagship of Orb's space fleet, Captain Amagi's voice cut through the tense silence, issuing a decisive command.

With precision, all ships in the Orb fleet discarded their thermal camouflage sheets, a strategic veil designed to obscure them from the enemy's prying sensors.

"Our objective is to capture or completely destroy the Requiem. All units, weapons free!"

With a burst of activity, the Gottfrieds and Igelstellungen whirred to life while Murasames launched in rapid succession.

"Never shall we forgive those who dared wield the blade of death against Orb!"

Beneath them, the Moon sprawled vast and silent, its surface marred by a monstrous gun emplacement, gaping like a voracious maw.

The ZAFT fleet is deployed in front of it. Mobile suit teams also launch from the ZAFT ships, heading towards them. A chaotic ballet of beams and missiles weaving a deadly tapestry between the two clashing fleets. Anti-ship missiles are also fired from the lunar surface, raining down on the Orb fleet.

Flashes of the harrowing battle off Crete haunted Amagi's mind. Their odds are much worse this time than back then. If they lose, there will be no second chances.

But now they can fight purely for Orb, to protect Orb's ideals. Amagi's command was clear and urgent.

"Mobile suit teams, vacate the firing line immediately. Lohengrin, fire!"

The Kusanagi's main cannon discharges and a ZAFT ship explodes in its path. The positron lance cuts through space and reaches the Requiem. A tremendous flash of light erupts, but when it fades, amidst the rising lunar dust, the massive muzzle lies unscathed.

As expected, attacks from a distance cannot penetrate the shield covering the muzzle.

Meanwhile, the Millennium advanced steadily towards the heart of the battlefield.

"Detach turrets."

At Murrue's command, several turrets are ejected from the Millennium. They autonomously fly about, locking onto enemy GINNs and firing beams.

Employing a sophisticated targeting system, the turrets autonomously pursued the adversaries Albert marked from his strategic vantage point on the bridge.

"Tristan 1 and 2! Kurwenal, target enemy fleet. Fire!"

Foundation's ships pursuing from behind explode under the Millennium's main guns and linear cannons. But beyond those flames, more and more silhouettes continue to approach.

Yet, outpacing them all, a sinister swarm surged through the darkness.

"Black Knights incoming!"

At Hilda's voice, Shinn tenses up. Cutting down the GINN he was dueling with a single stroke, he turns his unit around.

"Beams won't work! Luna, provide support!"

With relentless fury, the Impulse, armed with its Blast Silhouette, carved a path of destruction through the enemy ranks, its beams, and linear cannons, leaving a trail of devastation.

Lunamaria shouts back while fighting.

"I've got an anti-ship sword too! I can handle myself!"

Lunamaria purges the Blast Silhouette and switches to the Sword Silhouette chasing after her.

Having faced them before and knowing their strength, Shinn doesn't want to let Lunamaria near the Black Knights. Feeling a surge of solidarity with Lunamaria's indomitable spirit, Shinn's resolve hardened.

—*This time, we'll win!*

They accelerate, heading straight for the Black Knights.

"Seriously, you idiots never learn! You can't beat us!"

With a smirk of overconfidence, Griffin launches a volley of taunts toward the advancing units, his voice dripping with scorn.

The Impulse and Destiny?! Relics of the past.

Beside him, Redel's laugh cuts through the tension, a sound of amusement that belies the gravity of the impending clash.

"I'll shoot you down again! Kyahaha!"

That's right. The outcome is clear even before the battle begins. Just in terms of specs alone, neither unit comes close to their Rud-ro.A. The Rud-ro. A's femtech armor is next-gen PS armor technology, boasting semi-permanent durability without requiring power.

And the enemy pilots are Shinn Asuka and some other rabble.

They've already seen through them in the previous battle. Shinn Asuka is small fry.

They puzzle over their tenacity, wondering what drives their futile defiance against such overwhelming odds.

Griffin and his squadron advance in a meticulously coordinated formation, their approach as menacing as it is majestic.

—*I'll teach you that it's pointless to struggle against destiny!*

Lunamaria is also heading for the Rud-ro.A team. Just then, a mobile suit catches her eye.

It's a Gyan.

"That mobile suit--Agnes? How?!"

The Gyan and Impulse blur past each other in a high-speed dance, and Lunamaria brakes to turn around.

It really is a Gyan. She thought it had been caught in the explosion at Eldora!

"Agnes! You're alive?"

A surge of relief and joy washes over Lunamaria as she spots the familiar suit. But the Gyan, which has also braked and turned to face her, suddenly fires its beam vulcan at her.

"Shura was the only one who recognized my worth!"

Agnes yells. Lunamaria blocks the beams with her shield, finally grasping the situation.

Agnes has betrayed them. That's why she didn't come back after fleeing with Accord and the others.

How foolish!

In a dance of deadly precision, the Gyan slashes with its blade while Lunamaria counters, her anti-ship sword slicing through the space between them.

"You're just being manipulated! Can't you see beyond their lies?"

"You're a Coordinator too, aren't you? Why are you siding with them?! Did some stupid guy's influence fry your brain?!"

Lunamaria had been trying to reason with her in earnest, but those words made her snap.

"Huh?! This has nothing to do with Shinn! You're the one who's bitter about not being noticed by the commander!"

Their exchange escalates into a bitter exchange of accusations, with Lunamaria's incisive words hitting a raw nerve in Agnes.

"Shut uuup!"

The Gyan lashes out with its heat rod, the long steel whip shattering the anti-ship sword. Lunamaria retaliates by throwing her beam boomerang.

Anger fuels anger, and before they know it, both are fighting in earnest.

Four Rud-ro.As converge in a coordinated assault. But the Destiny charges in without hesitation.

It slashes at one unit with its anti-ship sword, then barely evades beams fired from behind by kicking off that unit. It slices off the rifle of the unit that shot at it, then in one fluid motion, aims its railgun at the enemy behind it. As if foreseeing the incoming beams, it dodges and shoots through that rifle.

"I only lost last time because I was in the Justice!"



Shinn yells, slashing at another unit.
"With the Destiny, you guys are nothing!"

Griffin catches the Destiny's anti-ship sword with his own blade, but the sheer force of the enemy shatters it. At the same time, the Destiny fires its linear cannons. Unable to evade, a tremendous impact assaults the Rud-ro.A.

"What the hell is he?!"

Griffin's composure cracks, his voice quivering with uncertainty. Is it really Shinn Asuka?

His movements are completely different from the last time they fought!

What is this guy who's fighting evenly against the four of them, even gaining the upper hand?!

Liu groans as if in a panic.

"I can't read his thoughts?"

That's right, even when trying to predict his movements, attacks come faster than they can follow his thoughts.

If anything, it's as if their own lines of fire are being read.

Griffin is almost gripped by fear, completely pushed back.

The Destiny, a blur of motion, creates a dazzling array of afterimages, each one a harbinger of its relentless advance.

Daniel shouts in desperation.

"Is this guy... not thinking at all?!"

A man inhaled the steam rising from his cup, savoring the aroma before taking a sip of coffee and sighing contentedly.

"Mmm, today's blend is exquisite, Dacosta, my boy," he remarked, his voice echoing a blend of satisfaction and a tinge of wistfulness.

"I'm glad to hear it, Commander," came his companion's slightly resigned reply.

Waltfeld sighed, his mind wandering.

"I was hoping to retire soon and maybe start a coffee plantation..."

It seems in this day and age, honorable discharge is not so easily granted.

He figures this capable deputy commander of his could handle everything just fine without him, but well, they probably need all hands on deck. Or paws, in his case.

That deputy commander, Martin Dacosta, cajoles him.

"Yes, yes, I'll help out when that time comes, so for now, please focus on the task at hand."

Waltfeld feels like Dacosta has gotten quite lax in how he treats him lately.

In any case, as he says, now is the time for action.

Andrew Waltfeld - the man once called the "Desert Tiger" - sets down his cup and stands up.

"Well then, gentlemen - I wish you luck."

"Synchronize watches. Move out!"

Dacosta ordered, his voice crisp in the command. Stealthily, like shadows, they split into two groups, each moving with purpose.

Above the Moon's stark landscape, the clamor of warfare raged on, echoing through the void. Jagannath, from the Burkhart's bridge, rallied his troops with fervor.

"Don't let a single one through! They're just a ragtag bunch of Naturals!" he bellowed, his voice cutting through the din of battle stations in action.

Below them, the Orb fleet, though valiant, was vastly outnumbered, a fact Jagannath knew all too well. The looming threat of Foundation fleet's arrival only spelled further doom, threatening to ensnare them in a deadly pincer movement. Their only aim now was to delay, to hold the line until the Requiem's formidable power could be harnessed once more.

"Commander Jagannath! Message from PLANT!" an operator announced, urgency lacing their words.

"The chairman is calling on the military to cease all operations and suppress the coup."

Jagannath's focus snapped to the communication.

"What?!" he exclaimed, a mix of surprise and skepticism in his tone.

Chairman Lament, who had thus far fled like a coward, had maintained his silence. Making the wrong move could result in the Requiem being turned against them.

The sudden directive from Chairman Lament ignited a storm of speculation in Jagannath's mind - what unforeseen developments had unfolded within PLANT?

A flicker of uncertainty crossed his features, quickly masked by a veneer of resolve. He surveyed his crew, their faces a mosaic of determination and anxiety, and made his decision.

"Continue the attack! When the Requiem strikes Orb, a new era will begin!"

The battle's tide remained unchanged in his eyes; the shifting political winds at PLANT could not deter their mission.

Once the world bowed down, PLANT would have to acquiesce, aligning with the future they would dictate.

The battlefield above the Moon was a maelstrom of chaos and destruction. Beams from ZAFT ships sliced through the ranks of the Orb fleet, leaving a trail of devastation in their wake.

"Hamilton, Schecter, sunk!"

"Enemy mobile suits approaching!"

The Kusanagi's bridge shook violently from the impact of missiles exploding nearby.

A Murasame, having just unleashed its anti-ship cannons, met its end in a blaze of light, obliterated by a precise beam strike. A unit of ZAKUs pressed in on them from all sides.

Enduring the shockwaves, Amagi glared straight ahead, resolve unwavering.

"Gottfried 1 and 2! Fire Heldart!"

They had to stop the Requiem at all costs, even if it meant mutual destruction!

Suddenly, a Nazca-class ship unleashed a potent beam from its cannon, tearing through the Kusanagi's port side with terrifying accuracy.

"Damage control!"

Amagi shouted on the bridge as alarms blared.

-Is this as far as we go?! he thought, a swarm of missiles bearing down on them with no time for interception.

At that moment, countless beams streaked across space, the volley mowing down the missiles, assaulting the Orb allied fleet and turning them into myriad balls of fire.

Salvation had arrived in the form of Duel and Buster, adorned with METEOR units, as they soared into the fray.

"This is Commander Yzak Joule of the ZAFT military intelligence. I convey orders from HQ!"

Yzak's voice, authoritative and urgent, broadcasted across the channels to the ZAFT fleet.

"All ZAFT forces under Commander Jagannath are to cease combat operations immediately and return to your units! The coup in

the homeland has already been suppressed. Chairman Lament has returned to power and taken control."

A short while ago in PLANT, units led by Waltfeld and the Clyne faction had stormed and seized control of the Council building and military headquarters. The hostages were freed, and the ringleaders either committed suicide or were captured.

Jagannath and his ilk no longer spoke for PLANT and were merely remnants of the rebels.

Yzak and Dearka had come here to persuade Jagannath and make the soldiers change their minds. As fellow ZAFT soldiers, they didn't want them to be complicit in the crime of firing on Earth.

"Commander Jagannath! Do you want to be charged with treason?!"

Despite Yzak's fervent appeal, Jagannath's conviction remained unshaken, his belief firm against external pressures.

"This is not treason!" he asserted firmly, his eyes sweeping across the tense faces of his crew.

"We are the ones who will shape the future of PLANT! We will liberate our brethren from the tyranny of the Naturals!"

If left in the hands of the spineless Lament, they would be at the mercy of the Naturals. With the end of the Great War, the world was returning to the status quo of Natural dominance.

Jagannath had taken a stand, believing they could not let this continue.

His crew, imbued with the same fervor, dismissed Yzak's attempts to dissuade them. They held fast to their belief that many within PLANT shared their vision, confident that the tides of support would soon turn in their favor. Once they burned away the old world with the Requiem.

But then, an unexpected voice pierced the tension.

"This is Lacus Clyne."

On the monitor appeared a face that was all too familiar - pale skin, long pink hair.

"I have just escaped from being held captive by Foundation, and I am speaking to all of you now."

The crew murmured, their voices rippling through the bridge.

Lacus stood on the bridge of a battleship - likely the Millennium - and the intense battle currently raging could be seen through the bridge windows behind her. Her slightly dirty, damp, and wrinkled attire corroborated her words.

Unlike her usual gentle demeanor, her soothing voice now carried an edge of resolve.

"I unequivocally reject Foundation's ideology."

At that moment, Jagannath knew their plan had been completely overturned.

"The 'fair and equal society' they propose is ruled by the Destiny Plan, and as I have said before, I will never accept it."

Lacus's voice was firm, her words cutting through the air as she addressed the camera.

Upon her arrival on the Millennium aboard the Amazing Z'Gok, she immediately set out to correct the misinformation disseminated in her name, broadcasting to the entire world. Athrun and Meyrin had filled her in on Orphee's broadcasts and his use of the Requiem to intimidate the world, not to mention the revelation that the initial nuclear strike was orchestrated by their own hands.

While Lacus had harbored some suspicions, the confirmation of these actions did little to assuage her disillusionment. Orphee's deceit exposed the underhanded nature of his plans, making a fool of her in the process. To think she was considered a "partner" yet left in the dark on such crucial matters revealed the depths of their duplicity.

In her heart, Lacus harbored an unwavering resolve: while she could find space for sympathy, forgiveness was beyond reach.

This battle was about her very existence: following them meant erasing 'I' and replacing it with the 'Lacus Clyne' they desired.

The same was true for everyone.

She stared past the camera with a sharp gaze.

"A world where failure, change, and dreams – everything is forbidden. A society where a person's worth is determined by their genes. I will not entrust my value to others."

Aura, flanked by her companions who had narrowly escaped from Artemis, stepped aboard the Foundation flagship Gullveig, her presence commanding immediate attention.

"Especially not by forcing it on people through violence and fear. That is absolutely unacceptable."

After courteously guiding Aura to the commander's seat, Orphee slapped the downcast Ingrid as she meekly followed.

"If you fail in your duties, you forfeit your right to exist!"

Ingrid, her cheek stinging, couldn't contain her tears, which floated away in the weightlessness of the ship. The cold, dismissive stares

from Orphee and Aura only deepened her despair. She was gripped by a deep sense of resignation.

It was too late to change her way of life now. She couldn't defy her destiny.

If she was of no use, she and all the others would lose their reason to exist.

That was the only way of life they had been taught. The only way they could live now.

—*Every life has the freedom to decide its own destiny.*

On the screen, Lacus continued to speak. Ingrid gazed at her with a painful longing.

—*I can't live like you...*

In the Freedom, Kira raced towards the Requiem, Lacus's voice resonating within him.

"I, too, will fight for that."

As she addressed the masses, Lacus pressed her tightly clenched fist against her heart, a symbol of her unyielding resolve.

"Never let someone who doesn't even love you decide your worth."

He felt the intensity of her clenched fist resonate within him as if transferring her force directly to his heart.

Kira plunged into the mobile suit fray around the Kusanagi, unleashing his DRAGOONS. Beams erupted from the Freedom, methodically disarming the enemy units by obliterating their weapons and cameras.

The Requiem!

The lunar surface cradled the half-buried Messiah, its wreckage sprawling like a shattered behemoth from a previous battle.

Suddenly, a premonition jolted Kira, and he looked up, his eyes widening in surprise.

"Kira Yamato!"

The Shi-ve.A bore down on him at tremendous speed, swinging its saber. The Freedom barely caught it with its shield and fired its hip-mounted linear guns. An explosion erupted between them, forcing the two apart.

Kira weaved toward the Requiem, dodging relentless attacks, yet the Shi-ve.A mirrored his every move, relentlessly blocking his path.

"I won't let you go any further!"

The shout, laden with fervor, reached Kira, prompting him to bite his lip.

"Enemy fleet approaching Requiem!"

"Shi-ve.A is engaging the Freedom!"

Agitated reports echoed through the bridge of the flagship Gullveig. The ZAFT fleet's movements were sluggish, possibly confused by Lacus's earlier broadcast.

The soldiers on the bridge appeared equally shaken. Lacus Clyne was likely a symbolic figure to them as well.

No one aboard dared to oppose 'Lacus Clyne.'

That was the extent of her influence.

As Orphee realized anew what he had lost, his glare intensified at the sight of Ingrid weeping—anger evident in his eyes.

She had always been competent, never once disappointing him—until now, proving utterly useless!

What good did crying do? Could tears undo even the slightest failure?

—*If you fail in your duties, you forfeit your right to exist!*

The words he had hurled at Ingrid came back to Orphee himself.

As if to spur on his shaken troops, he issued orders with full confidence.

"The flagship fleet will head for Requiem! Draw the Millennium into the fleet's defensive line and annihilate it!"

"Yes, sir!"

The captain straightened his posture as if snapping back to his senses.

"Mother, I leave the rest to you."

After glancing at Aura, Orphee swiftly turned on his heel.

"Shura and I will deal with the Freedom. Come, Ingrid."

He called out to Ingrid casually, not bothering to check if she followed, and briskly left the bridge.

The battle was far from over; nothing had been settled.

They still held the upper hand. Their plan was clear: eliminate all who interfered—both Millennium and Orb—and then reclaim Lacus.

If she couldn't be reclaimed, then perhaps even she—

But for some reason, Orphee's mind refused to consider beyond that point.

His first target was the Freedom, piloted by Kira Yamato. This time, he was determined to erase that persistently meddlesome adversary once and for all.

"Our ship will break through the enemy fleet and charge the enemy flagship. This is the decisive battle!"

Murrue declared, her gaze fixed on the fleet ahead.

She would leave the Requiem to the others and focus her efforts on attacking Foundation's flagship. The one giving orders to fire the Requiem should be there. Strike the head of Foundation, and the ZAFT fleet would likely stand down as well.

At that moment, Lacus's face appeared on the monitor in front of her.

"Captain."

"Lacus?"

Murrue was surprised. Lacus had changed into a pilot suit without her noticing. Not only that, she had boarded the Proud Defender that Kira and the others had been developing.

"I'm launching as well. Permission to sortie."

For a moment, Murrue was speechless.

This was absurd, she thought. Lacus was indispensable to both PLANT and themselves. Moreover, she had no combat training. Even a Coordinator was just an amateur without training.

However, Lacus spoke with a resolve Murrue had never seen before.

"I must deliver this to Kira—it's imperative."

"But that's--"

"Please. Just this once, let me go...!"

Swayed by her strong plea, Murrue's resolve wavered.

Albert quickly interjected.

"Madam President, this is Albert. The unit is fully operational, yet docking will need manual adjustments. Rest assured, I'll guide you perfectly through the process."

He spoke rapidly with full confidence as usual. In other words, there were no technical issues.

Murrue glanced at Konoe on the monitor. Konoe nodded slightly.

"...I understand. Launch approved."

Murrue said.

"Thank you."

A smile lit up Lacus's face.

Murrue understood her feelings well.

Each time she sent Mu into battle, her heart ached unbearably. Even so, she had her own role to play on that same battlefield. Lacus must want to do something, too.

Even at the risk of losing her, Lacus had the right to fight of her own free will.

As they prepared to launch as well, Athrun muttered.

"Geez..."

This was a dire situation—Lacus was sortieing. How would Kira cope if something happened to her?

Overhearing his grumbling, Meyrin retorted with a huff.

"What's wrong with that?! Sometimes just watching is far more painful."

Was that how it was?

He had urged Kira to consider her feelings, and now Lacus had made her choice. All they could do was watch over her, helpless yet hopeful.

Still, it chilled him to the bone. The thought chilled him to the bone; he'd rather launch unarmed himself than see Lacus in danger.

Regardless, everyone had their roles. Time was running out until Requiem became operational again. And its target was Orb.

Athrun's thoughts turned to Cagalli in Orb. Like him, she wouldn't flee; she would stay steadfast in her belief in them.

Athrun moved his unit onto the catapult.

"Athrun Zala, Z'Gok, launching!"

After Athrun's Z'Gok launched, it was Lacus's turn.

"Defender, you are clear for launch!"

Responding to Abbey, Lacus declared, her voice incongruously calm.

"Lacus Clyne, taking off."

As she launched, intense G-forces pressed down on her, causing her to stiffen.

In a flash, her view opened up, and she felt as if she had been cast out into the void. The Millennium below rapidly shrank to a glimmering point. Lacus was nearly overwhelmed by anxiety.

Without her intervention, the Defender surged forward through the void, seeking out the Freedom of its own accord.

This unit - this child that Kira had worked on would reunite her with him.

Lacus sensed his presence, still out of sight.

—*Wait for me... Kira!*

"Ingrid took her place in the rear seat of Orphee's machine. With practiced motions, she completed the Ziggurat's launch preparations and detached from the flagship.

Immediately after, Orphee's gleaming white Cal-re.A launched and smoothly docked atop the Ziggurat. Known for its exceptional mobility, it was the most formidable unit in the Black Knights Squad. It had the maneuverability befitting Orphee.

The three Ziggurats Ingrid controlled were additional equipment to supplement its firepower and also served as support units. Equipped with multiple beam cannons and numerous missiles, they boasted firepower on par with a small battleship.

"Prove your worth as well!"

At Orphee's goading, Ingrid gave a dispassionate nod.

"...Understood."

I am a machine, just like this Ziggurat—a mere tool in Orphee's arsenal, born and raised solely for this.

Don't think anymore.

Just pretend to have no heart. Just as I've always done...

"Launching!"

Following Orphee's command, Ingrid launched the Ziggurat.

The ZAFT fleet's attacks, which had been sporadic for a time, were once again intensifying. Yzak and the others used their METEOR packs to mow down the missiles, concentrating on the Kusanagi.

"Surrender, Commander! Don't sacrifice your troops needlessly!"

Yzak repeatedly called out, but Jagannath remained obstinate.

"Why side with the denizens of the old world?! Nothing will change at this rate!"

Jagannath shouted with anger.

"A world where a few prosper while injustice and brutality run rampant!"

Yzak, having once defied military orders himself, could understand their motives. Yet, understanding did not mean agreement.

However-

"You fools stuck in the past!"

Yzak felt a sense of futility and powerlessness.



Indeed, the world had not changed. But what they were doing was no different than Patrick Zala.

People are quick to sense injustice and faster still to anger. Stirring up conflict is easy—they're ruthless. They've brutalized us; don't forgive them. Yet, finding compromise and cooperation is the harder, nobler path.

But hadn't they already learned in that war what lay at the end of the path of continued killing in anger?

As Dearka dodged incoming beams, he spoke with bitter resignation.

"It's no use, Yzak... If they were willing to be persuaded, they wouldn't be doing this."

"Damn it!"

Reluctantly, Yzak prepared to engage his fellow ZAFT soldiers, a necessity he wished he could avoid.

He purged the METEOR pack and charged towards the ZAFT fleet, with the Buster echoing his maneuver.

The battle between the Freedom and Shi-ve.A continued, grazing the lunar surface that sparkled with gray sand.

The Shi-ve.A danced across the battlefield, skillfully manipulating sabers in both hands and beam blades on its feet, launching wave-like attacks. Kira blocked attacks from all sides with his shield and fired the linear guns to try to gain distance.

At that moment, a black shadow fell from above.

A new model of mobile suit unfurled its giant wings, menacingly angelic. Those wings detached one after another, spiraling in to attack like a whirlwind. In response, Kira detached his DRAGOONS, unleashing a barrage of beams.

The Freedom darted and weaved through a dense net of enemy beams. There, the new model of mobile suit closed in at tremendous speed. Kira barely managed to catch its down-swung saber with his shield.

"Pathetic wretch!"

It was Orphee's voice.

"What is?"

When Kira retorted, Orphee spoke with a hint of superiority.

"You dare challenge us with that outdated relic?"

"A mobile suit's performance doesn't determine one's strength!"

"Indeed."

With composed precision, Orphee's DRAGOONS sliced through the Freedom's DRAGOONS using beam cutters.

"That's why you, who are inferior to us, cannot win!"

Orphee's machine closed the distance in an instant and sliced off the Freedom's wings. Impossible to completely evade.

Certainly, in terms of weapons and pilot specs, they had the upper hand.

But what truly defines strength?

Orphee's three support units launched countless missiles at the Freedom that had fallen to the lunar surface.

"But I, too, have a weapon."

Even while crawling, Kira still stood up. Orphee mocked him.

"And what is that?"

"Lacus's love!"

Kira locked onto the incoming missiles at incredible speed and unleashed all of the Freedom's firearms. Countless arrows of light radiated out from the Freedom as missiles exploded all around.

I won't give up—not with the strength of Lacus's love and my love for her.

Love, the most precious gift one can give, elevates us, making us greater—even if just a little.

Just a little bit.

Love won't save the Earth.

Love won't save anyone. People save themselves.

People strive to become great. By gaining wealth and power, by defeating someone, by earning someone's love.

Yet, no matter their achievements, humans remain mere specks in the vastness of existence.

People struggle to forget that. They try to become immense. Not even realizing the emptiness inside.

Love is not something you earn but something you give.

For one person to meet someone they can love equally may be a miracle.

Someone you can become strong for by thinking of them.

Someone you can become kind to by thinking of them.

In such moments, one might touch the edges of eternity, even if just fleetingly.

Just a little bit.

And sometimes, that's enough.

The Impulse's phase shift dropped during combat. Unlike the latest models that used nuclear power, the Impulse would lose not only its weaponry but its armor as well once its battery ran out.

Engaged with the Rud-ro.As, Shinn's heart froze as he noticed — a blood-curdling terror gripped him.

"Luna!"

He shook off the pursuing Rud-ro.As and raced towards Lunamaria.

"Shinn!"

Lunamaria purged the Sword Silhouette and switched to the Force Silhouette.

The Destiny, having rushed over at tremendous speed, braked hard to avoid collision and joined hands with the Impulse. The two units faced each other, matching their relative velocities.

"Deuterion beam irradiation!"

The beam emitted from the Destiny's forehead was absorbed by the receptor on the Impulse's forehead. In an instant, the Impulse's frame regained color as its battery revived. Non-contact charging via beam was possible.

"...Thanks."

Lunamaria's voice was shy as she spoke. Shinn, smiling, felt a surge of relief. He felt her warmth conveyed through the joined hands of their mobile suits as if their spirits, too, were connected.

With someone to protect, Shinn found his strength.

With renewed vigor, Shinn spun his unit around and launched a forceful charge at the Rud-ro.A team in pursuit.

"Don't mock me!"

Orphee trembled, his rage barely contained.

"Disgusting! That trash like you dares utter Lacus's name—killing you a million times wouldn't be enough to erase such a sin!"

A failure, an Accord wannabe, Dr. Hibiki's reject!

It was a mistake. Everything was an error.

They killed Durandal, who was like a father to them; they ruined the Destiny Plan and robbed them of their very reason to exist.

And on top of that, even Lacus!

"Why do you interfere?! You, a failure who can do nothing!"

As Orphee unleashed a barrage of missiles and beams, the Freedom was engulfed in a vortex of explosions. Waiting for it to finally escape the blasts, the Cal-re.A and Shi-ve.A slashed at it. They

destroyed the defending Freedom's shield and rifle, shooting down its DRAGOONS.

"You should never have been born! And yet you live carefree and loved! Even though you have no right to be!"

With each ruthless downswing of the Cal-re. A's saber, the Freedom's frame buckled, and its armaments shattered.

Kira's pained voice shouted back.

"There's no qualification needed to be loved!"

"Then relinquish that love to me!"

Orphee screamed.

"She was supposed to become mine! And you took her!"

To have Lacus stolen by such a pathetic wretch!

Even though he had always thought of Lacus.

When he saw her singing on the PLANT broadcast, even when it seemed like the future had been closed off after Durandal was defeated.

He had relentlessly trained and honed himself, striving to become a man worthy of Lacus.

Believing that a bright future awaited if only he could obtain her.

If only this man weren't here, it should have turned out that way. Because of a single small error- because Lacus had mistakenly loved the wrong person!

Orphee pursued the Freedom, swinging his saber down from on high as it nimbly dodged the Ziggurat's missiles.

He showered it with even more missiles.

At last, the Freedom's power ebbed to its limit; its phase shift armor failed, and the now colorless frame crumpled onto the lunar surface.

Inside the Freedom, now stripped of its armaments and armor, Kira watched as the enemy — the Shi-ve.A — landed before him, its chest compartment swung open.

"It's over for you, Freedom."

The unfolding scene mirrored his previous defeat at Eldora.

But-

"Kiraaa!"

Kira saw the mobile suit flying in at high speed.

"Athrun!"

It was different now.

He wasn't alone.

Just as Athrun's Z'Gok positioned itself protectively in front of the Freedom, countless needles erupted from the Shi-ve. A's chest.

"Athrun!"

Kira's shout of alarm filled the cockpit as the needles pierced the Z'Gok's front, sending jolts of electricity coursing through its frame. Its armor cracked and scattered like brittle glass.

Before Kira's astonished eyes, as the Z'Gok's armor flew apart, a different silhouette rose up from within.

The red mobile suit - Justice!

The lifter detached from the Cavalier above, transforming as it flew in and docked with the Justice's back. Drawing its saber and outputting beam blades from its four limbs and wingtips, the Justice slashed at the Shi-ve.A.

"You alright, Kira?"

Athrun's voice, steady and reassuring, cut through the chaos.

"Out of my way!"

Orphee glared in irritation at the Justice dueling the Shi-ve.A.

That squat mobile suit's outer shell had been a disguise.

Damn you, Athrun Zala!

But the Freedom was still completely exposed. Now was his chance!

"Finish it! Unload everything on the Freedom!"

Orphee ordered Ingrid.

Ingrid, controlling the Ziggurat, launched a barrage of missiles, everything in its compliment.

Seizing the moment, the Freedom suddenly ascended.

"Kira!"

"Lacus!"

Kira watched as the Defender raced toward him, its vast wings unfolding to gently envelop him.

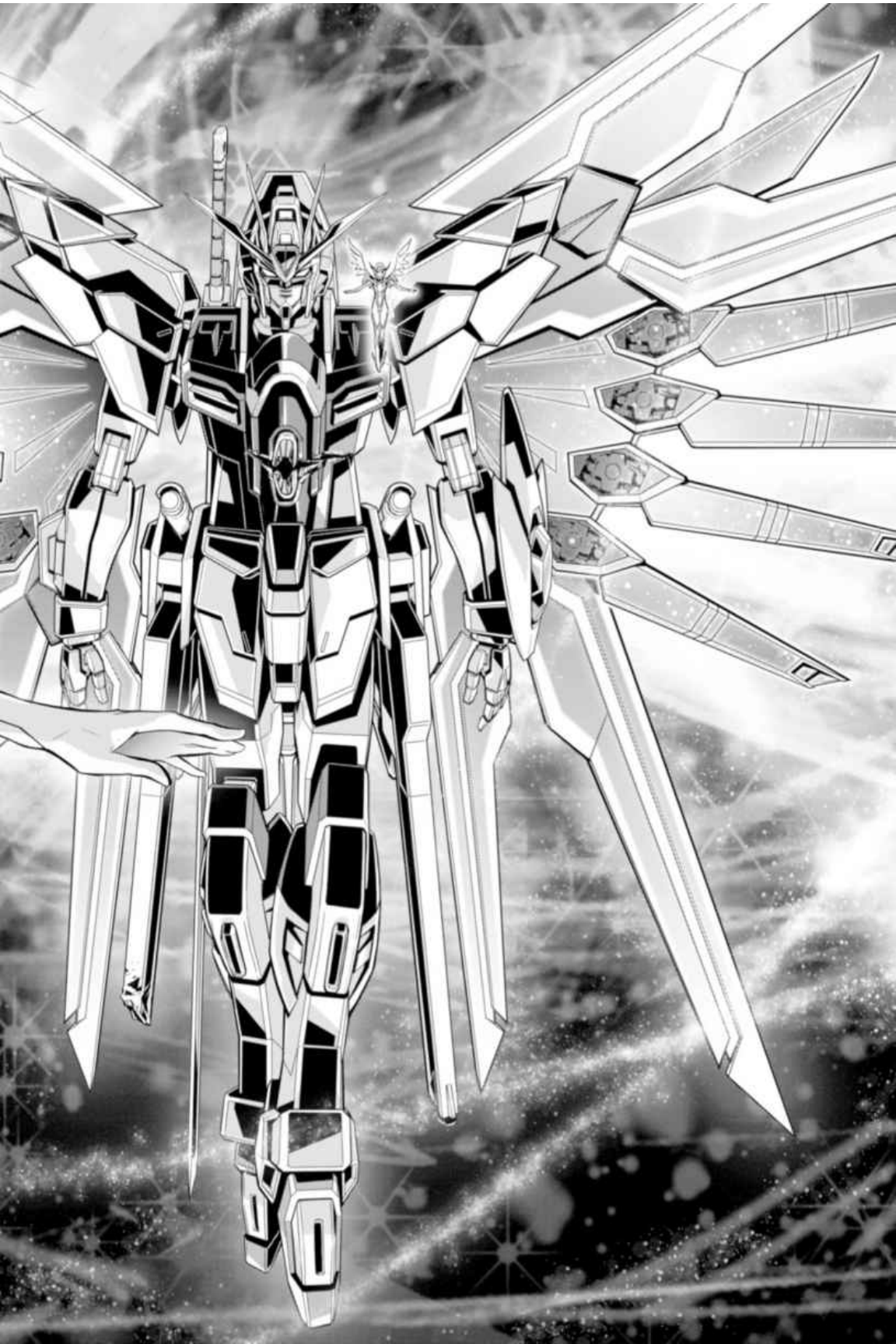
"Engage!"

With Lacus's voice, the Defender attached to the Freedom's back.

In an electrifying instant, the power gauge surged, and vibrant color flooded back into the Freedom's entire frame. The Defender unfurled, rainbow light streaming from its angelic wings.

Beams and missiles converged from all around like bars of light, enveloping them.





Glowing particles of light spilled from the wings, encasing the Freedom in a luminous embrace.

The next moment, the beams and countless missiles impacted.

A flash streaked across where the Freedom had been.

Seeing that, a grin of satisfaction crossed Orphee's face.

—*Burn in the fires of hell! Kira Yamato!*

But then, an eerie light dispersed the smoke from the explosion. Bathed in an aurora-like glow, the Freedom emerged unscathed. Its form bearing shining wings seemed akin to a seraph.

And there, Orphee saw Lacus as well.

Their dignified and noble princess stared back with eyes burning with resolve and defiance.

That was her will.

To head to the battlefield herself and protect Kira.

"She would go that far..."

Despair gripped Orphee as he clenched his fists, overwhelmed by the scene before him.

"You reject me so completely?"

It was the very form of her he had desired as his partner. And she was not by his side but with his detestable enemy. Could there be any greater betrayal?

When the one he had yearned for with every fiber of his being seemingly betrayed him, Orphee lost all semblance of composure.

His schemes, his ideals, his role.

Now, only a seething, roiling resentment consumed him.

"Then die along with that foolish love!"

With a crazed scream, Orphee unleashed his fury.

The upper hatch of the Freedom opened, and Lacus slipped through, settling onto Kira's lap and giving him a bright smile.

"Lacus, why--"

Kira began, his voice laden with concern, but Lacus responded with unwavering resolve.

"My will is with you."

Then, tilting her head slightly, she gave a gentle smile.

"Please take care of me, now and always."

Kira found himself smiling, too, drawn in.

Lacus's presence brought a serene atmosphere, momentarily making the battlefield seem a distant reality.

With her, he felt he could go anywhere.

Even to the ends of the Earth.

Kira spoke to her nonchalantly.

"Let's go."

"Yes."

Lacus moved away, taking a seat in the sub-cockpit beside him.

Once more, beams rained down from the enemy support units and Orphee's DRAGOONS. Nanoparticles emanating from the Defender absorbed the incoming fire, forming an impenetrable barrier around the Freedom.

A fresh volley of missiles bore down on them.

"I'll handle this."

With a mere wave of her hand, Lacus initiated a brainwave sync with the Defender, which instantly targeted all missiles, DRAGOONS, and enemy battleships in range. The instant they exploded, lightning surged out from the Freedom. After countless bolts raced across space, the missiles detonated without reaching them, the DRAGOONS fell, and the battleships were rendered inoperable.

The nanoparticles deployed by the Defender absorbed electromagnetic waves at specific wavelengths, converting them into intense heat. This heat created an electric field around them, generating current through electron movement. It turned attacks received into attacks against the enemy. Truly an armament befitting the name Defender.

Kira glanced over at Lacus beside him. In a mere instant, she had grasped all the information in the area and locked on. This was indeed the ability of an Accord.

The ability she had never shown before, she was now using unstintingly for their sake. Kira sensed her strong resolve in that.

But those support units still remained. Their firepower couldn't be ignored. What's more, they could target them with bending beams and guided missiles even while hidden behind cover.

"I'll use the Distructor. Commodore Kira Yamato requesting use of the Distructor."

As Kira spoke, a monitor popped up in front of Lacus.

"President Lacus Clyne authorizes use of the Distructor."

Lacus reached out and touched the monitor to approve the request.

She just happened to be here now, but this was a weapon that couldn't be used unless the wielder requested it and the President

authorized it. It possessed enough power that Kira himself had set usage restrictions on it.

"Disruptor activated. Output at eighty percent!"

A muzzle appeared on the Freedom's brow.

Lacus placed her helmet in contact.

"The enemy is behind the Messiah's remains. Please link your consciousness to mine."

Kira closed his eyes. What Lacus was seeing was projected in his mind. Through the wreckage of the fortress coiled on the lunar surface, he could see the support unit hovering on the other side.

"Disruptor, fire!"

Massive energy surged from the Freedom's brow, unleashing an invisible blade capable of breaking down atoms and suppressing nuclear fission. This formidable weapon, slicing through dimensions, cleaved the Messiah's remains in two and effortlessly cut through the Ziggurat on the other side.

After the unseen blade raced through, the Ziggurat vanished, leaving behind a blaze of explosive light. The Messiah slowly crumbled from the cut surface, collapsing and kicking up billowing clouds of dust on the Moon.

A report reached the flagship Gullveig.

"Repairs on the Requiem are complete. Deflection ring moving to primary relay point."

Aura, who had been awaiting this news with impatience, now commanded elatedly.

"Fire on Orb as soon as preparations are finished! Along with the enemy fleet!"

Currently, the enemy fleet was concentrated near the muzzle, trying to seize control of the Requiem. If they fired the Requiem, they would hit their target without even aiming.

Though they had struggled unsightly, in the end, all of their actions would come to naught.

A smirk twisted Aura's childlike lips, belying her youthful appearance with its malice.

It was the inevitable outcome, she mused; her creations were far superior to Hibiki's, after all.

At Mendel, the two had been rivals. Both striving to create a more advanced humanity.

It was during this period of intense rivalry that she encountered Durandal.

Aura was astonished by the intelligence of Durandal, who was much younger than her. Through her research into his genetic makeup, she found herself wholeheartedly aligning with his philosophical views. They dreamed of correcting the twisted world and building a new, fair, and peaceful one. The role of creating the inhabitants of that world fell to her.

Her children lived up to expectations. They demonstrated outstanding abilities in every aspect, individuals who could perfectly harmonize with others - children befitting a new world.

Yet Hibiki dismissed her visionary work as mere nonsense.

"Not satisfied with just manipulating genes, you want to manipulate everyone else too. You're utterly arrogant."

Aura seethed with indignation.

The arrogant one was Hibiki. Thinking only of his own gain, single-mindedly immersed in his own achievements, not even trying to consider the world.

Those with ability had an obligation to use that ability for the world's sake.

Fortunately, Emperor Mihar, a distant relative, had endorsed and aided their plan.

Durandal and she were in no rush. Her precious children - the Accords - still needed much more time to grow and become capable of their roles.

But just when everything seemed to be going smoothly, Mendel was attacked. At the time, Aura had been conducting parallel research on anti-aging. In the low-birthrate PLANTs, extending the lifespan and preserving the youthfulness of the existing population held significant importance. And it was easier to attract funding for research on that theme.

During the raid, a mishap drenched Aura in the very drug she was developing. She ended up experiencing the results of her own research firsthand.

Amidst terror and agony, Aura grew younger over the course of months. She took on this childlike form and ceased changing further. It was as if she had been imprisoned in a body that could neither grow nor change.

The result may have caused a strange warping of her psyche.

A powerless body. The unconsciously scornful eyes of others. Above all, her own technology had driven her into these straits. Could there be any greater humiliation?

Thus, driven by a need to vindicate her life's work, Aura sought undeniable results. That she was a researcher superior to anyone. Far more so than Hibiki.

And now, that was about to be proven.

Even after Durandal's death and the rejection of his plan, Aura's resolve never wavered.

She had quietly amassed power on Earth, biding her time until the day her children would take the center stage.

The one thing Aura had fixated on was Lacus Clyne. Though she had been taken away by her mother shortly after birth, Aura recognized her as her own masterpiece. When Lacus became PLANT's idol and gained influence over many people, she had nodded deeply in approval.

That was how I created her.

Durandal had given up on Lacus and tried to discard her, but Aura objected. Lacus was the one who would validate the correctness of her research.

But in the end, perhaps Durandal had been right. He had feared Lacus precisely because he believed in her abilities.

All this chaos, Aura seethed, was Kira Yamato's doing. His influence had poisoned Lacus, turning her against them. He had killed her ally Durandal and crushed the Destiny Plan.

How long will you stand in my way, Hibiki?!

A deep-seated hatred resurfaced in Aura's heart, more fervent than ever.

I will shoot down the Freedom, obliterate Orb, and bury both of your children beneath their ruins!

Griffin and the others were having trouble with the Destiny. Not being able to shoot down a single outdated machine was a matter that affected their very reason for existence.

"Synchro attack! Here we go!"

Liu's thoughts spoke out, and Griffin and the others responded.

"Roger!"

The consciousnesses of Griffin, Liu, Daniel, and Redell merged, achieving perfect synchronization. They became a single personality controlling multiple bodies.

The four Rud-ro.As moved as one, their actions no longer merely coordinated but unified, mirroring a single, organic lifeform. They scattered countless afterimages and closed in on the Destiny.

This time for sure, they would finish it!

"Fall into darkness!"

Griffin plunged into the depths of Shinn Asuka's mind, seeking to manipulate his thoughts.

There, a pitch-black darkness congealed.

Deep within the darkness, a tiny light flickered—tentative yet resilient. Out of the gloom, the ethereal figure of a young girl materialized. Her soft golden hair fluttered as she turned her empty, distant gaze toward Griffin. Her expression swiftly hardened, her features sharpening as she advanced toward him.

"...Bad guy..."

Griffin recoiled and hastily retreated.

Before his eyes, the girl's form swelled and stretched out to pursue him.

"...Stella... protect... Shinn...!"

A colossal apparition of thought loomed over Griffin and his comrades, its hollow mouth gaping in a silent scream as it attacked. Redell among them screamed.

"What the hell is thiiiiis?!"

"His darkness..."

"It's too profound...!"

It was as if a nightmare had taken form.

They didn't know. The depths of hell Shinn had endured.

Losing his parents and sister to war, losing the girl he cherished, losing the friend he believed in.

Meanwhile, Griffin and the others had lived knowing only the small world Aura had created. They couldn't possibly withstand the deep darkness of Shinn's heart.

At the same time, Shinn deeply loved those who had died and was loved by them in turn. Shinn had no doubt about their love.

That love was protecting him.

As the Accords reeled from the shock, the Destiny seized the moment to vanish from sight.

"This is how..."

Shinn raised his saber and roared.

"...you fight with afterimages!"

The Destiny produced countless afterimages through DUPE particles and bore down on the Rud-ro.As. It was as if a swarm of butterflies had suddenly appeared in space.

Suddenly, a Gelgoog burst through the swarm of afterimages, with Hilda at its helm shouting, "This is revenge for my guys!"

The down-swung halberd bisected one of the Rud-ro.As.

A horrific scream erupted within Griffin's mind, reverberating violently.

"Gyaaaaah!"

The pain and terror of the slain Redell seared their minds directly.

"Redel!"

"Nooooo!"

"Uwaaaaaah!"

It was no longer clear who was screaming. Synchronized, they endured the direct sensation of 'death' as Redell perished. No one could withstand such a shock.

In that instant, the Destiny charged in.

A saber impaled Liu's unit, and railgun blasts tore into Daniel's, causing it to explode in a fiery burst.

As the enemy machine loomed closer, the haunting images of his comrades' final moments were etched indelibly into Griffin's mind.

The signals of the four Rud-ro.As cut off, and Aura gaped at the monitor, her astonishment mingling with disbelief.

"My children!"

Impossible. She had given those children everything. Physical ability, computational power, and judgment.

They shouldn't lose to any enemy!

The research she had poured her entire life into had been reduced to nothing in an instant. Aura seethed with rage, her body tensing as she writhed.

"Aaaaaah - I'll burn Orb and PLANT to ashes!"

All that drove her now was an obsession with what had been killed and lost and a grudge against those who had obstructed and rejected her.

Agnes and Lunamaria continued their war of words even as they fought.

"You're the type who always makes moves on other people's boyfriends, aren't you?!"

Lunamaria made the spiteful remark, and Agnes retorted.

"So what? I can't help it if all men are drawn to me! Stop being so jealous!"

Come to think of it, things like that had happened. But it was just that Lunamaria's boyfriend had chosen the more appealing Agnes. It wasn't her fault Lunamaria's boyfriend had chosen her. Holding a grudge over that just showed how vindictive Lunamaria was.

"That's exactly what I hate about you!"

As the Gyan and Impulse collided with a thunderous crash, damaging the shield, Lunamaria shouted in defiance.

Agnes thought Lunamaria was the troublesome one.

Just when she thought she could reap the benefits of joining the Accords, Lunamaria and the others had to interfere and get in the way.

Why was her luck so bad?

It had been that way from the very beginning. Shinn and Lunamaria were assigned to the Minerva and gained attention, while Agnes, who was far more skilled, got stuck on the lunar front.

Still, she had worked hard, achieved results, and even earned the nickname "Moonlight Valkyrie." But then she was betrayed by the man who approached her.

Moreover, she endured the ultimate betrayal and suffered through hell at the hands of Kira Yamato.

"Always, it's always the same! Why does nothing go right for me?!"

Agnes vented her frustration. Lunamaria replied with exasperation.

"...Are you serious?"

"You're the one dating that loser and having it easy!"

At that, Lunamaria seemed truly peeved as she snapped back.

"Huh?! I like him, so what?! Got a problem with that?!"

"No way! You like that monkey?!"

Agnes was taken aback; she had always assumed Lunamaria was with Shinn only because of his FAITH status.

Before, Lunamaria also liked elites, and the lover Agnes had stolen from her was quite the high-spec man.

But it seemed Lunamaria had been truly corrupted by Shinn and was genuinely angry.

"None of your business! Why would I date someone I don't like?!"

She fired her beam rifle in earnest. For some reason, Agnes felt like she was being denied and faltered.

Agnes had always envisioned herself alongside a man who was not only elite but also strong, kind, and handsome.

Like?

Seriously, with a worthless man who wouldn't make anyone jealous if you dated him?

She had believed she outmaneuvered Lunamaria by snagging a FAITH boyfriend right from under her but seeing that expectation crumble only fueled her misfortune.

But Lunamaria was saying it didn't matter if Shinn wasn't a FAITH? She wanted to laugh it off as foolishness. But she couldn't.

Agnes was haunted by the realization that Lunamaria possessed something unattainable to her.

Hiding her impatience, Agnes declared.

"I have value! I deserve to be loved!"

"So what?!"

The two mechs charged, clashing beam sabers in a fleeting encounter. In that fleeting moment, the Impulse whirled around and unleashed a barrage from its Vulcan cannons. The shots struck the Gyan's backpack, detonating in a fierce explosion. Pushed by the shock and losing thrust, unable to right itself, the Gyan fell helplessly towards the lunar surface.

—*I lost? Me?- The one called the Moonlight Valkyrie?*

Bitter tears streamed down Agnes's cheeks.

No, she couldn't accept defeat.

She frantically tried to argue back.

"I too... had feelings...!"

She had followed Shura because she liked him.

There was nothing you had that I didn't!

I haven't lost! Absolutely not!

Lunamaria watched Agnes plummet toward the Moon, a mix of regret and discomfort stirring within her.

"I'm sorry, Agnes."

In the heat of the moment, she had engaged in a bitter battle she now regretted.

Agnes, too, was likely doing her best in her own way. No matter how much she dragged others in and caused trouble.

Their paths had irreversibly diverged, and it seemed unlikely they would ever reconcile their differences.

Still, they had been friends once.

She never wanted to fight a former comrade like this again...

Lunamaria turned her machine around.

The battle wasn't over yet.

"Tannhäuser, fire!"

At Murrue's command, the Millennium's bow cannon belched flames. A thick beam of positrons surged through the densely packed enemy fleet, incinerating the few ships it struck directly into brilliant orbs of light. Several ships merely grazed also exploded and were rendered inoperable.

A gap opened in the center of the fleet's wall.

"Now! Full speed on both sides!"

Murrue ordered. The Millennium tried to accelerate through that gap.

"Enemy ship main cannon range, Bravo, mark 31 to 65."

"Target the enemy flagship! Ram it if you have to!"

Murrue commanded, her voice tinged with desperation.

Even if it took some hits, even if it spent all its ammo, this ship itself was a weapon. An object with this much speed and mass was a terrifying instrument of destruction in its own right.

Crush the enemy's core. Then, there should be no more sacrifice.

But a panicked voice from the operator rang out.

"Nazca-class to the rear starboard!"

Murrue glanced over with a start. A massive ZAFT ship was charging at them while firing beams in rapid succession. They had the same idea.

A direct hit would knock them off course, thwarting their desperate charge towards the flagship.

"Never forget—the blood spilled, the lives lost, the lingering resentment!"

Jagannath shouted as he charged towards the Millennium.

"As if we could forget!"

The soldiers who believed in him followed his orders and died.

They died believing that if they fought, they could make the Naturals submit and change the world.

How could he forgive those who allied with the Naturals, turned a blind eye to a corrupt society, and led carefree lives while his people suffered?

Determined to ensure that the sacrifices of his fallen comrades were not in vain, he vowed to press on.

"Haven't forgotten..."

Dearka muttered under his breath, steadying his long-barreled rifle as he targeted the ship that had once been his wingmate, then fired.

Beams and missiles assaulted the Burkhart, striking its engines.

Simultaneously, Yzak maneuvered his Duel Gundam closer to the bridge, launching a salvo of Lancer darts with precision.

With a deafening explosion, the Burkhart's engines burst into flames, sending the ship veering off course. It rolled ominously as it passed over the Millennium, soon becoming entirely engulfed in a fiery inferno.

Dearka stared into the engulfing flames, his heart heavy with bitterness.

He hadn't forgotten. The blood they had spilled.

The blood of Nicol, Miguel, and many others had been shed. Not just his comrades but also the comrades of his enemies.

He had witnessed the grief of those who loved their enemies, mourning their deaths with heartfelt tears.

A cycle of vengeance—killing for the killed, blood paid back in blood...

"That's exactly why... we must put an end to this."

Yzak's voice was heard.

He was probably gazing at this fire with the same feelings.

Because that blood was precious, they mustn't spill it any longer.

With resolute will, they must sever this tragic chain of violence.

On the lunar surface, the Shi-ve.A and Justice continued their fierce battle.

"Now, this is what I call a challenge!"

The Shi-ve.A eyed his foe with a look of delight.

"You're strong, Athrun Zala."

The two dueled, wielding all their sabers, beam blades on their limbs, wings, and cloaks. It was as if they were dancing an intricate waltz. The two machines swiftly separated and landed, the impact of their landing causing massive debris to fall from the fortress ruins behind them, kicking up glittering clouds of dust on the lunar surface.

With a triumphant air, Shura declared.

"But still no match for me!"

Impressive as he was for a mere Coordinator, Shura was yet to unleash his full strength. It was rare to encounter such a worthy opponent. He wanted to savor this moment for as long as possible.

A powerful enemy- an even stronger enemy- his value would rise when he defeated them.

"Winning is the role given to me. That's the meaning of my existence!"

He had to finish this enemy soon.

Shura exhaled and charged at the Justice.

What would he do next? Extending the tendrils of his thoughts, it seemed Athrun Zala was closing his eyes, trying to empty his mind.

Shura sneered.

"It's useless! You can't shut out your thoughts..."

At that moment, a clear image surfaced in Athrun's mind. A woman with golden hair and eyes.

The image of the woman, her golden hair tousled by the wind, came into focus as she narrowed her eyes in a knowing smile.

"Cagalli..."

Athrun focused intently on picturing Cagalli. As if clinging to that image.

Her spirited golden eyes, her innocent smile that she showed from time to time, the scent of her hair...

The supple curves beneath her wet, translucent clothes...

The soft sensation of her skin when he embraced her, and the physique beneath...

Her strong voice, resolute and clear, urged him to live, to fight with all his might.

As he recalled every cherished moment with her, Athrun made a heartfelt vow.

To live, to endure—whatever the means, no matter how desperate or unseemly the measures might be.

Just as she had once told him.

The vivid image of the woman stirred intense agitation in Shura, disrupting his focus.

"You bastard! What an obscene delusion in this sacred place of battle!"

Giving in to anger, he slashed at the Justice. Beyond the woman's image, he saw Athrun's thoughts.

—*Right!*

Anticipating the Justice's evasive action, Shura swung his saber down to the right. But--

The red mobile suit wasn't there.

The Justice abruptly leapt to the left, unleashing a barrage from its railguns in rapid succession.

"What?!"

Caught off-guard by the sudden shift, Shura absorbed the full brunt of the railgun fire, which obliterated his right arm and verniers.

"Impossible! How?!"

As Shura lay defeated on the lunar dust, Athrun's icy voice descended upon him.

"Truly useless, aren't you?"

Shura started.

"Remote control?!"

Far from the lunar surface, on an island nation surrounded by the Pacific - in Orb, Cagalli muttered, her voice dripping with disgust.

"An obscene delusion, huh?"

She gripped the control sticks of the Strike Rouge, the monitor in front of her showing the Shi-ve.A collapsed on the Moon.

From her position in Orb, Cagalli had been remotely controlling the Justice through a relay system involving two Cavaliers. It was a countermeasure against the Accords who could read minds.

This remote operation instantaneously transmitted information from the main unit to the sub-unit via superluminal paired communication, theoretically without time lag. However, in practice, it required compatibility and affinity between the pilots. It was a technology made possible by a deep bond of trust between the two.

Yet, a recent remark threatened to fracture that hard-earned bond of trust.

"Athruun!"

Cagalli's voice darkened with a mix of concern and anger as she uttered that name.

Just what had he been thinking about in the middle of battle?

When he got back, she'd have him explain thoroughly.

"Coward!"

Shura slashed at them, giving in to anger. Shura's beam-bladed kick sliced through the air where Athrun had just evaded. It sent his shield flying and destroyed his right arm. Even when damaged, its movements were tremendous.

His remaining left arm was grabbed, immobilizing him. Shura shouted in triumph.

"I am superior, after all!"

"Strength isn't about power!"

Athrun shouted back.

"It's the will to live!"

The Justice activated the beam blade on its head and swung down with its entire body. The Shi-ve. A's frame was sliced cleanly in two from head to waist.

Was strength truly Shura's sole reason for existence?

Had he been made to believe that if he wasn't superior to others, his life had no value?

Had no one ever taught him that living itself was valuable?

That any life, no matter how powerless, was precious just by living?

Weak, cowardly, unseemly—it didn't matter. Athrun felt a deep pity for him for never having been taught the simple yet profound value of just living.

Living is more of a battle!

Just as Cagalli had once taught him.

"I... lost...?"

Even in his final moments, Shura refused to accept defeat.

If it had been a proper fight, he should have won for sure. If his opponent hadn't used cowardly tactics.

He had been given specs that ensured he would always win.

He had to prove that.

For his creator.

As he vanished engulfed in flames, Shura remained trapped by the compulsive obsession instilled in him, a haunting legacy that followed him to the end.

In the midst of the battle with the Freedom, Ingrid suddenly jerked her head up, a chilling sense of loss washing over her—the unmistakable presence of someone close had vanished.

"Orphee, Shura's been--!"

"Shura..."

Orphee sensed it, too.

Even Shura!

A bit earlier, they had also perceived the deaths of their other comrades.

It couldn't be. They were a superior race. They couldn't possibly lose to anyone else!

"You damn miserable insects!"

Orphee was seething, a mix of impatience and indignation threatening to overwhelm him. He had lost the Ziggurat and was losing the upper hand in the battle with the Freedom. He had lost his comrades, too.

At that moment, Lacus's quiet voice called out.

"Orphee, Ingrid, let's stop this."

Orphee bristled, detecting an unwelcome note of superiority in her calm voice.

If only she hadn't betrayed them in the first place, it wouldn't have come to this!

He felt like he understood Lacus's true nature.

"You chose him because you deem him beneath you, didn't you? Is that why you revel in being adored by those you consider lesser?!"

She had rejected the responsibility that superior beings had towards the world.

Because she was content with the way things were now.

Because it was more convenient for her to sit on a pedestal and look down on everyone around her.

Orphee's words spilled out in a torrent, like a child in the throes of a tantrum.

"So cold and selfish! Do you not care if these fools slaughter each other in endless battles?!"

"Shinn!"

The Impulse had caught up. United in their mission, Shinn and Lunamaria both set their sights on the same critical target.

"Destroy the Requiem!"

But with their ammunition nearly depleted, doubts crept in. Could they really breach the Requiem's formidable shields with their remaining arsenal?

Just then, a communication came in.

"Kid!"

It was Mu who had called out.

"Old man!"

"I'm not old!"

After reflexively retorting to Shinn's unintentionally spoken words, Mu purged the Akatsuki's Zeus Silhouette.

"Take your equipment!"

"Roger!"

Skillfully, the Destiny matched relative velocities and docked with the Zeus Silhouette, securing the equipment. It had been returned to its rightful owner.

Meanwhile, Dearka handed over the METEOR pack to the Impulse.

"Lunamaria, use this!"

Newly armed with powerful enhancements from their mentors, Shinn and Lunamaria exchanged a determined look through the monitor.

"Let's go, Luna!"

When Shinn said that, Lunamaria smiled reassuringly.

"Anytime!"

With the METEOR's propulsion now at their command, the Impulse surged forward, cutting a swift path to the far side of the Moon alongside the Destiny.

Meanwhile, the Millennium barreled towards the Foundation's flagship at maximum combat speed, undeterred by the chaos around it.

Despite being barraged by a relentless storm of missiles and beams from all directions, the Millennium maintained its relentless advance.

Hilda's Gelgoog and the METEOR-equipped Duel flanked the Millennium, fiercely guarding its path as they cut through the enemy's barrage.

"Charge in! Activate the Goten bow ram! Load all gun ports for close combat!"

Upon Murrue's command, the sharp, pointed ram smoothly extended from the Millennium's bow, poised to strike.

Within moments, the enemy flagship loomed ominously large, dominating their forward view.

"All hands, brace for impact!"

On the flagship Gullveig, Aura shouted in panic.

"What are you doing?! Shoot it down!"

Amidst the torrential rain of beams, missiles, and anti-air fire, the Millennium charged straight ahead without even attempting to evade. The massive ram loomed as if to cover the bridge window.

"Uwaaaaaah!"

In a desperate reflex, Aura leaped from her command chair, a futile attempt to escape the relentless charge of the enemy. But she had barely moved when the entire vessel shuddered violently under the crushing impact.

Lacus spoke, her voice tinged with gentle admonishment.

"There is no superiority or inferiority in life. Everyone is precious to someone."

Orphee shook his head, a deep sadness etching his features.

"Then... why am I not loved?"

"No, you are not unloved. Someone is watching over you, perhaps not now, but in the future. Often, they are closer than we realize."

Ingrid slowly raised her face.

Could Lacus be referring to her? Had she somehow perceived her deeply buried feelings?

That's right, she loved Orphee.

She had endeavored to suppress these feelings, dedicating herself to her duties with mechanical precision. But still...

She couldn't deceive herself. She couldn't kill this love.

But acknowledging her love meant betraying everything she stood for.

The values she had believed in until now, the will of their creator—and even Orphee himself.

For Ingrid, her love was an act of rebellion against the very person she cherished.

But to Orphee, Lacus's words held no meaning and merely slipped past his ears.

He attacked the Freedom with a fury born of despair, his beams slashing through space only to dissipate before striking their target. Once more, a flash emitted from the Freedom's brow, and the Cal-re. A's left arm and wing vanished.

Orphee's cry of despair echoed.

"To hell with the future—I need you now!"

The Millennium had come to a halt, its bow embedded in the Gullveig's massive hull.

Among the shattered remains of the bridge, Aura floated, her blood spiraling around her in zero gravity, shimmering like crimson gems in the dim light.

How had it come to this...?

She pondered with a hazy mind.

But at last, she could escape this body.

The latter half of her life had felt like a constant, oppressive reminder of her own failures. Every gaze from others seemed to hold either pity or mockery. That's why she had to succeed. No matter what.

The Accords... her magnum opus on which she had staked everything.

They couldn't possibly lose.

The counter on the monitor caught her eye. It was steadily counting down.

The time until the Requiem fired.

Aura smiled one last time.

If she was to lose everything, then she would ensure they plummeted into the abyss with her.

Determined to avenge her beloved children, slain by the despised offspring of Hibiki, she resolved to drag them all to hell with her.

Moments later, with the Millennium impaled in the Gullveig's hull, it unleashed its arsenal, engulfing the ship's interior in a swirling inferno.

As Athrun raced to the airspace above the Requiem, Yzak's shout suddenly blasted through the speakers.

"You bastard! What were you doing?!"

Athrun briefly responded, ignoring Yzak's shout, which had become more of a ritualistic greeting than a genuine inquiry.

"Shinn and the others!"

The enemy fleet and mobile suit forces launched desperate attacks to stop the Destiny and Impulse heading for the Requiem.

Athrun's Justice and Yzak's Duel coordinated from both sides, firing in bursts to mow down the enemy units blocking Shinn and the others' path.

Dearka's Buster sprang into action, its long-barreled beam cannon blazing as it targeted the advancing battleships.

The Destiny and Impulse broke through the defensive line, increasing their speed.

Missiles erupted from the METEOR, decimating the mobile suit teams and gun emplacements that guarded the Requiem's muzzle. From the METEOR's tip, the Impulse projected a beam sword and slashed downwards with the immense blade of light.

While the muzzle's protective shield deflected the beam, the blade carved deep gouges into the surrounding structures. An explosion rocked the facility, clearly causing significant damage as the shield over the muzzle flickered and then disappeared.

"Shinn!"

Slowly, the muzzle began to widen, its depths glowing ominously with the burgeoning light of criticality. In that instant, the Destiny slipped in from above.

"Oooooohh!"

Shinn aimed the Zeus's barrel at the opening muzzle and pulled the trigger.

The fired shell was sucked into the depths of the Requiem.

The earth-penetrating shell dove deep into the reactor and detonated with devastating force. For a moment, the Requiem shuddered as if writhing in agony before being utterly consumed by massive, engulfing flames.

"We were born out of human foolishness. Mouthing words of peace and equality, yet demanding others to change and never trying to change themselves."

Lacus absorbed Orphee's resentful words, her heart heavy with sorrow.

"That's not true!"

Kira objected, but Orphee wouldn't listen.

"That's why conflicts persist through the ages—because grudges are never forgotten! Even on the brink of ruin, they cling to immediate gains and preconceptions, tripping each other up! They're all fools!"

Orphee was right.

But at the same time, he was wrong.

In hindsight, she should have realized it when he spoke with full confidence of saving the world.

"A guide is needed! To end this history of division and bloodshed—that is the reason for our existence!"

Indeed, many yearn for guidance, longing for a simple, elegant plan that promises to solve all problems.

But no such thing exists.

There is no single, dramatic solution that will change this complex world.

Change comes when individuals think independently and evolve gradually through endless dialogue and continual compromise. Only

the steady, inconspicuous, mind-numbingly tedious effort to continue such things is the path to a solution.

Orphee's tragedy, and that of his ilk, was their narrow worldview, confined to their own limited experiences.

Oblivious to both the suffering and the hidden greatness of the people they so dismissively labeled as insects.

Even though the world is moved and supported by such people.

"People are not born out of necessity."

Lacus declared with finality.

"They are born out of love."

What good does it do to seek meaning in having been born?

Life is too profound to be confined by the need for mere meaning.

Kira, too, shouted.

"I choose the future with my own hands!"

His blade thrust decisively through the enemy unit's cockpit, sealing its fate.

"Orphee!"

Ingrid sprang from her seat and clung to Orphee, whose body was tragically impaled by the Freedom's sword, along with the cockpit.

"Impossible... I... I have a mission..."

Tears streaming down her face, Ingrid embraced Orphee tightly as he continued to mumble in disbelief.

"It's alright now... Orphee..."

In the final moment, Lacus chose to fight alongside Kira, while Ingrid chose not to fight.

She had betrayed her brethren, the will of their creator.

And she became free.

"Ingrid?"

Orphee gazed at her, seeing her truly for the first time, as she gently cradled his head.

"I know..."

I've been watching you all along. Though you never noticed because I was too close.

Orphee's expression softened as she held him close.

If love needs no qualification,

Then I'll proudly say it. That I love you.

I love you.

I love you...

Silently, Kira and Lacus gazed down at the Cal-re.A, now engulfed in flames.

In their hearts, there was neither exultation nor pity—only a profound solemnity.

They had fought this battle not for the world at large but for their own beliefs and survival.

As Orphee had pointed out, their actions might seem selfish, but fighting for their own sake was a burden only they could bear.

Lacus placed her hand on Kira's shoulder, and Kira laid his own hand over hers.

People don't just live to fulfill a role; they live for themselves, for their own chosen paths—that's what true freedom means.

At times, people must fight for it.

In a final, symbolic gesture, Lacus slipped off her ring and released it into the void of space.

As if offering it to Orphee and Ingrid.

As if discarding the past and destiny, returning to being just herself.

Freedom - for that alone.

As they looked down at the muzzle, still blazing intensely, Shinn and Lunamaria's eyes met through the monitor—both relief and triumph in their gaze.

"We did it... you and me."

"Yeah..."

Lunamaria nodded, her relief palpable, but her expression quickly shifted to a playful pout.

"But you said, 'Luna, provide support,' didn't you?"

"Uh... well, that's..."

Shinn panicked.

"You know I can do it too, right?!"

"Y-yeah!"

Shinn nodded vigorously. Then Lunamaria said, looking a bit embarrassed.

"So we'll always be together from now on! I don't want to feel that way again!"

Seeing her voice catch slightly, Shinn realized her feelings.

"Yeah... sorry."

Just as he wanted to protect Lunamaria, she wanted to protect him, too.





With a force that bordered on comical, Shinn declared emphatically.

"We'll always be together!"

Lunamaria couldn't help but burst into laughter at the sight of his earnest expression.

"What's with that? You're the one who said it, Luna!"

"But..."

Still laughing and chatting away, they maneuvered their units to turn around together.

Athrun stared down at the muzzle, now spewing flames into the void.

It seemed over, yet Athrun knew better—nothing truly had ended.

The world bore new wounds now. He wondered how long it would take for these scars to heal.

"At least Requiem will never fire again."

Yzak declared as he maneuvered beside Athrun, his tone a blend of relief and somber resignation.

"Man... it's gonna be a pain from here on out."

Dearka grumbled. After this, they would have to run around nonstop to make the ZAFT troops who had joined the rebellion surrender and escort them back to their homeland.

"What will you do?"

At Yzak's question, Athrun turned his gaze to the far side of the Moon. To the blue planet hidden by the gray satellite, unseen for now.

"I'll keep doing the same thing... again."

He would simply continue doing what he could.

Just like her on that planet.

Dearka quietly replied.

"Yeah..."

They belonged to different places and positions. But no matter where they found themselves, they would remain bound by shared sentiments, now and always.

From her vantage point, Agnes could see the Moon's horizon glowing a deep, mournful red.

Agnes sat huddled at the base of the grounded Gyan, her arms tightly wrapped around her knees.

Tears brimmed over, drifting weightlessly inside her helmet.

She recalled standing alone, frozen outside the circle of dancers. But there was no one to call out to her anymore. Shura and the other Accords were all gone. Why was her luck so bad? She thought she had sided with those who would absolutely win. The Accords, it turned out, had been nothing but a grand deception.

But it wasn't just her. The others had been deceived, too. It wasn't her fault! Tears streamed down her face, a mixture of bitter indignation and profound self-pity.

The person she loved, whom she had finally found, she had lost so quickly.

He had told her she was beautiful.

Shura had been strong, wonderful, and a fitting match for her.

She, too, had waged her battles for the sake of love.

Agnes stubbornly repeated this over and over in her heart.

Love.

For the sake of love.

As soon as Mu stepped onto the bridge, Murrue leaped forward, pulling him into a kiss.

Around them, the crew erupted in a mix of jeers and cheers, the bridge instantly transforming into a scene of festive commotion.

Only Albert remained detached, his expressionless face buried in the analysis of combat data.

The Millennium was battered, but it had managed to survive once again.

As their lips parted, Mu whispered, his voice tinged with a shyness that was rare for him.

"I'm back, you."

"Yes."

Murrue's laugh, as she embraced him tightly, was tinged with a tremor—her only shield against tears.

"You are the man who makes the impossible possible, after all."

"That's you, isn't it?"

"No," Murrue thought, "That's everyone."

In her arms, she held not just Mu but a fragile, finite existence—a reminder of the transient nature of life itself. Someday, these sturdy arms and smiling eyes would also succumb to the inexorable march of time.

All people are very tiny, weak beings.

Yet, in their brief flickers of existence, they sometimes can make the impossible possible.

Murrue thought she would savor this joy to the fullest for a while.
Respect and blessings to all the weak.





Epilogue

The waves lapped warmly around their feet, frothing as they broke.

They abandoned the craft that had carried them this far, shedding their pilot suits. Discarding hair ornaments, all the various things they wore, everything that had bound them—they ran, stripped down to their bare selves.

The receding tide erased their footprints.

Naked as they were born, they reached out to each other, and eventually, they embraced.

Warm waves enveloped them, cradling gently like a rocking crib.

Still in each other's arms, they felt the beating of their hearts.

The joy of you being here.

The miracle of having met you.

Eyes locked, they see their souls mirrored in the other.

No chains left to bind them.

Amidst the golden waves suffused with the setting sun, the two remained entwined forevermore.

* * *

Cagalli offered flowers at the memorial.

Once barren, this sacred place had been lovingly restored, now lush with blossoms and verdant greenery.

With eyes closed, Cagalli offered a heartfelt prayer for her father's soul, the souls of Orb's fallen, and the countless lives claimed by the recent battle.

Hearing footsteps behind her, she opened her eyes and turned around.

Walking towards her, black hair tousled by the wind, was Athrun. He, too, carried a bouquet.

A soft smile played on her lips as she watched him approach.



"Thank you," she said as he knelt before the memorial to lay the flowers.

"It's the least I could do..." he replied, standing up, and they began walking towards the sea.

Cagalli's voice broke the silence.

"How is it out there? Have things started to settle down at all?"

"No, there's still confusion everywhere. Eurasia and its surroundings, PLANT too..."

Blue Cosmos, silent since Michael's disappearance, was now stirring again, galvanized by the actions of the Accords.

With its capital besieged, Eurasia's foundations had further weakened, precipitating a precarious shift in the global balance of power.

Meanwhile, the PLANTs were in upheaval, deeply divided over the severe punishment meted out to this rebellion's participants, with a growing chorus of voices rising in sympathy.

Regarding the Accords, too, some called them mere butchers, while others lamented them as true saviors.

Athrun's tone was laced with bitterness as he revealed, "There are still those obsessively searching for them."

It was about Kira and Lacus, who had vanished without a trace after the battle on the moon. Officially, they were listed as missing in action. But many were unsatisfied with that.

That was how strong people's feelings were in seeking them out.

"Orb has no knowledge of that matter," Cagalli responded with formal detachment.

"Of course, you're right."

Athrun concurred, and the two exchanged a secret smile. But Athrun soon lost his smile.

"No one has the right to force them anymore... but..."

Both Kira and Lacus had given their all, their hearts worn thin by battles they never sought.

As a result, they were in tatters, on the verge of losing even the feelings of caring for each other...

Athrun would never want to drag them back from that.

But...

"From now on, the world will have to manage without them."

A subtle anxiety gnawed at Athrun, shadowing his thoughts as he pondered the future.

Would they be able to somehow handle this chaotic world?

Could they inspire those who relied on Lacus's guidance to find strength in themselves?

Would they be able to stop the warring factions without borrowing Kira's strength?

Could they guide this even more deeply wounded world... to peace?

But Cagalli countered with a confident smile, "We'll find our way through this—I'm sure of it."

Her eyes, unwavering and filled with a gentle resolve, met his.

Athrun gazed into those eyes for a while and nodded.

"You're right."

Gone were the days of angels descending from the heavens to pass judgment.

We had to move forward step by step as humans. Even if the steps were small.

Side by side, they stood, their gazes lost in the tranquil expanse of Orb's sea, the South Sea, glittering like a jewel under the expansive sky.

Hesitating, driven by a sudden impulse, Athrun asked, "Cagalli... have you ever thought about giving up?"

"Sure, I think about it. All the time."

Cagalli replied with a laugh, bright and clear, "But my heart belongs to Orb, you know. It's just the way it is."

And he found her like that, dear.

He wished to protect the future those golden eyes gazed upon.

Athrun gazed intently at her profile and turned towards the sea.

Someday, surely, we will see that day... A world where no one loses their loved ones to conflict, nor takes from others, where guns are forever silenced, and children never know the horrors of war.

With steadfast belief in that day's arrival, they continued their walk.

You live within the depths of my soul.

Do I echo within yours?

Your joy blossoms within me as my strength takes root within you.

It's unclear if it's light or dark; the future is an unseen entity.

Yet hand in hand, even unseen, we step forward.

With fingers laced and palms pressed tight to strengthen our bond, let us learn more about one other.

I shall reveal to you the myriad wonders,

the tender secrets nestled in my heart. In turn, unveil to me the countless treasures hidden in yours...

Afterword

The movie's out, and the response has been way beyond what I expected. It's a bit overwhelming, but I'm super excited about it.

I mean, I knew it was going to be captivating from the moment I saw the plot! (laughs)

The plot had it all, you know? Like the scene where Mu gets blasted by a beam again with the Akatsuki or the Justice Burn! scene with the Z'Gok. How fun is that?

I took the original plot and wove it into a story, used it as a starting point. Then I sat down with Director Fukuda and the producers, we talked it over, rewrote it, the director put his touch on it, we talked some more, sometimes I tweaked it again... We kept going through that process until the script was done.

So now, no one can even remember which lines I wrote, which ones Morosawa originally wrote, or which ones are the directors. Just the other day, I mistakenly said the line "I don't love you because I need you. I need you because I love you" was Morosawa's. My apologies, it looks like that one was mine... probably.

And even after we started production with that script, there were still lots of changes.

I thought we wouldn't be able to fit in much comedic elements due to the runtime, but the direction played around with it and snuck in some hilarious scenes here and there. Seeing how it turned out on screen, I was impressed. It's different from making people laugh through narration in a novel.

And Albert's quirkiness was totally thanks to the voice actor's skills. The fast-talking was in the script, but every time Fukuyama spoke in the recording booth, I had to try so hard to suppress my laughter.

Cagalli's remote was the director's idea. It was the ultimate highlight!

Getting to see that whole process this time around was an amazing experience.

So many hands go into creating a single work. It's incredible.

Oh, and I've always loved the speedy scene transitions in anime and wanted to try it out sometime. That dream came true.

In novels, you usually keep the perspective fixed on one character, so you can't switch it up that often. I mean, the SEED series does have a lot of perspective shifts, but do it too much and it starts to feel choppy.

While writing the script, I was like, "This pacing feels awesome!" But when it came time to write the novel version, I was like, "Who the hell put all these scene changes in?! Oh, right, it was me!"

The novel version (Part 1) and the movie's bonus novel have been well-received so far, which is a relief.

For the okonomiyaki recipe in the bonus novel, I referenced how Gaku Hamada was making it in VIVANT. Thanks, Gaku Hamada. Nagoya folks eat tama-sen, not okonomiyaki, by the way.

Moonlight Valkyrie had way too much of an Agnes vibe going on, so I tried to balance it out by including as many scenes with Shinn, Luna, and Rey as I could. But it's still a bit much.

This also serves as a prequel to the "Freedom Heist Incident" that gets touched on a bit in the movie. There's a chance that might get adapted, too, so I tried not to include too many spoilers in the main novel version. I hope it happens... I wanna see it too.

As for the bonus novel, I'm hoping there'll be a chance to release it somewhere else at some point. (gives a side-eye)

I finally got to see the movie in theaters recently, and I was so moved that I almost got swept away by the relentless visuals. But unlike at the preview screening, I made sure to check that my name was in the credits.

During the preview, I was laser-focused on the ending scene so I could write the novel's ending. I mean, it's the scene where Murrue jumps into Mu's arms. Of course I'm gonna be looking at that.

I love that scene too, but Lacus' scenes really stood out this time. My favorite is the one where Lacus' poised figure is silhouetted against the Freedom after it combines with the Proud Defender. That winged suit looks absolutely stunning on screen.

But more than anything, I was thrilled to see all the fans leaving the theater with smiles on their faces. I'm so glad there are so many people who enjoyed it. An experience like this is a once-in-a-lifetime thing.

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the director, the staff, Ogasawara, who worked on the novel version with me, the editors, and everyone who enjoyed the movie for giving me this precious experience.