

小説

機動戦士ガンダム

閃光のハサウェイ

〈上〉

新装版

Hathaway

Mobile Suit GUNDA

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Zeonic|Scanlations

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue		
Chapter.01	Gigi	006
Chapter.02	Lounge.....	012
Chapter.03	Kenneth.....	016
Chapter.04	Hijack.....	019
Chapter.05	Hathaway	024
Chapter.06	Landing Grand	031
Chapter.07	With Gigi.....	037
Chapter.08	Hotel.....	043
Chapter.09	Contact	050
Chapter.10	Hunter	053
Chapter.11	Minovsky Flight	061
Chapter.12	Be Frightened.....	069
Chapter.13	Commander	077
Chapter.14	Young Pilot	083
Chapter.15	Circe Unit.....	087
Chapter.16	Runaway.....	096
Chapter.17	On the Ocean	103
Chapter.18	Dining Room.....	108
Chapter.19	Lodoicea	112
Chapter.20	Pathway.....	116
Chapter.21	Take Off.....	119
Chapter.22	Showdown.....	124

Prologue

Who was it who wrote that time leads us to forget?

The only ones who have dared to utter such words have been either optimists, or those who have glimpsed the truth and are familiar with utter despair. In either case, one would do well to remember that words are both vague and multifaceted, and so rarely tell us the truth. Nevertheless, the story which I am about to spin in those same words is one that has been told throughout countless eras, and one which deserves to be handed down until the end of time.

The sadness of our mortal world. The pitiful sorrow born out of the very existence of said world... These things which so assail us are born of something as frightfully simple as our own existence. Constructed in a way that means that we continually let slip the happiness that we so crave, we humans are creatures of sorrow. And when one considers that the only freedom granted to the protagonists of this story is the wild hope that there may come a day when they are freed from that cycle, one is bound to cry out with shock and sorrow that this is the tragedy of mankind.

Countless generations have passed since the dawn of the Universal Century, and mankind has expanded his territory to colonies between the Earth and Moon... Initially, it was believed that this increase in living space might open up the opportunity to save the Earth, which had long since been polluted by mankind's hand, or at very least the chance to extend its lifespan. Yet though the new territory represented only a pathetically tiny portion of the vastness of space, mankind's continuing adherence to petty divisions and classifications meant that wars of class, race, and territory did not come to an end. Rather, it appeared that the expansion of territory only fanned the flames of conflict between those of different classes, different regions, and different lines of thought.

Naturally, a shared awareness of the critical lack of living space in the latter years of the Earth Age meant that mankind had temporarily ceased its conflicts. And for a while, at least, there had been an era of frustration where the various disparate elements of mankind had managed to coexist. However, once space had been colonized, mankind appeared to recall its natural instinct toward oppressive conflict and war. One could well say that the expansion of territory only provided seeds for new conflict. When mankind took to the stars, he may have discovered yet more space in which to act out his primal instincts.

History, it appears, has run backwards...

It may be the case that mankind is destined for such folly.

There is a theory that when frustrations peak, we naturally create enemies, and that acts of terrorism which serve to fan the flames of aggression are simply the natural outcome of such a situation. It is easy to decry such reactions as irrational, but such words cannot quell the tide of human frustration.

For words are so often lost in the void of space...

Chapter.01

Gigi

"Would you excuse me..."

"Oh, of course."

Captain Kenneth Sleg yawned three times before standing and addressing the early twenty-something year old young man opposite the open seat between them. The young man, who had been reading on his laptop, gave Kenneth a carefree smile and stood the laptop on his lap to let him pass.

Although it was zero gravity, merely floating over to your seat would earn you the ire from other passengers. Half of the passengers on today's shuttle flight aboard the Haunzen were a bunch of the privileged class. If he performed a spacewalk in front of them, they could very easily put a stop to any promotion chances, or much worse. He was grateful, though, that there weren't any government officials with military affiliations, but the result would be all the same.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kenneth caught one of the Earth Federation cabinet ministers engaging in the usual flattery towards a young girl that everyone had been talking about as he moved to the restroom at the rear of the cabin.

The flight manifest of Flight 356 was about forty passengers with a crew of five. It was an exclusive flight; you either have to pay a hefty fee or have a slew of connections for the privilege of boarding. So, as long as you're on this ship, whether it be to Earth or a space colony somewhere, you were exempt from the arrival and departure checks. The very fact of being aboard the ship guaranteed ones credentials. Furthermore, aside from military aircraft, this flight is the only one capable of landing directly on Earth.

The youth next to Kenneth gave an unabashed impression of coming from a family whose social standing must have connections; which was in keeping with the Haunzen. With a frivolous sense, he questioned the young girl in her late teens who was being flattered by one of the cabinet ministers. There was something vulgar about her, something which made it impossible to categorize her as a passenger of class.

"Gigi Andalusia, was it?" Having finished his business, he stood in front of the mirror, thinking back to the name of the girl who was whispered amongst the gentlemen passengers.

As he was readjusting the front of his suit, he thought there was a sort of coolness to the style of clothing, though he didn't care much for the look. As for his own good looks, however, he didn't mind at all.

"Had the Kimberley Task Force of handled things properly, I wouldn't have had to come here in such a hurry."

Those were his thoughts on the matter at least.

Following Char's Rebellion, the Earth Federation Space Forces had not been involved in any real combat and were even bereft of potential enemies. Yet in spite of that, Kenneth had been meaninglessly engaged in the ongoing development of new model mobile suits. Although his fighting spirit surged at the thought of the possibility of real combat again, his assignment on Earth was not something that appealed to him.

That said, he was still a young man.

With the activities of an anti-Federation government organization calling themselves Mafty Erin intensifying on Earth, the Kimberley Task Force was charged with moping them up. Ten days ago, the new model mobile suit Penelope along with its test pilot, who happened to be Kenneth's subordinate, Lane Aim, were dispatched.

Immediately following that, however, Kenneth himself had received orders to assume command of that task force as a successor. That was the day before yesterday. Which was why Kenneth, having made use of military privileges, was able to board the Haunzen, the quickest flight to Earth.

Being on the flight in the company of the cabinet members, however, merely served to confirm what a bunch of utter low-lives they really were.

"Even if I'm killed by Mafty Erin, I'm not in any position to complain..." is what he had come to think.

As he adjusted his tie, he wondered why it was that Julie felt she needed to part ways with such a dashing man. It hadn't quite been two years since their divorce.

Leaving the bathroom, he peeked into the lounge.

Three couples, the cabinet ministers with their spouses, sat around chit-chatting with drinks in hand. Apart from them, another three high-level officials formed a lonely tableau as they played video games. With that, he returned to the cabin.

"?!"

The cabinet minister who was chatting with Gigi Andalusia was nowhere to be seen.

Kenneth floated up to the side of the seat belonging to the infamous young woman seated in the row before his. He glanced down at her knees. On the laptop's display appeared to be moving pictures.

The young woman's long, transparent blond hair covered her shoulders, her eyelashes glinted with the same transparent radiance. As a Caucasian, her face may not have elicited much fanfare, but her skin on the other hand, with its Oriental smoothness and Latino coloring, only served to reinforce the transparency of her blond hair.

Despite being a typical soldier, Kenneth was not as rigid and austere as his appearance would suggest. Nonetheless, the ease that he found in talking with the young woman was in part due to the air of enjoying the company of men she imparted. This also accounted for why men aboard the flight, despite the disapproving looks from their spouses, were able to come over and speak to her one after the other.

"Do you mind?"

"No, not at all."

Although she didn't give off a feeling of being surprised, her look said otherwise as she was addressed by an unexpected male voice. It all seemed rather elegant, the rate at which she raised her face won him over, almost catching him by surprise.

"I appreciate it. I can't seem to find anyone to talk with."

As soon as he uttered the words, he spared himself a wry smile.

"She is just a kid after all, isn't she?" He thought to himself.

His embarrassment must have been evident on his face. The girl appeared to have laughed, but in the blink of an eye her face resumed its normal repose as she looked him in the eye. To Kenneth, it felt as though this was the first time he'd ever been stared directly in the eyes by a woman when they met for the first time.

To top it all off, the ever-changing, flickering range of expressions on the girl's face struck him.

"Would you mind if I sat here?"

All the passengers in the cabin were aware that the girl was the only one sitting in the row of three seats.

"If it's going to be long, I'd rather not..." she said bluntly.

"So it's alright if I make it short?"

"Well, let's say maybe, shall we?"

He found nothing remotely unpleasant about being told so in that manner.

"As you wish, I'll keep this short. My name is Kenneth Sleg. I'm with the Federation Forces." He introduced himself as he floated over and into the seat.

"My guess would be that you're a Captain, yes?"

Without any inclination of closing the laptop, she followed his movement with her translucent blue gaze.

"What're you reading?"

"A picture book. Here, have a look."

She turned the laptop towards him. Sleek movement of beautiful computer graphics filled the screen. Two rabbits chased a butterfly in an animated fairytale. Several lines of text were displayed beneath the images.

"That story is quite popular, isn't it?"

"It's a classic. I can't say if it's very popular, but if I like something, I'll watch it no matter what."

"Hmph."

Before Kenneth could express his admiration, she switched to the next screen.

"Look, it's cute, isn't it?"

The screen was alive with animation. A rabbit and fox bounced their way around and around the border while in the center, a rabbit caught in a cage of petals was crying a fountain of tears.

"There's quite a bit going on, that's for sure."

As Kenneth was staring at the screen, the young woman shifted to a completely different subject.

"Seeing that you're a soldier, there's something I'd like to ask you. What do you think of Mafty Navue Erin?"



"Ah, well..."

Taken completely off guard, Kenneth briefly glanced into the young woman's eyes. The way she had shifted gears in mid-sentence and spoke what was on her mind revealed an inner strength to her that was completely at odds with her outward appearance.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked, flustered.

Though he had every intention of asking in a calm and composed manner, that name and its connection to his current reasons for heading Earth side only served to expose his agitation.

"No reason in particular. I was just wondering. I mean, here we are conversing with one another much like passing strangers do..."

She laughed after using such an awkward analogy. As far as her bluntness was concerned, nothing changed. He found her lack of equivocating refreshing.

"What's so funny?"

"Well, I mean, you are heading to earth to wipe out Mafty, aren't you?"

Kenneth couldn't help but feel that there was something unusual about the young woman's insight into his position as she engaged him with her amusing verbal jousting.

"You're..."

"My name is Gigi Andalusia. I'd prefer it if you addressed me properly..."

"Ah, my apologies. It's not my intention to question your suppositions regarding me."

In the face of his apparent discomfort, Gigi maintained her faint smile. She did have a small measure of sympathy for his apparent bewilderment.

"Don't laugh at me. I accept that I am an individual who can be overly emotional but, to have my shortcomings so easily pointed out by someone as young as you is, well, a considerable shock to me."

During his lengthy explanation, the girl seemed to have forgotten all about him, going back to staring at the pictures dancing across her laptop's screen. Yet the moment he finished, she glanced back up at him.

"So, what about the answer to my question?" she pressed.

Sensing the meaning in the glint of her eye, he blurted out a reply unbecoming of a man his age.

"Mafty... he's, well, a dangerous individual. He's someone who presents a threat to the order of the Earth Federation government."

"Such a formal answer. The world seems to be quite fond of Mafty. There's a plethora of special programs on TV with people wondering 'is Mafty Amuro Ray' or 'is he Char Aznable come back to life' or whether he'll do everything that people wish for."

Forgetting the computer, Gigi stretched her upper body, letting the unit float away. Kenneth reached out a hand and stopped the free-floating device and pushed it back towards her.

"Oh, thank you."

Pulling the laptop back onto her knees, she appeared to forget all about her question and started staring back at the pictures on the screen again.

"That's overkill, don't you think? After assassinating all the important figures in the Federation government, a policy should be enacted to cleanse the Earth

by making everyone leave it. That's Mafty's declaration. Don't you think it's rather childish?"

Kenneth spoke with a newfound confidence, one he thought sufficient to stand up to the young girl's words; however, her response was simple: "Sometimes a child's logic is the correct one."

"You haven't given this enough thought. The world simply doesn't work as easily as that."

"Right... I understand adult logic, but... take high society for example. Are they really so high and mighty?"

As if to bring an end to their discussion, Gigi leaned in close to him, her voice almost in a whisper.

"I see your point... There's corruption, favoritism as well... But one can't really maintain a spotless integrity now can they? "

"What are your thoughts on that?"

He could see the shine in her eyes. Yet, almost as a reflex, he let the words slip out.

"Grease the wheels of society, perhaps?"

"Nothing but riddles from you, as usual."

Kenneth had no reply to the young girl and her sudden about face of anger. He was keenly aware that he had offered nothing but trite arguments for their little exchange.

"However, there is something I'd like to correct you on. Although you say they've appeared to assassinate key government officials, would using mobile suits be considered assassination?"

"Not at all... it's an indiscriminate attack."

"I beg to differ. It's not indiscriminate if they're targeting only Earth Federation cabinet members and those who are in important positions. Mafty has clearly identified their targets, haven't they?"

Kenneth had nothing, not even a whimper.

Again, Gigi placed the laptop on her lap with both hands and changed the display.

Kenneth took this to mean Gigi's "few minutes" were over.

"Sorry, but although my time seems to be up, I wanted to ask you of your opinion on them."

"I think it's cute." She said, tilting her face sidewise before immediately looking back at the screen.

"You're saying that the organization calling itself Mafty Navue Erin is cute?"

"Yes, it's a blend of Sudanese, Arabic and Old Irish. It's not a name at all, it's an awful hodgepodge." She said as if reciting it, her eyes never leaving the display.

"Hahaha, I suppose so..."

Although he felt like asking her a little more about what she thought, he sensed her aversion and floated away from the seat. He floated past the young man with a studious look to him and as he slid back into his own seat he glanced over at him.

"What's with this guy?" he thought, "Is he a hunchback or something?"

Chapter.02

Lounge

It was time for the last meal of the flight, as the full vestige of the Earth was no longer visible from the windows of the shuttle.

As the commotion came to an end, Gigi Andalusia floated her way towards the lounge at the rear of the cabin.

“...”

The young man seated next to Kenneth glanced over at the girl as if to make eye contact but didn't feign as much interest in her as the other men did.

“...?”

That fact alone likely attracted her attention. She turned back towards the boy as she approached the hatch connecting the cabin to the lounge, much to the chagrin of many of the cabinet member's spouses.

The wives of the older men followed her with their scornful, prying eyes.

“Those are adults for you...”

As Gigi looked at the young man, she swallowed her urge to spit at them for their crude and opinionated glares.

Gigi was well aware of her position. The truth was, she felt intense gratification in having herself in this kind of situation.

“Your husbands will all come to the lounge anyways...” she thought as she floated towards the computer game area inside the lounge. It didn't take long for the cabin to become just as she had imagined.

One by one, the Federation cabinet ministers left their seats and headed for the lounge. Their wives, meanwhile, quietly gathered in the center of the cabin and boisterously gossiped about Gigi.

The wives usually weren't entertained by such impolite subject matter, however, they needed an outlet for frustrations, having become worn out from being crammed into a sealed room under zero gravity.

“Isn't that girl's name a little lewd? I just wonder...”

“You know, I've thought that for a long time. The issue of why men chase after young and immature girls is one of those eternal philosophical problems.”

“Are they trying to be modest just because we're around? I wonder about their nerves, you know? I hope I'm not being rude in saying so.”

“Maybe it's because we're here or maybe they're just getting old and don't know what they're doing anymore, you know?”

The young man sitting in the aisle seat across from Kenneth quietly got up. He felt it was best to leave his seat for a little while, having stifled his laughter over the wives conversations.

He was wearing a gray jacket with a checkered pattern shirt in the same color, a loosely tied necktie with a pair of nicely matching, well-worn jeans. Amongst those in the cabin, however, he seemed a bit underdressed. Nonetheless, his refined facial features made him look appropriately fitting.

Due to the dark green velvet walls, the dim lighting of the lounge created a calm, elegant atmosphere. The ceiling, with its faux wooden beam accents, made it feel as though it wasn't a zero gravity environment.

"How extravagant," he said sighing as he went up to the counter to the left of the entrance.

"What can I get for you?" asked the bartender 30-something year old bartender in a businesslike tone as he sized up the young man's age.

"Would you clock me if I told you warm milk?"

"No, not at all. Is that what you really want?"

"No, my bad. I'll take a Wild Turkey on the rocks."

"Coming right up," replied the bartender, giving him a faint smile. Though primarily the ship's purser, he was working behind the counter this time.

"Well, well now. Her companions are all the Federation government cabinet ministers."

The young boy smirked from the corner of the lounge as he looked over at Gigi surrounded by the cabinet ministers. One sixth of the chief members of the Earth Federation Government Central Assembly were gathered over there. Although there were several civilians on board the Haunzen as well, seeing the cabinet ministers heading for the lounge made them hesitate in following suit.

"So then, Miss Gigi... Your views are anti-Federation?"

"Well, I wonder about that. They're just a typical girl's view. Still, they're not all thoughtless ones. Public consensus does at times reflect the truth. This is a historical fact."

The smile on the young man's slender face never vanished as he picked up on Gigi's naive logic.

The bartender placed a glass with a straw in front of the young man.

"Thanks. I'm guessing working on a ship like this is difficult, huh?"

"You betcha. There's too many bigshots."

"I feel ya there. No time to relax." The young man said sympathetically as he took a drink from the glass with the straw.

"Still, it's nice to be able to be on board, isn't it?" asked the bartender as he compared the boy and Gigi's gathering.

"I wouldn't say that. I can't exactly boast about it to others. I'm only on here because of my father."

The boy appeared to be telling the truth.

"Still, that's something. You get to go down to Earth."

"You're right about that. I'm in a good position, so I'm not about to start complaining."

Eventually, the bartender became more talkative with the young man as they were closer in age.

"So why are you going down to Earth?"

"I'm a candidate for a biological observer position. But, I'm still in training..."

"That's quite a privileged job! You can walk around on Earth with no fear or hesitation!"

"You're right. It's quite the privilege." replied the boy, giving him a wide grin. His smile was warm and made people like him.

The vacant seats around Gigi and the cabinet ministers gathering are accentuated by scenes of the ocean and forests, protected onto scenic displays on both walls of the lounge.

"So the Earth Federation government is adamant about exterminating Mafty? Are they blissfully unaware of the claims the mass media is making that they're completely wrong?"

Gigi's sharp voice got the young man and the bartender to look over at the group again.

"Well, he is the mastermind of a group of assassins. The Federation government's stance is that he is subject to capital punishment. You are aware of this, are you not?"

"So then why is the mass media heralding what Mafty is doing?"

"That is nothing but a lie, Miss Gigi. It's fabrication by some underground press and tabloid publications."

"Are you sure about that? Even if that were the case, the news tickers, the graffiti, they're all saying, 'Mafty Erin is the Messiah!', 'The Second Coming of a Newtype', and 'Mafty will purify the Federation government!'. It's all over the colonies and the Moon."

"Well then, do we, as respectable cabinet members of the Earth Federation government, look like such bad people that we need to be killed like that?"

"And don't you think that maybe some of those who support Mafty are wrong?" asked one of the cabinet members as he grew serious amidst Gigi's earnest protests. Although joking, he was trying to get Gigi to look at the nature of the fact.

"I'm asking because I don't know. You see?" Gigi asked, placing her hand on another cabinet member's knee.

"Take a look at that..." the bartender whispered to the young man.

"How could a girl like that get on this ship?" he asked in response.

"Probably somebody's mistress."

"At her age? She's not even twenty."

"Eh, probably. But, when you work on this ship it's not strange to meet someone like that."

"Even when she's not from a family worthy of boarding this ship?"

"You're right on the money. Oh, but please, don't tell anyone I told you this."

"You are the Purser after all. It's a hard job."

The young man laughed intentionally so the others wouldn't think they were talking secretly. The bartender went along and faked a laugh.

Afterwards, the two exchanged small talk as another member of the staff entered the lounge from the hatch in the back.

"Mace Flower sure takes her time in the cockpit." the bartender whispered to the young man after seeing the blond girl come in.

"So you finally decided to make your way down to the lounge?"

The blond girl flashed the young man a perfect smile with her full lips.

"Well, unlike ordinary people, a person of social standing just can't relax in a place like this."

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

"But, that's not what it looks like," the blond girl complimented, took a drink of water, and said,

"It's about that time," the bartender nodded, looking down at the clock beneath the counter.

Chapter.03

Kenneth

"Are you awake, sir?"

Mace Flower came around Kenneth Sleg's seat and handed him a hot towel with tongs.

"Oh, thank you."

"Would you like a snack or a beverage?"

Kenneth wiped off his face with the towel, "How about a bourbon on the rocks to wake me up?"

Giving him a faint smile, the blond turned around and floated into the lounge.

Kenneth picked up and folded the blanket clumped at the bottom of his feet. He jammed it into the space under the seat in front of him and took a moment to appreciate the earth's vivid blue sky and clouds through the window.

"What's the best word to describe it...? Treacherous?"

Just as Kenneth was starting to think about Gigi,

"Here you are, sir."

Mace brought him a glass with a straw in it. Kenneth thanked her, and as he was handed over the glass, he started to snicker.

"What's so funny, sir?"

Mace asked while giving a quick glance at his chest.

"Oh, it's nothing. I was just getting ahead of myself for a moment."

Kenneth had the cold hearted veteran's face in moments like this.

"Is that so?"

"I just realized I do like girls like you after all."

"Whatever do you mean by that?"

"Well I will not go too much into details for you might mistake me for a racist or some sort, but I came to a conclusion that every blond is different."

"I see. That is definitely complex."

The blond shrugged her shoulders in an animated fashion and gave him a faint smile with her lips glowing in red.

Kenneth's ex-wife was one controlling blond white woman: she would force him to say I love you constantly and never forgot to remind him that attending his child's sports meets was a father's undebatable responsibility. There were many occasions where he just wanted to tell her off and say he was a pilot before anything else. They ended up getting divorced in the end, but Kenneth still liked blond white women nonetheless.

Even though it may seem like it, it was not about race. It may exist in the core of the concept, but for Kenneth, it was more than just about a racial prejudice; it was more of a personal preference for him.

The reason why Kenneth was able to like a girl named Gigi Andalusia was not because of sentimental reasons but her existence itself. It was both rational and intuitive at the same time; it was not physiological.

He felt pressured just by knowing that she exists.

If it was not a power of presence, what else would it be?

What's more, Gigi's presence was so powerful, he would find it easier to put up with the below-average woman who would demand him to tell her I love you a million times.

"Hmm, talking about feelings is hard you know. That's because it's not conceptual. I mean, I've met all kinds of people and worked many different jobs. But what I just felt was I like girls of your proportions. That how I am feeling right now."

"Is that how a man entering middle-age flirts?"

"I don't mind if I came out that way, Miss..."

Kenneth held his breath, feeling a little embarrassed about not knowing the blonde's name. She had a name tag on her chest when she was wearing a stewardess uniform, but she no longer had it now that she was serving as a flight companion.

"...Mace Flower."

"Flour?"

"No, F-l-o-w-e-r."

"Where are you from?"

"You sound like the police. That's why I don't like working on this ship. Do you visit Earth often?"

"Not so much. This time, I am on vacation half the time. Can't you take a break after this?"

Kenneth lied.

"Why, are you asking me out? I will be doing some gardening since I have a room in Hong Kong, which is our landing point."

"Well, that's rich. Which side are you from?"

"I hate space... I seem to feel weak magnetism like gravity, and I prefer that way."

Whatever her words meant, Kenneth was in a moment of relief for he liked her more than Gigi.

"I would like to see you again, if you have some time."

"Sure... Is it hard getting old?"

Mace switched subjects while leaning against a seat, but Kenneth didn't mind. She needed some time to think as well.

He took a sip out of the straw and answered, "Not really".

"Why is that?"

"Well, for one thing, I no longer get nervous when talking to a beautiful girl like you. When I was a teenager, I would choke, my chest was always tingling, and wasn't able to do anything... This is certainly better than that. "

"But I would rather you got nervous."

"That's because you still haven't forgot about how you felt when you first fell in love. But you already know that is not realistic."

"Hahaha. You saw right through me, sir."

Mace gave Kenneth the I'll take off look as the young man came out of the hatch and she passed by him.

"I am sorry to disturb you."

The young man talked to Kenneth for the first time.

"You're fine."

Kenneth had no idea who it was, but he kept on sipping on the bourbon and looking out at the Earth drifting beneath the window.

As soon as the young man next to him started gazing at his laptop, all of the passengers in the lounge started moving into the cabin.

Kenneth stared at Gigi Andalusia over the seat as she was escorted into the cabin by the gentlemen.

"I almost want to agree with Mafty after seeing those cocky cabinet ministers."

Kenneth, again, thought of the relationship between the cabinet ministers and Mafty. He is a soldier because he knows adults can't escape from regulations and restrictions of organizations.

"I would have befriended Mafty if I ever chose to live like them."

He could feel that way probably because he was somewhat proud of who he was.

However, normally, people are barely getting by and once they find a way to make the ends meet, they cling to it for the rest of their lives.

Normal people aren't usually able to have any connections with the Earth Federation Government's cabinet ministers or high officials, and they are too busy living thier lives to think about some vague entity like the government.

The same goes for Kenneth. He is only in the army because he like the mobile suits. He gets to make a living doing what he likes and as a result, he doesn't hate his life for what it is.

The humanoid weapon known as a mobile suit is the one thing he can truly have feelings toward. So much so that while he was fighting on the frontline as a pilot inside of a mobile suit during "Char's Rebellion," he felt something akin to an ecstasy.

Mobile suits were always as honest to him as he was to them. They were the one thing that never betrayed him. That is why Kenneth was able to survive to this day.

"I was being overly sentimental thanks to Gigi, but women have been nothing but an obstruction in my life." he thought..

Chapter.04

Hijack

The Haunzen slowed its orbit, decelerating so fast it seemed to jump into the upper atmosphere. The shuttle slowly made its decent into the thick atmosphere.

It was not as rough as flight in the days before the space colony era, but all the same, the passengers were strapped into their seats and had to endure a fair amount of vibration.

Humans who live in space, Spacenoids, who were used to space flight, hated flying through atmosphere. Their comfort for space flight only increased their anxiety for flying through air.

"It's because that thing they call 'air' is flowing. It's much worse than in space."

That was Kenneth's, and the other pro pilots', evaluation of flight on Earth.

As long as there were no obstacles, the uniform vacuum of space promised stable flight. To space pilots, that was the central principle of spaceflight.

Kenneth squinted at the blue sea the thousand meters below. He guessed at the origin of the vibration in the fuselage.

If he didn't think of anything the vibration would just continue to gnaw at him until it was unbearable.

"... ?"

"It looks like two strange objects are flying," he thought. They slid from below, flowing upward.

"Looks like an older craft."

That was all he had in mind the moment something with the same silhouette cut across his window. Kenneth had an uneasy feeling.

"Oh no!"

A slightly hysterical voice rose from ahead. It was that girl, Gigi's voice.

"What?"

The young man asked from across an empty seat. That was the second time the young man called to Kenneth. He tightly gripped the computer terminal with both hands.

"Huh?"

Kenneth didn't understand the meaning of his question, or what Gigi said.

DWAA!

Suddenly a violent vibration shook the cabin.

"Aaiiee!"

"Ooh!?"

The adults screamed.

As Kenneth's seatbelt dug into his thigh he saw one of the ministers wives body crash into the ceiling and fall back down.

"A shockwave!?"

Kenneth guessed that the Haunzen was rocked by the supersonic wave created by the unknown craft racing by. The vibration subsided but there was no sign that things would quiet down.

"What!?"

"Stand fast!"

As voices rose from the center of the cabin, Kenneth tried to see what was happening outside. He couldn't spot any aircraft out of the narrow ship-side windows.

"It looked like a Base Jabber Type frame, but..."

"Where is that ship from?"

The young man in the next seat asked.

"I don't know but, here it comes!"

Another ship swept by from the front-diagonal to the back; there was nothing written on its flat Base Jabber type hull that would indicate where it was from. The thickly painted dark green fuselage was covered in rust. The rough treatment of the craft was obvious—the front glass looked like it had never been cleaned.

"Shockwave incoming!"

Kenneth shouted into the cabin.

"What!?"

"It was a near miss, but it looks like they noticed and are coming back."

"They noticed?"

The young man moved to the seat next to Kenneth.

"Purser, what is the situation!"

Kenneth turned to the back of the cabin, shifting to a military tone.

"Uh..."

The young man leaned forward to the window and saw part of a ship disappear to the rear of the Haunzen.

CRASH! CRAAASH!

"It appears to be pursuing the Haunzen."

Kenneth stood up.

"What's wrong?"

Without answering, Kenneth left for the passage.

As the Haunzen was tossed by the shockwave—up and down, left and right—Kenneth stretched out both arms, grabbed a seat, and braced himself.

Another passenger's body, a cabinet minister, bounced off the ceiling.

"Hold that lady down!"

Kenneth's order was drowned out by the screams of middle-aged women. The lady's body that had crashed into the ceiling floated up, and crashed down again.

"Purser! Get into the cockpit!"

"Captain Kenneth!"

The young bartender exited the hatch from the lounge, trying to gain control, when suddenly he grabbed the intercom on the wall.

CRASH!

There was another crash, but Kenneth held onto to the seat and stopped himself from flying—the product of his considerable military training.

The purser, on the other hand, crashed into the ceiling, ripping the intercom cord out of the wall.

“Ooahh!”

His voice, a mixture of a scream and a moan, filled the cabin.

“Where is that craft from?”

The young man slid into the seat next to Kenneth, looked out the window, and caught a glance of the wing of the unknown ship before it once again hid behind the Haunzen.

“It’s a hijacking. It’s not clear what their intention is yet, but they are not trying to shoot us down. Relax.”

An announcement from the captain of the Haunzen played, then stopped.

“...?”

The young man made an enigmatic expression and saw the purser stand up. He watched the blond girl, stiff faced, rush into the passage with a first-aid kit to help the woman who crashed into the ceiling.

“The voice before must have been that girl, Gigi, right?”

The young man looked at Gigi’s seat but he saw nothing there but an empty seatbelt, still fastened.

The young man quickly moved to his original seat and put on his seatbelt. He stared at the blond girl crouching in the corridor attempting to push the lady’s round legs, which were protruding from an armrest, into a seat.

Kenneth, who was by the hatch connecting to the cockpit at the front, couldn’t see it.

“...”

CRASH!

The impact this time was biggest, and what was worse, the longest.

“Aah!”

The blond girl in Hathaway’s field of vision floated high in the wide corridor and then crashed down on the ceiling, and then into the next seat backing. She dropped, landing on her side.

“Ung...!”

The blond girl shrank down and then bounced, seat to seat, toward the young man.

The young man raised his arms and caught the girl’s body, her stomach covering his face.

“Are you okay?!”

“I... I think so...”

“It’s probably better if you sit.”

The young man lowered Mace Flower into the chair to the right of his.

“Oof...”

Mace, gasping deeply, sat in the seat next to his—her hair was all over the place, and her cheeks had lost their color.

“Seatbelt...”

“That’s right. Yeah... Thanks.”

Mace used both hand to check her body to see if there was anything wrong.
"Looks like I just got boxed around."

As Mace rested her head on the seatback, she glanced at the young man, but he did not have time to return the glance.

"What is that...? That sound..."

The young man noticed the sound coming from the rear of the cabin.

A clattering sound of metal on metal seemed to start around the time he laid Mace's body in the seat next to his.

"The rear airlock?"

Mace asked, not even able to raise her head from the seatback.

"Are you kidding me? Those Mafty bastards!"

It was Kenneth.

He leapt through the hatch connected to the cockpit, pistol in hand, and ran toward the lounge.

"Captain, wait."

"Cabinet Minister Einstein! It's Mafty Erin. They're trying to board the ship."

The cabinet minister sitting in a seat behind the young man stopped Kenneth.

"If that is true, throw your gun away. The Haunzen has too many cabinet ministers aboard."

The cabinet minister grabbed Captain Kenneth by the wrist.

As the young man listened to their conversation he took off his seatbelt.

"Mafty is trying to seize the Haunzen, of all things."

Kenneth shook free of the cabinet minister's hand and walked past Hathaway toward the lounge.

"At this high altitude? Ridiculous!"

"Our altitude is below six thousand meters. Besides, this spaceship has a perfect airlock so it has no effect on the cabin. They can get in."

Kenneth's voice moved behind Hathaway.

"That is correct. Captain Kenneth! Put down your gun and throw it here! Slide it across the floor!"

That voice seemed to come from the direction of the lounge.

"Don't look."

The young man said, sensing Mace's head moving next to him.

"It's better not to make eye contact with hijackers."

To the young man's side, he could see Kenneth starting to retreat to the cockpit.

"The gun! Pass it here!"

The voice giving that order was slightly muffled. Next to the young man, Kenneth lowered the gun and slid it across the floor.

The young man, not moving his head, watched the movement of Kenneth's arm and stern face. He tried to predict the hijacker's next move.

The animal-like eye moments of the young man noticed Kenneth backing away.

"... ?"

Kenneth raised his hands and backed away further.

"Well done, Captain."

The hijacker picked up Kenneth's pistol and tucked it under his ammunition belt. He held a submachine gun in his right hand, pointing it at Kenneth.

"Earth Federation cabinet ministers, ladies and gentleman: I am Mafty Erin."

The reason the voice of the man who made that declaration was muffled was shown by what he was wearing on his face: a pumpkin mask, like one you would wear at Halloween.

Chapter.05

Hathaway

The man in the pumpkin mask moved forward, calmly observing the seats on both sides. Kenneth froze, pressing his back up against the hatch that led to the cockpit. The man in the pumpkin mask came up next to the young man and Mace Flower, the blond girl next to him.

A man in a pirate mask with an eye patch followed the pumpkin mask. Walking up to Kenneth, he opened the hatch to the cockpit.

Both men wore leather jackets and jeans. Sturdy weapon belts were fastened around their waists, complete with hand grenades.

The grips of the pistols on their belts shone with a well-worn luster. These were professionals.

"Cabinet ministers and their wives, my apologies, but I believe you already know how you will be treated. Sit now, Captain!"

Forcing Captain Kenneth to sit down on a front row seat in the cabin, the pumpkin mask then stood with his back facing the hatch to the cockpit that the eyepatch man had opened.

"This operation is different from the ones in the past... Our objective is not take your lives at any cost. There are limits to such indiscriminate attacks. At times, we resistance forces need money. This operation is about getting that money. In exchange for your lives, we will acquire military funds from the Earth Federation government. If we succeed, all of you will be released. As for the civilians, they too will be released with the appropriate ransom payment."

The open mouth of the pumpkin mask did not muffle the man's voice too much, but the Halloween mask itself was quite an effective tool of intimidation.

What seemed to be another one of their companions could be heard entering from from the back of the cabin. Hathaway heard the purser groan as he was hit.

It seemed that the witch and the pirate had proceeded to the cockpit and opened the door.

Pumpkin Mask made no move to close the half-open door in front of him, holding it open with his body.

Each man held a lightweight machine gun. This was to avoid damaging the ship in the close confines of the cabin.

"Spare my life! Please!"

A scream rose from among the old women.

"Don't scream! It's annoying!"

Hearing the pumpkin mask's threatening voice, silence overtook the cabin.

"Very good... Now, so long as things remain as they are, all of you will be saved. We are currently organizing an army at a certain location in order to oppose the Earth Federation Forces. To do that, we need money. I ask for your cooperation in order to avoid useless bloodshed... PURSER!"

"Y-Yes. Here is the list."

The purser handed the file panel to the man in the pumpkin mask. Kenneth caught sight of the bruise on his right cheek.

"Hmph...sit down over there."

Taking the file, pumpkin mask sat the purser down on the seat in front of him and glanced at the file.

"Alright, I will now conduct roll call. My apologies to you, esteemed cabinet ministers, but be good little grade school students and raise your hands when called."

Staring out from the holes in his mask, the man looked out over the entire cabin, calling out names from the list.

The wives were also forced to raise their hands and reply.

Only half a year since Mafty's activities had come to the forefront, it was strange for so many members of the Earth Federation government's Central Council of Ministers to be gathered in a single place.

However, that the operations of the Haunzen were even kept from the military was just a cover up. The fact that Mafty had yet to set hands this ship was surely the reason things had ended up this way.

"How did you find out about this ship?"

One cabinet minister spoke up before the man in the pumpkin mask had finished his roll call.

"With the exception of answering our commands, questions aren't necessary!"

"But, you see... we are in a position to inquire about your organization's secrets..."

The calm, overly familiar questioning the old fox of a minister spelled out was more than enough to rub the already-nervous hijacker the wrong way.

"You sure can talk!"

The man in the pumpkin mask let out a short burst from his machine gun, spraying shell casings around the cabin. It happened in an instant.

"Ahhhh!"

One of the wives let out a scream and stood up. Her right cheek and shoulder were stained red with blood. After taking a step into the corridor, she fainted, body crumpling down onto the opposite row of seats.

"What happened?!"

The man with the witch mask jumped out from the cockpit and looked over at the pumpkin mask.

"An execution. Don't mind it. Continue contacting Hong Kong. We must communicate our situation and demands to the Federation government as soon as possible."

"Gotcha."

"Listen up, you dogs! This is the work of Mafty Erin. I warned you not to forget about that! And, don't stand! Roll call isn't over! I'm am prepared to execute another one or two of you!"

Hearing the pumpkin mask's angry voice, the witch mask returned to the cockpit.

The pumpkin mask returned his gaze to the list.

"Gigi Andalusia."

"Here..." A meek reply rose from among the seats.

"You're rather young, aren't you? What are you doing on this ship?"

The man with the pumpkin mask who repeatedly shouted the name of Mafty seemed to stare at Gigi's seat.

"I had a connection."

"I'll ask you about that matter later. Hathaway Noa..."

"Here..."

The young man sitting next to the blonde woman Mace Flower raised his hand in reply.

"Hathaway Noa...? You?"

"Yes..."

The young man met the man's gaze and nodded.

"Hathaway...you mean that Hathaway?"

"It's probably just as you imagined."

The young man replied without hesitation.

"I see... I heard you were the leader of an anti-military and anti-ideology group, but wh...no, never mind. We'll talk later. Right now you'll have to become one of the hostages."

The pumpkin mask's last words were filled with good will.

Yet, nothing in the young man's speech or behavior showed that he had put down his guard. Rather, his entire body was drawn tight, chin drawn in.

Mace Flower did not miss this. Still moaning from the pain in her side, Mace saw the repeated squeezing of the young man's hands, clasped and resting on his knees.

"Tie both of Captain Kenneth's hands." the man in the pumpkin mask ordered to the man with the pirate mask who was guarding the hatch to the lounge.

"Yes, sir!"

The man with the pirate mask replied curtly, in military fashion.

"Twenty-two passengers and five crew members. One dead. Somebody, anybody, will need to remove the corpse. Hop to it."

Nobody in the cabin replied.

"He's one of your own, isn't he? This is the Minister of Health and Care who died. Christ!"

One man raised his hand in response to the pumpkin's demand. It was Hathaway Noa.

"Can you do it?"

"I saw a lot of heavy corpses in the last war..."

"Hmm... I guess the elderly shouldn't be counted. Purser, help Hathaway out."

"R-right!"

The purser stood up with a meek reply.

Hathaway walked around in front of the Purser and looked over at the the seat next to the woman who had fainted.

"You went and did it..."

The seat was stained with blood and brain matter. The minister's head had been blown apart by three shots to the face. Hathaway's brow furrowed.

"I had no choice. That was the situation. You saw," said pumpkin masked man from behind Hathaway.

Hathaway felt the weakness in his reply. Yet, he also knew to avoid rash actions in an uncertain situation with multiple enemies.

"I need a blanket, Purser."

After his curt words to the purser, Hathaway looked over sympathetically at another cabinet minister in the same aisle. His eyes were closed and he was looking up at the ceiling.

"I want to move the minister. Do you mind?" asked Hathaway. He looked over at the man in the pumpkin mask.

"Hey! Minister of Science and Technology! Stand up. You're in the way!"

The minister who had been looking up at the ceiling stood up hurriedly and scaled the seat in front of him. He sat down in the seat next to Gigi.

Hathaway and the purser then began the most repulsive job in that cabin.

As they were finishing up, the minister's wife came to her senses, latched on to the blanketed body and began to bawl.

Hathaway gathered up the extra blankets and handed them over to the purser. He heard the "Tch!" of the man with the pumpkin mask clicking his tongue.

"Madam, it's better if you don't make any sound. You'll be killed."

The purser put the blankets handed to him by Hathaway on the aisle seat behind him.

"If my husband ended up like this, then I want to to be killed too!"

The woman continued to cry and howl, body crumpled in a fetal position.

Just as Hathaway was thinking that the situation took a turn for the worse, the man in the pumpkin mask pushed him from behind.

"Ya know, we really don't like it when people speak figuratively."

The head of the machine gone had already gone up to the woman's head as she spoke. There was a muffled gurgle.

Again, the cabin fell into silence.

"You don't of a bitch!"

Hathaway twisted around and glared up at the man in the mask.

"What?!"

The man drew back reflexively and pointed his gun at Hathaway.

"Why don't you kill those guys who lie about being Mafty?"

The girl's words hit the man in the pumpkin mask and Hathaway like a slap to the face.

"What?"

Right as the masked man let down his guard, Hathaway's uppercut sliced into his chin. The man with the pirate mask behind him in the passage aimed his gun.

Twisting his body, Hathaway threw the blankets the purser had placed on the aisle seat at the man with the pirate mask and rolled into the passageway.

He could hear the sound of the pirate mask's machine gun tearing through the blankets, but that was above him.



In an instant, Hathaway's legs swept his feet out from under him, and, staring up at the gun pointed down at him, Hathaway redirected his body to the right of its aim.

Using two seats at his side as support, Hathaway drove his foot into the pirate man's face and used his heel to crush the right wrist holding the machine gun.

Behind Hathaway, the man in the pumpkin mask was trying to get up, but Captain Kenneth hurled himself on him, falling to the floor while trying to bury the machine gun with his side.

Hathaway tore the gun from the pirate mask's hands, pointing it up over Captain Kenneth and the pumpkin masked man, towards the cockpit hatch.

"Another execution?"

At the same instant that the witch masked man in the cockpit turned, Hathaway pulled the trigger.

Even as the the witch mask's body crumbled, he tried to aim his gun. Hathaway rushed forward, entering the cockpit to knock his machine gun down.

When their eyes last met, there was about two feet between Hathaway and the masked man. Hathaway struck the muzzle of the man's gun with his own. That single action stole his enemy's will to fight.

Hathaway pressed the head of his machine gun firmly into the right side of the man's chest.

"Hands up! Tell your allied ship to withdraw after you've finished taking control of this ship."

"It's already gone," replied the man. His English was broken.

Captain Kenneth, hands still tied, peeked into the cockpit holding a machine gun.

"Is it over?"

"...!"

Hathaway shot a look to the Captain to check the exterior as he removed the gun belt from the man's shoulder.

"I thought so. A Base Jabber. They used something the military disposed of?"

It was the pilot's voice.

"Any others?" asked Hathaway, looking over at Kenneth.

"There were only four. I checked from the cockpit when they docked."

"How?"

"They said so when they boarded. That sent me into a rage."

As he spoke, Kenneth took the fruit knife the purser had brought him and cut the bindings on his wrists.

The copilot drew out some extra cord from the cockpit and tied the hands of the man Hathaway was restraining.

"In-flight inspection. Hurry," commanded the pilot to the purser.

"Well, that went well. What were you planning on doing if you failed?"

"Nothing. It was either fall into the ocean together or I would end up like the Minister of Health and Care."

Feeling the cold sweat trickle down his armpits, Hathaway finally let out a sigh of relief.

"Anyway, let's tie this guy up in the lounge."

Shouldering the machine gun, Kenneth removed the man's eyepatch mask and pushed him into the cabin.

Still thinking that he should at least stay alert until things had settled down, Hathaway followed Kenneth out and watched over as the purser took the civilian passengers and the last hijacker into the lounge.

"Captain! And... Hathaway Noa, was it? I am grateful."

The girl in the front seat, Gigi Andalusia, met Hathaway's eyes and let out a faint smile.

Seeing the girl's smile, Hathaway remembered that things had gone well thanks to her words.

"...?"

Hathaway wondered how the girl knew that the hijackers were just using Mafty Erin's name.

The men shouldn't have given anything away.

Yet, Gigi Andalusia had definitely shouted that those men were not with Mafty. Because of that, things went well... was there some meaning behind it?

This was the problem that bothered Hathaway.

Chapter.06

Landing Grand

The Haunzen must have been damaged when coming into contact with the hijacker's Base Jabber.

When the captain announced a change in location for their landing, the cabin was noisy. But as the strange vibrations continued, the noise died down and a gloomy air of unease permeated the cabin.

"We've contacted Davao. We will land at their airport in twenty minutes."

After countless broadcasts, the captain had finally revealed the landing point.

"Well, well... if it isn't our future base."

Kenneth's words to Hathaway Noa were again filled with the comradery of a shared job well done.

"Why here? It's farther away than Hong Kong..."

"Yeah... something is wrong with the Haunzen's tail fin."

Kenneth checked the belt of his life-jacket while murmuring to Hathaway.

"We can only go forward and are drifting to the right?"

"That's right."

Attempting a wink, Kenneth then closed his eyes, pressing his head up against the back of his seat.

"Noa m'boy..."

One of the cabinet ministers across the aisle was reaching out, poking Hathaway with his elbow.

"Yes...?"

It was Mr. McGovern, the Minister of Culture and Education Promotion.

"You piloted a mobile suit during Char's Rebellion, didn't you? Is the Haunzen okay?"

The minister's wife sitting on his other side was also looking at Hathaway with a worried expression. She did not recognize her husband's great leap in logic.

"I don't know anything about flying machines right now. Especially spaceships... but, we chose Davao, so it should be okay."

"Oh. I guess you're right..."

"I'm also praying to God..."

"Ahh, I see..."

Just as the Captain had said, the Haunzen was heading for the giant new landing strip west of Davao. Bright shouts and cheers rose up from the cabin.

"Well, things are easier for me because we don't have to be on the move anymore."

Kenneth grinned over at Hathaway, removing his life-jacket.

"...This airport, it was this big?"

Hathaway tried to look out the window at the airport, but Kenneth spread his arms over the window, hiding it.

"Actually, this isn't something I can show to civilians."

"But you're also using it for civilian flights, right?"

"Yes we are. Unfortunately, it doesn't just belong to the Federation Forces."

Kenneth laughed, "Besides, you can see all you want after we get off the Haunzen."

The Haunzen had started to head for the airport apron. Kenneth stood up and entered the cockpit.

"Still, now that we've landed in a place like this, what are we going to do next for transportation?!"

"Wasn't this an inconvenient location?"

Disgruntled complaints rose up from among the ministers. It was as if they'd forgotten the nervousness from moments before.

"No, no. This airport is closer to Adelaide. Gentlemen. Let's take the time to enjoy the beautiful tropical air. A flight to Adelaide will be prepared for you immediately."

The Minister of Interior Space Inspection in the front row spoke out with an optimistic address, earning applause from the other ministers. It was like he had already forgotten of his comrade's death.

Although they knew this was brought on by the relief from the threat of the hijackers, it was not a pretty scene for the onlooking civilians.

"How could you..."

Hathaway was stirred up, but he kept his mouth shut and stared out at the passing tropical scenery.

The Haunzen stopped on the apron in front of the airport's control tower. A short while later, a passenger walkway connected to the airlock.

The Mindanao island of Davao was originally an island with airport access. The Earth Federation Forces had appropriated the facilities and was using it as an Air Force garrison base in the South Pacific region.

Hathaway moved to the lounge to check on the tied up prisoners.

"Wow, Noa m'boy, that was a nice bit of action there."

The bruise on the Purser's cheek was getting darker and darker.

"It wasn't nice at all. The aftertaste of violence is bitter...the wounds to the hijackers are pretty bad, right?"

"They won't die. And a doctor should be coming soon."

Hathaway loosened the prisoners' gags in fear that they were biting their tongues, but the trio appeared to be fine.

They still had life in them. They didn't seem to be soldiers, but their eyes shone with the confidence of purposeful action.

"Is your body okay?" asked Hathaway, seeing Mace Flower standing next to the hatch with her clothes unchanged.

"Yea...somehow."

Despite saying this, when Mace tried to reach her arms up to fix her hair, she crouched over in pain. It seemed her injury was bothering her.

The Purser went over to help Mace. Noticing the ministers coming down, he adjusted his collar and waited.

"Well well, Hathaway Noa. Thanks to you, we've been able to land at a friendly base. Thank you."

The ministers and their wives went up to Hathaway one after another, repeating derivatives of the same sentence. A breath of warm, slightly salty air floated off towards the lounge.

To the five senses accustomed to airtight spaces, that foreign air was quite refreshing.

This was especially so to Hathaway, who had gotten used to such air over the years. Breathing deeply in secret, he waved sociably at the ministers and the other guests as they left the ship.

"...?!"

Last among the passengers was Gigi Andalusia.

Their gazes met. Or rather, she stopped and waited until it happened.

"...?"

"Hm Hm..."

Gigi gave a laugh, looking over with her clear blue eyes.

"What...?" asked Hathaway. But the voice wouldn't leave from his throat. In that second of hesitation, Gigi slipped passed and out over the walkway into the dense, tropical island air.

"My new subordinates are coming. Sorry."

Kenneth finally entered the lounge alongside the captain.

"Well, it seems that nothing is amiss..." said Hathaway, looking over the prisoners.

"Yea, it seems it's just like Gigi said. These guys aren't Mafty."

"You mean they're frauds?"

Hathaway pretended not to know. His circumstances made it that way.

"Well, we won't know until we look them up. As a possibility, they might be fragments of the Mafty army gathering at Oenbelli.

"...? Mafty army?"

That news alone was a first to Hathaway. Although he was used to life on the southern islands, it wasn't as if he knew everything that was going on.

"I don't know the details myself."

"Oenbelli?"

"It's a town in northern Australia... Seems there are several thousands of dissidents gathered there."

"Sir! Commander Kimberley is currently leading troops towards Oenbelli."

"Wha-?"

An officer had cut between Hathaway and Kenneth for his report. Just finishing his dash, he stood there gasping for air.

"Sir! Lieutenant JG Ray Lagoid of the Kimberley Forces 5th Landing Squad."

"Ah. I'm Kenneth. I've just been appointed here."

Waiting for Kenneth to return a casual salute, Hathaway asked, "Um...can I get off?"

"Wait for me in the lobby. We need to get a statement from you, and we have to make arrangements for a hotel tonight too."

"Are these the new forces you'll be in charge of, Captain?"

"Mafty hunting is our job. I'm not gonna let the police complain. The Haunzen's operating company, Pan Space, landed here so it's in our jurisdiction.

"Really?"

"We've no choice, right?" said Kenneth clearly. He took a sullen look at the protesting captain.

"Captain! What is it you want us to do?!"

"Oh, Lieutenant. Good work. Take the hijackers calling themselves Mafty into custody. We're going to get them before police or the guys from the Investigation Department.

"Yes sir!"

Hathaway put their conversation behind him and waved over at Mace, who was sitting in last row of lounge seating. He then headed off of the walkway.

The weariness that filled his whole body spread a refreshing warmth over it. Letting this weariness emanate from his body, Kenneth vaguely saw plain-clothed police officers walking briskly towards the Haunzen.

Kenneth's words bothered Hathaway.

It seemed there was a Mafty army in Oenbelli and Kimberley himself was heading there to clean things up. These two bits of information were not something Hathaway had imagined.

"What is this?"

"Ah-, your name!"

As Hathaway exited the walkway, several airport personnel, policemen and officers of the base were waiting for him.

"It's Hathaway Noa..."

"Oh, okay... please wait in the VIP room."

"It's this way."

A female employee with a body like a coiled spring stood out in front of Hathaway. From her appearance, there was no doubt she was from this island.

"Thanks."

The lobby was fortified by gun-wielding soldiers, and the civilian passengers were completely closed off.

The room on the other side of the thick mahogany door they were guided to was a wide space that was almost too gaudy in the way it was decorated.

One side was a giant glass window that faced the runway. A space the size of a gymnasium was lined with vermilion sofas and rosewood tables spaced wide enough so that you couldn't hear the conversations passing over.

"Where would the Chief of the Criminal Police Organization be?"

The question was from a middle-aged man in front of Hathaway. He was wearing glasses and accompanied by two subordinates. It seemed he was talking to his fellow companions in the room.

"Who are you?"

"I am with the Federation Bureau of Investigation. I want to set up a meeting to question the chief..."

"The chief is... ahh, yes. He's over there."

"I appreciate it."

The trio's clothes rippled like water as they ran between the relaxing ministers.

Watching this men unfit for the room move around, Hathaway walked towards the window as if drawn in by the sunlight.

"Well, the hero arrives."

"Hathaway Noa! I'd like to shake your hand. I heard you were a soldier when you were younger?"

"It was a pity that Hiram Messier died, but afterwards, when we were taken hostage, the Earth Federation government launched a huge assault. It wasn't just about my own life. I am grateful."

Having relaxed after being saved, the wives bubbled with conversation. One of them, old enough to be Hathaway's grandmother, embraced him and gave him a kiss.

"No, I just did what was right for any person."

Repeating such cliched phrases, he finally managed to sit down on a window side sofa.

Just as he was thinking Gigi should be around, a companion dressed in a white blouse and a long black skirt that almost touched the floor came to take drink orders. Her head bowed in an oriental style.

"Oh... I'll have a ginger ale."

"Right away."

Just as she went, the chief of the Criminal Police Organization came accompanied by the trio from the Bureau of Investigation.

"I believe haven't introduced myself because we weren't on the same ship. Hathaway Noa. I remember. Your father was Bright Noa of the Space Forces 13th Autonomous Corps and captain of the Ra Cailum. During Char's Rebellion, you piloted one of the military's mobile suit, right?"

"Not at all. I just stole one... I got out of it without being convicted because we won the war..."

"No no, it was quite the feat. I am Hundley Yeoksam of the Criminal Police Organization. I'll need you to accompany me to the investigation room for an interview, but we've been having a bit of a dispute with the Kimberley Forces... I want you to stay in Davao until tomorrow. Is that possible?"

"No problem. I'm going back to Menado, so I'll wait for my flight here."

"Menado... ? In Sulawesi?"

The question came from a man behind the chief wearing glasses.

"Yes, I'm currently training as a biological observer on the Minahassa Peninsula.

"Really... that professor? Amada Mansun?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Prepare a hotel room for him. The Kimberley Forces say they're going to stay here, but who cares. Find a different hotel."

"Of course."

"Our hotel should be prepared by the airline company. This and that are separate things."

"But, for questioning, now is okay too."

"We're done for today. Dismissed, dismissed. Your ladies are waiting for dinner overlooking the southern ocean's setting sun. You don't know their troubles, do you?"

The chief patted Hathaway's shoulder and returned cheerfully to their seats.

The companion who was waiting came and brought Hathaway's drink.

Before Hathaway could take even a moment's respite, the glasses-wearing man from the Bureau of Investigation returned, business card in hand.

"Director Geise H. Hugest?"

"I have a favor to ask. I want you keep this incident a secret from the general public. Alright?"

The way he talked was a bit irritating. He clearly didn't have anyone above him to report to.

"Of course, Director..."

"And also, the chief said that, but could you just tell me a little about the situation? Us higher-ups can't be so laid back... If you would, please."

The glasses-wearing man stood up before even hearing Hathaway's reply. His behavior stunk of someone who didn't think of ordinary humans as humans at all.

Slightly disgusted at the bureaucrat, Hathaway drank his ginger ale without the straw.

"...?"

Why didn't they realize, though Hathaway.

The reason sat on a sofa across from the Hathaway's glass. It was Gigi.

Chapter.07

With Gigi

Gigi had been watching Hathaway since he stood up. Her radiant, golden hair fluttered around her shoulders.

"So why did you laugh earlier?"

Hathaway felt relieved. He had asked her without much difficulty.

"No reason, really... You hate me, yet you were worried about me then."

Gigi's words had a hint of laughter.

"Those men on the shuttle were all talking to you. A young guy like me isn't on the same level, so I didn't talk to you. Besides, that's not the reason you laughed. You were thinking something else, weren't you?"

"Really? Was I?" Gigi motioned for Hathaway to sit down. Hathaway gave his thanks. Seeing her from the front for the first time, he thought she was beautiful.

"You're really quite beautiful."

"Thank you."

Gigi was used to such praise, yet there wasn't a trace of irony in her words.

"Really, you are..."

"Haha!"

Her laugh, full of affirmation and confidence, was also free of irony.

Hathaway did not actually know for sure what Gigi had been thinking when she laughed.

"How did figure out that the hijackers were pretending to be Mafty?"

He ended up asking a different question.

"A person's body language always shows it. Oh, and the reason I laughed was because I realized they were just using Mafty's name."

Gigi sighed.

"Wha-...?"

Gigi leaned forward slightly. "Because I knew that name Mafty Nabiyu Erin, also known as the title of "The Righteous Kind of Prophets," belongs to you, Hathaway Noa."

"Hahahaha! Can't you see I'm just your average guy?"

It seemed like Gigi had absolutely no interest in Hathaway. She openly turned her gaze to the window, staring out over the wide expanse of the airport.

With such a reaction, Hathaway could not find it in him to continue.

"..."

"I should have brought my ginger ale," he thought. Gigi gave the silent Hathaway a sidelong glance.

"Honestly... I like that about you," she said.

"...?"

Hathaway rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands, looking up at Gigi.

"This girl knows I'm lying..."

To Hathaway, this meant that he must prepare himself for capture.

The Kimberley Forces were stationed at this very airport. They're a force organized for the purpose of capturing and exterminating Mafty Erin.

As Kenneth had said, the commander until today, Captain Kimberley Heyman, was a incompetent opponent. His lack of ability was also the reason Mafty Erin had been able to move so freely these last six months. Even then, Kimberley was currently conducting an invasion of Australia. Kenneth would soon be commanding that force.

Commanders like Kenneth were truly scary. The type that pretend to be strong and scary were the easiest to handle.

Hathaway shuddered. He thought of saying, "You have no proof," but, remembering that Gigi hated excuses, he thought better of it.

Instead, he thought of a different way to go about it.

"You'll probably hate me for asking like this, but..."

"Try it," said Gigi, still looking off to the side.

"I'll escape by asking a question. What makes you think that?"

"You boarded the Haunzen. You are clearly too young. And there was how you fought, too. There was plenty of circumstantial evidence."

"Why?"

"People are idiots when it comes to themselves, really."

"So, tell me..."

"...Think about it. Meeting these guys using Mafty's name, you went off and handed it to them, didn't you?"

"Ah!"

Hearing Gigi's words, Hathaway finally realized why he had done such a dangerous thing.

Gigi, seeing Hathaway's reaction, finally cracked a gentle smile.

"Just now, I...no, never mind. If you talk too much I will hate you for it."

"I won't tell anyone else. I don't want to be hated, after all... but talking to the person himself is fine right? It's so thrilling, and fun."

"Anything I say gets a retort so I won't say more... but don't forget that that sometimes words can kill a person. That's not a figure of speech."

Hearing Hathaway's words, Gigi moved uncomfortably, taking her hands from her chin and straightening her body.

Her face was pale.

"T-That's absolutely something I wouldn't want..."

"..."

This time, it was Hathaway's turn to become speechless. Gigi lacked sensibility, but she was not a girl who liked to talk.

Everything she said was what she truly believed, and, because of her belief in the power of words, she did not react much to normal, powerless speech.

Of course this would depend on whom she was talking to, but, at the very least, she had not lumped Hathaway in with the sly old politicians. To people that tickled her fancy, she was honest.

"Gigi Andalusia..."

"I'm not that kind of woman. Really, okay?"

"I know. But you should know that it's also something you should proceed with carefully."

"Yea... I've come to realize that lately."

"I see...it's difficult..."

"Idiot."

Hathaway's words, seemed to have brought color and sparkle to Gigi's eyes. Then, suddenly, the strength left her body and she sunk back into her chair.

The color in her eyes faded and she stared blankly at the water droplets collecting on a glass.

"Hey hero!"

Another cabinet minister slapped Hathaway on the back before moving on to another group.

"Even if it was speculation on your part, it hurts to be told the truth."

"..!"

Gigi nodded, her chin still sunk into her collarbone.

"Let's forget about this conversation."

"I won't forget... it's the same for you, right?"

Hathaway remained silent.

"Excuse me..."

The black-haired young man from the Bureau of Investigation that had been with Chief Geise was calling from off to the side. He announced that he wanted to question Gigi first.

Gigi hopped to her feet as if to shake off her fatigue and headed towards the lobby entrance.

"Oh boy..."

The unpleasant nature of the event had forced Hathaway to steel his resolve.

Escape was difficult. Hathaway did not know how the Kimberley Forces, who were stationed at the base, were deployed.

Hathaway returned to the table with his ginger ale and sat facing the window.

One of the island's regular flights was just taking off on the runway. That same sight had continued for a hundred years.

A month ago, Hathaway had seen reconnaissance photos of the airport, but those didn't tell him the extent of Kimberley Forces equipment or manpower.

That was the reason, after all, that Hathaway had made the trip to the moon in search of new mobile suits.

"The sooner Gawman and the others come, the worse the timing will be..." thought Hathaway.

Hathaway remembered the faces of his comrades he had not seen in over a month.

When it was decided that Hathaway would return on the Haunzen, he had considered several crisis avoidance strategies. In the case that Hathaway was

caught in a situation and unable to act, Gawman would attack some nearby place.

The attack would help Hathaway avoid suspicion and give him an opportunity to escape.

A large number of staff had also been stationed in the Hong Kong area to check on Hathaway's status.

As for Davao, it was in close proximity to the base where Hathaway and the others were planning to carry out their campaign, so there were likely a larger than average number of liaison officers hiding in the area. But Hathaway was not in a position to figure out whether they were aware of the day's events.

The phone in the lobby might be wiretapped. He couldn't risk using that.

The ad hoc questioning by the Bureau of Investigation was being held in the VIP Room next door. The cabinet ministers and their wives, upon finishing their questioning, greeted Hathaway before heading off to their designated hotels.

It was probably the authorities' decision to save Hathaway for last. For the person waiting, though, it was like waiting to step up onto the execution platform.

Gigi returned in less than ten minutes. After ordering a new juice to replace her unfinished one from the hostess, she sat down next to Hathaway.

"Are you tired?"

"What?"

Hathaway was forced to consider again that something was wrong with Gigi's head.

Gigi had forgotten about her down moment from before. Her speech was so casual that it seemed she had completely forgotten about their earlier conversation.

"Well...yea..."

What else was he supposed to say?

"They'll take us to the hotel by limousine. I'll be waiting, okay?"

Gigi put the card in her hand on the table in front of Hathaway. It was a Tasaday Hotel membership card.

"You'll wait? What?"

"I want to see the hotel, so let's go together."

"Oh..."

Hathaway felt himself relaxing at Gigi's words.

This was Gigi. If she had been told about the hotel after questioning, then she had heard about Hathaway's lodgings too. In other words, she hadn't said anything to get Hathaway arrested.

"I see..."

Hathaway looked again at Gigi, her body stretched out and facing away from the window.

"What kind of girl are you?"

Gigi tilted her face, smiling and lifting up her hair with one hand.

"I want to be free. Look! The truth is difficult to see, right? If I want to know the truth, sometimes I have to be careful."

"Your drink is ready."

"Thank you very much."

Gigi politely gave her thanks to the hostess before putting the straw in her mouth.

Hathaway watched the juice disappear up the straw.

"...?"

Gigi's eyes were questioning.

"No, I was just thinking that the juice's color was beautiful... not to mention your lips as well."

"Is that some expression of thanks?"

"That too... but I'm just happy you're energetic again."

"I'm just fine. That's the reason I came to Earth, after all."

"Are you going to live in Hong Kong?"

"No... I think the mountains of Japan will be nice."

"Japan...? Can you get in?"

"I can."

"I see... I'd like to visit. My mother's ancestors are from there."

"So that's why you're making that face."

Gigi put her glass down and stared at Hathaway's face.

"Stop that..."

"Looking at you like that makes me want to say it."

"Say what?"

"Mafty's methods aren't the right way."

"If you have a better idea, please say it. Mafty will listen."

"I do have one."

Gigi had not lost her serious expression. Hathaway was surprised by the smooth, effortless reply.

"And what would that be?"

"If you want something without fail, then you need to establish the ideal dictatorship."

"Hahaha..."

Hathaway laughed to deflect Gigi's truth-filled words. For some looking "between" the people, for someone looking at society's problems from the outside, that was the truth.

"Is that weird?"

For the first time, Gigi had put on a dissatisfied, childlike expression.

"Well, you're right. But any human that can do such a thing is a god."

"Then you'll just have to become a god."

"Well, yes, but by the time such a person appears, all of humanity will have become gods."

"Oh, you're talking about Newtypes?"

"Yea. Reality isn't pretty. We aren't there yet. Even taking control of local governments isn't easy. A political takeover of an entity of the Earth Federation government's caliber isn't something that can be done by the will of a single individual."

"I see..."

"Organizations built by humanity aren't to be trifled with. That's why they are so huge. It's quite troublesome."

"But hijacking is terrible too. It was a scary ordeal."

"You're right."

"And being killed is even scarier."

"I think so too."

Hathaway really did think so.

"Mr. Hathaway, please."

It was the young man from the Bureau of Investigation.

"Ah... well then."

Gigi, rested her hands on her knees. "Okay... I'll be waiting."

Chapter.08

Hotel

"Thank you, Mr. Hathaway. You may return to your hotel now."

Chief Geise of the Bureau of Investigation returned his pen to its place in the inner pocket of his suit and signaled to the young man sitting next to Hathaway.

"Right... this is the hotel card. Please use it as you wish."

"Thank you. What about tomorrow?"

"We ask that you show up one more time. Captain Kenneth also said he wants to take a personal statement, so if you would..."

"Okay, so, what shall we do?"

"Ah, yes... I will call you tomorrow at 9 AM. We'll decide on your schedule then. If this place suits you, you can use the hotel as you wish."

"Indefinitely?"

Hathaway's question was a jest; his words were not a challenge to the bureaucrat.

"No problem. Just give the card to the front desk when you check out."

"Wow... That's convenient."

Although he didn't know if the offer was genuine, Hathaway was impressed. Retrieving his suitcase from the room where the younger Bureau staff were stationed, he then exited to the front lobby.

"Ms. Andalusia is waiting in the car."

"I see."

Hathaway looked around the lobby, feigning interest. On the inside, he was quite nervous, straining his faculties to keep track of every human around him.

The entrance to the Terminal Building was just like your average airport lobby. There was no sign of the Kimberley Forces anywhere.

"This way."

"Right!"

At that time, Hathaway caught sight of a young man who looked like one of his comrades, but there was no way he could exchange a greeting. Staying silent, he followed the young man from the Bureau.

In the refreshing night air of the entranceway, a light pink limousine awaited them.

This wasn't something he had expected, but, with Gigi standing there, it seemed to fit right in.

The day's heat had settled to a pleasant warmth, and quiet air around them gave the ideal sense of liberation that only the Earth could provide. To a five

senses now accustomed to man-made artifices, the scent of the greenery around them was pleasantly stimulating.

"Go ahead," said Hathaway, suggesting that Gigi sit first.

"Mmm...standing here like this fills me with energy. I like it."

Saying that, Gigi climbed her way into the back seat.

The young man from the Bureau closed the door, and, as the car departed, Hathaway looked back and waved at him.

But his real intention was to observe the road behind them.

They made a half circle around the Terminal Building. Several parking lot exits lined the right of the road leading up to the highway entrance. A car made its way out of one of them and followed them.

"..."

Hathaway put his hopes in that car and settled back into the beige-weave rear seats.

"What's bothering you?" asked Gigi, whispering into his ear. Her lips were all too close. Feeling her breath and the warmth of her body, Hathaway jumped a little.

"Nothing... Or so I'd like to say, but I don't want you to hate me..." said Hathaway in a whisper, nose sliding into Gigi's hair.

"But danger would be even worse, so I can't."

Gigi's shoulders seemed to quiver at Hathaway's words.

"Hahaha!" Laughing, Gigi brought her cheek next to Hathaway's.

It was probably just an act, but, Hathaway felt as if he had caught scent of Gigi's womanly side. Feeling this was not something he could contend with, Hathaway drew back.

A expression, slightly pouting, seemed to appear on her face.

"...?"

The sight of her face filled Hathaway mind with questions, but Gigi sat back in her seat and turned to face the window.

"..."

Hathaway realized that he had said something terrible.

Even if it was an act, Gigi had wanted to enjoy that moment a bit longer.

And she didn't want to deal with a young man that could not guess at her feelings.

To Hathaway, who was already on edge, her feelings were not something he could imagine. Suppressing faint feelings of regret and anxiety, Hathaway looked out to the suburbs of the southern city.

Within twenty minutes, the Limousine had arrived at the Tasaday Hotel.

Built with cutting-edge technology a hundred years ago, the tropical architecture had ripened with age. A true first class hotel.

Coconut trees were planted in the center of the wide entrance area, and the evening sun's rays poured in from the ceiling skylights, highlighting the front of the building.

Hathaway and Gigi showed their cards. The reception clerk, stunned by Gigi's beauty as he was, showed no attempt to play favorites. He called a porter to bring their luggage.

"...?"

On their way to the elevator, Hathaway noticed a man he had seen at the airport running alongside a woman behind them.

"Mihessia!"

Hathaway was relieved to recognize the familiar face but boarded the elevator with the porter and Gigi.

Mishesher Hence and the man were clearly looking at the elevator that they had just gotten on to.

The porter pressed the button to the 36th floor.

"The top floor is the 43rd? Anything up there?"

"Yes, a restaurant and bar. There's a dance floor too."

"Wow!" Gigi let out a shout of glee.

The elevator door opened to a corridor lined with windows on the left. It was too splendid, almost, for a hotel corridor.

"What an amazing floor."

"Yes, this floor only has suites for long term guests."

"Wow! Impressive!"

Gigi followed the porter, making gleeful shouts at the sight of the ocean and the soft-lined mountains in the distance.

Off to the right of this scenery was the airport and Kimberley Forces.

The porter led them down near the end of the hall before handing Hathaway and Gigi keys to a pair of adjoining rooms. He then carried the suitcase to Gigi's room.

"What an amazing room!"

That Gigi would shout in delight was given. An extensive living room opened out to a view of the cape and the horizon beyond.

On the right was the main bedroom.

On the left was a dining room and another bedroom. The Davao cityscape spread out silently, faint now in the evening sun.

Compared to the century before, the city's population should be one-fifth of what it was before.

As the porter showed them the room, Hathaway followed him out to the veranda of the dining hall on the right and looked out over the city.

Short mountains drew soft lines under the slowly darkening sky. Birds chirped off in the distance.

"Well, I'll be..."

Letting out a sigh, Hathaway leaned against the faux wood railing of the veranda.

Hathaway had realized that his presence in this difficult to escape location was a form of confinement. There were around a dozen floors to the top and thirty-odd floors to the bottom.

In other words, Hathaway had realized that he was trapped from above and below.

"Oh! You can leave Hathaway's suitcase here as well." Hathaway overheard Gigi's voice as the porter was showing her around the kitchen, bathroom and dressing room.

"What?"

"Gigi! That's not a good idea," said Hathaway as Gigi followed the porter out of the closet room.

"Why?"

"I'm fine with the other room."

"No. I'll be sad sleeping alone in such a big room. Use this bedroom."

Gigi's words made sense.

"Fine, if you insist."

He couldn't have the porter carry it, so, handing the porter a tip, Hathaway set to moving his own suitcase.

"Please tell the front desk as well."

"Right away, sir."

"By the way, do you know if the passengers from the Haunzen staying here?"

"Oh, you two are from the Haunzen as well?"

"If we're here with the higher-ups, we'll probably see them in the dining hall, right? We'll need to prepare ourselves mentally, you know."

"I think so. I suppose you'll have to think about the social aspect."

Placing Hathaway's luggage on top of a cabinet by the wall, the porter informed that that three parties had checked in, but that he didn't know their names.

"Is there anything else you need?"

"Could you bring tea and something sweet to eat?" asked Gigi from the living room.

"Absolutely."

The dignified-looking porter walked briskly to a window table, picked up the menu, and handed it to Gigi.

"Hmm, I'll have this three tart sampler and a milk tea. What about you, Hathaway?"

"I'd like some fruit if they have any..." said Hathaway, sitting down on the sofa in front of Gigi.

"They do. Kiwis, mandarin oranges and such."

"Mandarins will do. Those are Japanese, right?"

"Yes... What about to drink?" asked the porter.

"Same as mine."

Hathaway and the porter exchanged knowing smiles at Gigi's quick reply. Then, bowing, the porter left the room.

"I'm going to take a shower, that okay with you?"

"Yea. I'll be using mine too though, okay?"

"Okay, thanks. I need to relax. I don't want to have to be polite because you are here."

"Same for me."

Hathaway headed to his bedroom and opened his suitcase.

The entire shower room was lined with beautiful tile, and all of the shower items were made from ceramic. Hathaway felt a strange pressure, as if using the giant bathtub would cause his body to shrink.

"I'm not foolish enough to believe that a hotel prepared by the enemy is safe, but... How should go about Gigi?"

Feeling the almost-cold water of the shower and the satisfaction of having returned to Earth, Hathaway's thoughts returned to how he was going to get out of the hotel to meet with Mihessia and the others.

"We checked in with just the cards... We didn't leave our names. That means this is a place that can be used privately. Celebrities and officials probably bring their mistresses here... It probably isn't bugged..."

Still, if Mihessia was downstairs, Hathaway needed to meet with him and the others.

Checking his back teeth in the bathroom mirror, Hathaway withdrew a large pair of tweezers from his toiletry kit. At first glance, they looked like a normal pair of tweezers, but the tip was slightly curved. Hathaway used it to pull out one of his back teeth.

Under the removed wisdom tooth was a tooth-shaped capsule with microfilm hidden inside.

As he was changing, he heard Gigi humming from outside the door.

Hathaway slid the film from the tooth into his notebook, keeping the other item hidden in the leather cover of another notebook as it was. He then exited to the living room.

"Gigi...?"

Before he could be shocked, Hathaway regretted not being cautious about Gigi being this kind of girl.

"Oh!"

Gigi put on a sour look and tried to wrap the towel around her shoulders, but her naked body reflected off the mirror, and Hathaway caught sight of her beautifully-proportioned body.

"How rude!"

"How can you even say that?" said Hathaway in a blunt voice.

"What...?"

At Hathaway's brisk response, Gigi quickly fixed the towel wrapped around her body.

"We aren't married or even living together... Yet you still walk around naked. I hate that kind of woman."

Hathaway walked to the table holding the food they had ordered and took the newly prepared room key.

Meanwhile, Gigi had retreated to her bedroom, shutting the door with a thud.

"Bullseye?" he wondered to himself as he figured that if he didn't at least spend the time to drink a cup of tea, he wouldn't be able to go outside. He poured himself a cup.

"Is she caught up about it...?" thought Hathaway.

Hathaway relaxed at the sweet smell of the tarts. A chance to go out for a walk had come naturally.

He knocked on Gigi's bedroom door asking if she wanted to go for a walk, but there was no reply.

"Gigi!" He called her name again.

"Go ahead!"

There seemed to be tears in her shout.

"I'm just going to take a look around the hotel."

Leaving those words, Hathaway went out to the corridor.

"So she's that kind of girl..."



With those practiced words, Hathaway drove Gigi from his mind. There might be a hasty judgment and a misunderstanding, but Hathaway had no intention of trying to understand Gigi's feelings and winning her favor.

"Still, if this makes her into an enemy, I may have been rash..." thought Hathaway as we waited for the elevator.

She might become his ally if they got along well. However, if she came to hate him, she might join the Bureau or Kenneth. That was how Gigi Andalusia was.

It was precisely because she was that kind of girl that Hathaway could let his guard down.

It seemed paradoxical, but if she was a normal girl, then Hathaway wouldn't have any desire to associate with her.

That was the kind of young man Hathaway had become.

"Yea, that's right."

His understanding spilled out in the form of words. Hathaway recognized that this was a dangerous side to him.

"Same as Quess Paraya, huh..."

The grief weighed heavily on Hathaway. He didn't even know how hard he had tried to forget that name. Still, there was no doubt that her existence had made Hathaway into the way he was.

So, by meeting someone like Gigi, he wanted her by his side unconditionally.

Chapter.09

Contact

Hathaway picked up a sightseeing pamphlet that sat next to one of the pillars near the front desk before dropping by the shopping arcade and the coffee lounge. He made sure his behavior was just as any hotel visitor's might be before then heading for the front door.

On his way out, Hathaway paused to wait for Mihessia Hence and the other young man to follow behind before exiting the building.

Wind had started to tickle at the palm leaves, but darkness had not yet fallen.

As Hathaway headed out onto the street, Mihessia passed him, carrying a bundle of documents.

"..."

Mihessia's right hand, the hand holding a bunch of documents, made a beckoning gesture at Hathaway. To an onlooker, it would appear simply as a matter of habit.

This series of events would continue for a while.

They exited onto a street crowded with cars, street lights and neon signs. Had it been twenty minutes now?

After turning several corners, a car, rusted from the salty ocean air, closed in next to Mihessia.

"That one, huh..."

Before Hathaway had time to fully comprehend the situation, he saw Mihessia turn and give a light hand signal. Hathaway broke into a run.

Mihessia slid into the car and Hathaway followed nimbly behind. In the drivers seat of the car was the same young man from the airport.

"Good work."

The rear seats of the car shook as the car accelerated. "Is this okay?" asked a nervous Mihessia Hence.

"Better. Any sign of us being followed?"

The young driver with pitch black hair spoke up. "Sir. I've checked your surroundings carefully for followers."

"Good."

"This is Kenji Mitsuda. He works with us."

"Thanks."

"Yea..."

The young Asian man deftly handled the wheel of the shabby vehicle, maneuvering the car into the slipstream of evening traffic.

"It was an ordeal being alone among enemies. You're a great help."

"We weren't a burden?"

Mihessia had a terrible knack for noticing these kinds of things.

"First of all, this is the data for the course of the Gundam retrieval. Analyze it and make a copy for each machine."

"What do you mean?"

"It's the autopilot data."

"Oh! So I should hand it over to Iram?"

Mihessia was a woman who knew little of such matters.

"We know the time the new Gundam disguised as a meteor will fall. It'll happen tomorrow night. It can't be changed. Have Lodoicea hurry with preparations."

"Yes, we've made preparations, but... It was quite difficult, wasn't it?"

"Yea, hijackers using Mafty's name commandeered the Haunzen..."

Hathaway explained the circumstances of the Haunzen's arrival at the airport before asking the pair about the Mafty forces in Oenbelli.

"It's true. There are a lot of men gathering there after hearing rumors of a Mafty base in Australia."

"Is this Quack Salver's doing?"

"No. It happened naturally. General Quack is happy about it, but we have not made contact with them."

"Around how many of them are there?"

"From what we've heard, there are about thirty thousand."

"I see... This kind of movement just shows that we were not wrong in our actions. But I also heard that the Kimberley Forces have left for Oenbelli?"

"Yesterday. The main force launched an attack on Oenbelli," said Mitsuda, the driver.

"Before the new commander arrived?"

"That's the reason, isn't it? They mobilized quite suddenly."

"I see. The news made Kimberley panic, huh? And thanks to that, our preparations for the Gundam's retrieval went undisturbed..."

"Yea. but it won't be like that with the new commander arriving in Davao."

"We know. The new model mobile suit coming to Davao was also the new commander's doing, wasn't it?"

"New model?"

"We haven't confirmed this, but it seems they are currently testing it."

"I knew it! When we were taking time for final adjustments on the moon, I heard news of a new Earth Federation mobile suit and took some forced measures, but... To think that we would lose time due to this incident... I got on the Haunzen expecting reliability and it ended with this mess."

"Were the Mafty frauds from the group in Oenbelli?"

"I don't know. It's possible."

"What will you do, Hathaway?"

"I probably won't be able to leave from the Tasaday Hotel all of tomorrow morning. Treat the situation as if I am under the surveillance of the Federation's Bureau of Investigation and the Kimberley Forces.

"So we don't need to make a diversion?"

"No, you should. Kenneth is investigating me carefully. My personal history has some suspicious points."

"And what about this Gigi girl? You'll be all right around her, right?"

"I still don't know if she will be a scapegoat for me or if she's a Kimberley spy."

"What do you mean?"

"Forgive me for not giving an explanation. It's complicated... It's better if you make a diversionary attack to remove suspicion."

"It'll be dangerous..."

"Yea. My room is on a middle floor. Attack one of the higher ones."

"But..."

"Also, please inform Professor Amada in Menado that there might be a military investigation."

"Yes sir."

"...And the Gundam will come on time. Got it?"

"We'll be returning to Lodoicea by Mitsuda's plane... We'll come back in the Emerald."

"I'm counting on you."

Circling the city, Mitsuda's car set a course back to the Tasaday Hotel.

Chapter.10

Hunter

"This is bad... Hunters."

"What?"

Hearing Mitsuda's voice, Hathaway looked forward from the rear seat.

The population of the area was small, but a crowd was causing quite a commotion on the street near the entertainment district as evening set in. There were a number of black minivans right in the center of the street blocking the path, and around them men dressed in all black leather uniforms were intimidating the crowd.

"What do you want to do?"

"Hathaway will probably be fine, but we'll be arrested."

Mihessia turned up the collar of her jacket. She had already had the unfortunate experience of being caught by said Hunters, and forcibly deported to space. A second arrest would see her sent to a border colony known as "the remote island". More than anything, it was the utter shame that came with the deportations the Hunters administered as punishment that filled people with fear.

"We know this place just as well as they do, so..."

Saying this, Mitsuda casually turned the car right onto a backstreet.

"They didn't spot us?"

"They were busy loading the people they caught into the carriers..."

Alternately checking his left and right mirrors, Mitsuda took care to avoid the people coming and going on the narrow path.

"If they have you cornered, crunch the film in your teeth. We have another."

"R-Right. I'll do that..."

"Ugh, son of a...!"

A single car appeared ahead, and Mitsuda panicked and pulled the car to the right in an effort to get away. The car's speed rose slightly as he did so, and they emerged onto the next street.

Unsure for a moment of which direction to turn, Mitsuda brought the car to a halt.

"...?"

Hathaway inadvertently made eye contact with a black visored man through his side window.

Hunters always dressed completely in black when working, regardless of the climate. That alone was evidence enough that they were a group who delighted in intimidating people.

"You. Let's see your residency permit!"

The man tapped the car's glass with the tip of his nightstick.

Hathaway attempted to lower the window, but just as he did so, Mitsuda started the car, and sent it hurtling to the right. Hathaway slammed against the backrest, and the Hunter tumbled forwards, screaming with rage.

"Son of a bitch!"

The Hunter immediately pulled out his pistol, and began threateningly firing off rounds while calling to his cohorts.

"Somebody was shot!" Mihessia cried out, glancing backwards.

Despite his seemingly mild mannered demeanor, Mitsuda was an outstanding driver. The old fashioned gasoline-powered car had obviously been tuned up, and weaved through oncoming car after oncoming car as it shot towards the suburbs.

The sound of a hunter patrol car rang out from behind, and others could be heard closing in from the left and right.

"Hathaway, get out!"

"What about you?"

"I'll find somewhere to burn the car, or sink it into the sea."

"You can do that?"

"I had several places in mind in case this happened."

Making two turns, Mitsuda rapidly decelerated, and let Hathaway out.

"Sorry for bailing. Don't let them catch you, okay?"

Without even taking the time to listen to Hathaway's words, Mitsuda sent the car speeding away, the rubber of its tires burning on the concrete. Not having the luxury of being able to see the car off, Hathaway began to walk back in the opposite direction, doing his best to regain a calm expression.

Three minivans went speeding past, sending other vehicles scattering.

"...!?"

Hathaway spotted machine guns installed on the roofs of the vehicles, and heard the Hunters screaming something.

"We're acting on behalf of the military..."

Swearing loudly in his head, Hathaway looked for a taxi, but panicked when he didn't see any passing by. He realized that having left without making dinner plans with Gigi could arouse suspicion too.

Worrying about Mihessia and Mitsuda wouldn't do any good. Hathaway tried to put them out of his mind, went to a souvenir shop, and bought a typical tourist souvenir.

"Did they check your residency permit?" the clerk asked as she punched the register. She looked like a local.

"Of course. It happens often here?"

"It's been rough here since the reinforcement of the Earth Federation Forces. They'll even surprise you in your sleep. I wonder why Mafty doesn't take care of them?"

"Say stuff like that in a place where Hunters are hanging about," Hathaway said, taking his receipt, "and you could get yourself deported."

"Heh heh... But don't you think Mafty are pretty dense?"

"Guess so... By the way, there aren't any taxis on call around here?"

"If you go about 500 meters to your right, there's a taxi rank. It's pretty noisy over there about now."

"Thanks."

Knowing that the date and time would be printed on his receipt, Hathaway tore it up, threw it away, and reluctantly headed for the taxi stand.

The Hunters still seemed to be spreading their net there. Hathaway found himself with the unenviable job of waiting for a car at the rank while watching a black patrol car ahead. Worse still, the car, some 200 meters in front, gradually began edging closer. Hathaway began to consider running away.

"Urgh!"

The door of the building behind Hathaway slammed open, and a group of three or four people stumbled out as if they had been thrown. Some Hunters soon followed.

"You've got to be shitting me!"

"You're violating our human rights!"

The man who yelled this found his chin met by the tip of a Hunter's boot.

"Stop!"

A woman clutched at the Hunter, and was struck by his nightstick. She crumpled on her side, and another Hunter kicked her in the groin.

"...!?"

"If you're looking for a taxi, wait over there!" yelled a Hunter at Hathaway, as another group emerged hurriedly from a patrol car, "Can't you see you're in the way?!"

The Hunters' tone was more polite when they addressed someone who wasn't being arrested, but Hathaway received a poke with his nightstick all the same.

"Ugh!"

A handful more men and women were thrown out of the building, and a gunshot rang out.

As Hathaway moved away from the taxi rank, he noticed that the gunshot had come from near the third floor.

"You bastards!"

The machine gun on the patrol car parked in the taxi rank repeatedly rang out, sending a flash across the lingering light in the sky.

"..."

The fire fight continued for a handful of seconds. One of the Hunters on the street fell over, and two men in t-shirts spilled out of the window, falling to the ground with a sickening crunch.

"..."

With the same terrified look as the other citizens, Hathaway walked out onto the road. Weaving through the patrol cars, he found a taxi amid the cars splayed across the street.

"Please! Let me in!"

The driver waved Hathaway away with his hand.

"The Hunters said to find a taxi here. Look. They've taken the taxi rank over there."

The driver looked towards the grisly scene unfolding near the patrol cars, and then signaled to Hathaway to open the back door. Taking care to make

sure that the driver saw the plastic souvenir bag he was carrying, Hathaway got in, and gave the name of a building near the Tasaday Hotel.

"It'll take us a while to get through this street."

"Will you charge a big premium?"

"Nah, not really."

Making eye contact with the driver as he checked his back mirror for people, Hathaway did his best to make conversation like a regular passenger.

"The Hunters here are bad, huh?" The driver asked as the car picked up speed, and he had a moment to catch his breath.

"It was pretty shocking to see a firefight right in front of my eyes like that. It looked like there were casualties."

"Happens every other day. I can't work out why Mafty won't do something about them."

"For sure. They're the people they should be looking to take care of."

"Right? I'm not educated and I don't know the details, but the Earth Federation government is deporting people into space and capturing those who complain, right?"

"That's right..."

Despite his vague replies to the driver's controversial opinions, Hathaway felt quietly relieved that the public wished to see the Hunters punished by Mafty for openly engaging in gang violence. After all, it was true to say that Hathaway and Mafty were actively engaging in military force themselves. And those using force always want to believe that that force is excusable if justice is on their side.

"Mafty are too educated for their own good, I reckon. It's all very well for them to play the part and take on the big guys, but their eventual plan is for us all to go into space too, right? Can't say I understand that. It's not like Davao's particularly polluted."

"But there's not much greenery these days, and you can't catch fish, right?"

"Sure, but the people on the islands, at least, have no problem finding food."

"Haha, guess so. But I think Mafty are talking about the Earth a thousand years down the line. So I wonder if they don't have a point."

The driver burst out laughing. "I'm guessing they have a lot of time on their hands. I don't have the luxury of thinking that far ahead."

"The luxury?"

This normal, run of the mill word shocked Hathaway. It was true. For the public, when life got mad it was all they could do to think about the next day. He couldn't deny that people could get tunnel vision when they began to think only about how to further a certain cause.

"You don't think so? You can't really think about tomorrow when all that's on your mind is the money you're going to have to put into some rich guy's pocket to get yourself a residency permit."

"I'm in the same boat there," Hathaway agreed, staring vacantly at the side of the road as the rows of coconut trees gave way to the evening sky.

It was just like the driver and Gigi said. It was true that he was possessed by a furious desire to put a stop to all of those systems if he had the power.

However, he was horrified at the depth of the organizations that the Earth Federation government had built within society, which could be seen even in the Research Bureau's door key system at the Tasaday Hotel. In order to destroy that depth, he needed to send fear to the very core of those organizations. If he didn't, then it was only logical to assume that there would be no reform of the Earth Federation government.

Focusing on that one issue, Hathaway became frustrated.

In order to stay on Earth, it was currently necessary to obtain a permit administered by the Earth Federation government. This had begun as a necessary evil after migration to space colonies became common, and enacting forced migration became an essential to avoid the migration process becoming discriminatory.

After the Earth was polluted by waste products from the development of modern civilization, and the greenhouse effect caused its average temperature to rise two degrees, people became filled with a sense of impending doom.

Constant food shortages and destruction of nature wrought by the abnormal weather reduced the earth to a state where it could no longer tolerate human life, and space migration became a necessity. However, if the earth really came to an end, humanity would lose the power to construct space colonies and expand into space.

The Earth Federation government was established after the realization that humanity was headed for its extinction along with the earth spread outwards from the cities. And construction of space colonies began. The Earth Federation's plan to indiscriminately take all of humanity into space once the space migration began was not misguided.

However, special case exceptions in the policy later gave rise to discrimination. The Earth Federation government made provisions for those deemed necessary to remain on Earth. There was a condition: those allowed to stay had to be those who would manage nature so as to preserve the Earth, or those who could preserve and conserve humanity's native cultures.

The law did not carry out that principle in an ideal fashion, and as the Earth didn't appear to be on the verge of death to the average person, it was natural for it to be broadly interpreted and exploited.

What's more, as those born on Earth were unable to forget the feeling of its gravity, people began to appear who ignored the law unconditionally on that basis.

That desire was understandable. Humanity's greatest sin, however, was not acknowledging the realization that the most dangerous thing for the Earth was their own propagation.

In this era, space migration was a price that humanity itself was forced to pay; the era of the space colonies was neither a frontier era, nor one of openness. That the frustration born of this realization only further lit the flame of the those who lived in space colonies – the Spacenoids – desire to return to Earth was paradoxical, but ultimately a natural outcome.

Humanity's continuing to see Earth as the only home it could return to after its propagation was its second sin.

In order to completely revive the world, it was necessary to wait a thousand years. And in the space of a thousand years, humanity would only further

multiply. In short, people had to be prepared for the truth that the entirety of humanity could no longer live on Earth.

This too was a truth people were unable to admit.

Now, though, all exceptional clauses had to be removed, and humanity in its entirety had to be forced to withdraw to the colonies. If that was not done, then Hathaway felt that the spirits of those who died in Char's Rebellion would not be able to rest in peace.

Char Aznable had thrust that same ambition upon the Earth Federation government, but had fallen before the Federation's overwhelming military force. That had been the ultimate outcome of the conflict known as "Char's Rebellion".

At the time of the rebellion, Hathaway had happened to be aboard the battleship of his father, who served the Earth Federation government. And there, he had seen battlefields.

It was also through that conflict that he had met the girl named Gues Paraya. She had viewed the war with innocent, almost childish eyes, and was so sensitive that it overwhelmed and killed her.

Hathaway had heard the voice of the spirit of that girl who had been his first love, along with all of those who had died in the void of space.

It was probably nothing more than blind faith. But Hathaway believed that in the final days of Char's Rebellion, he had heard countless screams. Screams of friends and foes alike that had been swallowed by flames in the fight to protect the Earth.

After this, Hathaway felt he needed to study the problems surrounding these individuals and organizations. He also learned the career of Char Aznable.

Realizing that Char's eventual conclusion had been that the planet which had given birth to humanity could not be allowed to be destroyed and had to be preserved, Hathaway found himself deeply empathizing with the man.

Reality, however, threw difficult phenomena into people's paths.

Had the core idea of the space colony age to almost empty the Earth and come up with a way of prolonging its life been followed, and had the migration law been enacted fairly, then the black uniforms of the Hunters and their exposure of unlawful residents might have been seen as a symbol of justice.

"So long as there are exceptional clauses, people will continue to do wrong..."

Bidding farewell to the cheerful driver, Hathaway walked for around five minutes, and arrived at the Tasaday Hotel.

At the hotel's front desk, a message had arrived stating that a car would be coming from the Research Bureau at ten the next morning.

Gigi wasn't in the room.

To avoid the hassle of having to greet the cabinet members he met on the Haunzen, Hathaway ordered room service. He spread his postcards and other documents in front of him while eating in the same sloppy way that Gigi would.

At the same time, he was prepared for the fact that if Gigi had told Kenneth how she had been feeling, there would be no escape for him.

It was fine even if he was caught. At the very least, Lodoicea would recover the Gundam. It was partly for that reason that the central administration of Mafty had come to the area.

Hathaway ate his sauteed sole, all the while feeling guilty towards his companions. He had barely started the meal when Gigi returned.

"Hey! What are you doing eating dinner in a place like this, Mr. Hero?"

It was Kenneth.

"Why are you here?"

The fact that Kenneth had shown up made Hathaway nervous. He was supposed to be busy.

"What do you mean? You abandoned me to go out walking, so I asked him to be my dinner partner. We're just heading out now. The Captain is busy, but he's so nice that he came anyway..."

Gigi casually bounced into her bedroom.

"What are you doing here?" Kenneth asked.

Giving the excuse he had prepared, Hathaway tried to establish whether Gigi had told Kenneth about him.

"Where are you going for dinner?"

"Not telling. I mean you'll have her tonight, right? I have to steal her away from you before that."

"Be my guest."

"You don't care?"

"I'm not interested in her like that. Anyway, what's happening with the Research Bureau and your investigation tomorrow?"

"We've decided to have the crew and cabinet members from the front cabin come to our headquarters. All you'll have to do is sign the official record I've written up once the Research Bureau finishes up."

Kenneth twirled the cheap souvenir Hathaway had bought in his hands.

"This is pretty tacky."

"You think? I've never bought anything like that before. I wanted something that was properly handmade."

"Heh... Guess you're still a kid after all, irrespective of achievements."

"Maybe you're right. It's not very grown up, huh?"

"I looked into your background. Back when Char's Rebellion happened you were just a brat, but you snuck aboard your old man's ship, and even wound up piloting a mobile suit. Heard you fought well, to boot. You shot down an enemy machine, right?"

"Yeah, against military regulations... It caused a lot of problems for my father."

"Pretty impressive to be able to do that with no training. Besides, the army is a pretty irresponsible place anyway, so by my reckoning, you got that part right too."

"I guess so."

"That hasn't changed, by the way. Looking into Kimberley's record of work makes me shake my head in despair."

"Wasn't he pretty effective during the dispatch to that place – Oenbelli, was it?"

"You've got to be kidding. That was just to spite me. I was supposed to be taking command of his unit in three days, but thanks to the Haunzen incident, things wound up like this. Kimberley was planning on putting on a good show by then and returning to space."

"Hmm... Things are pretty complex there, huh?"

"Yep. It's an organization, after all."

"You must have to work hard."

"It's normal when you come from a common background. I wish I had a famous father."

"That can create pressures of its own."

"I guess so..."

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Gigi had changed into a dark blue dress that exposed both of her shoulders, and was in high spirits. Being able to change your mood with a dress was clearly one of the perks of being a girl.

"Captain, lace up the cord for me. The cord on this dress is kinda wispy, and it's hard to tie..."

"Heh heh..."

Winking at Hathaway, Kenneth turned to Gigi's back, and tied the dress's cord for her.

Sipping his tea, Hathaway watched them out of the corner of his eye, doing his best to remind himself that Gigi just had a very ingratiating way about her.

Chapter.11

Minovsky Flight

Skimming just above the surface of the water not far below the speed of sound, two machines sent a belt of white bubbles through the water behind them that was visible even in the darkness.

The Earth's global surveillance network had grown particularly weak compared to the end of the old age, and recently Mafty's efforts had reduced the number of observational satellites, so there was no risk of being detected. Being able to do this was the result of the era becoming fixated on space colonies, and people's consciousness being too focused on space.

The camouflage paint on the two machines meant that their allegiance could not be identified.

They were not so different from the Base Jabbers that had attacked the Haunzen, but seeing that they had 2 humanoid machines, mobiles suits, on the flat deck above the vehicle, they were not some mediocre group like the one that attacked Haunzen.

Lying on the deck, the humanoid machines looked just like people lying down with their eyes closed, with their rugged shoulders, slender bodies, powerful legs and helmeted heads being like suits of armor.

"Nothing can stand before our Galcezon. Kimberley's squad is close. Expect interference to begin soon!"

"Roger! Understood."

The conversation took place via transmission between the cockpit of the Galcezons, the flat crafts carrying the suits, and those of the Messers, the mobile suits. By scattering Minovsky particles, which caused electrical interference, they were able to communicate to a degree.

"Second Galcezon, this is Gawman of Messer 2. Roger that, but won't it take Kimberley's morons fifteen minutes to get here to defend?"

"They say they've got a new commander in charge. And a new model too. Don't underestimate them, Gawman."

"You think some runt who was just appointed yesterday can lead? It'll just be another Kimberley."

Gawman Nobile, the pilot of Messer 2 aboard the deck of the second Galcezon on point, supposedly had a habit of worrying about his long chin. He looked around thirty.

Though dressed in a pilot's uniform, he had a certain rough way about him that wasn't suggestive of a regular army man. Nevertheless, he didn't have the kind of crudeness of the Haunzen hijackers.

"Right then, are you guys done yawning? The rendezvous point is just as we planned. If something goes wrong, release your dummies and wait for assistance."

"My, how frightening!"

The second Galcezon signaled to the third following it with a primitive Morse light signal from its side.

Receiving the signal, the third Galcezon gradually began to turn to the left, and drifted away towards the cape ahead.

"You can assume they got caught by the Kimberley squad! Got it?"

"Roger!"

Gawman opened the left and right rear displays that surrounded his cockpit to keep careful watch of his left and right. The scenery rushing by became a slightly brighter field of vision than reality, and was displayed around Gawman.

As the name "reality display" suggests, it projected real sceneries surrounding the pilot. On top of that, information like targets appeared on top.

It was an artificial image of reality from the pilot's perspective created by computers using videos from multiple cameras. It even recreated the dawn faintly lighting up the horizons as the pilot saw it.

"My targets are..."

Gawman pulled up a map of Davao on the lower right display of his multi-monitor, and overlaid the targets that had been inputted before launch.

Cross marks were displayed over two sections of the map, and one was the Tasaday Hotel. The cross marks were linked with the images generated by the actual sight display, and also to the sight system for the machine guns and missiles.

In short, if the computer system that generated the images were destroyed, the machine known as a mobile suit would become no more than a puppet.

"Well, the fact that there are 7 cabinet members sleeping in Davao is pretty stupid to begin with. Are they trying to insult Mafty?"

Gawman looked ahead. Suddenly, the faint bundle of light in Davao started to approach him quickly.

"Listen up! Leave the combat airspace in less than 10 minutes!"

"Ok, ok. Mr. Civet."

"Stop joking around, thank them for today's hunt as well. Don't let them get you!"

In midst of all this, the electric light from the coastline approached from the left. Then suddenly, the light passed by just below them.

"...!?"

Gawman saw Messer 4 leaving from the rear Galcezon 3. It drew an arc and headed towards the left, the west side of Davao.

"Go, Fencer! Three! Two! One!"

Fencer Maine's Unit 3 launched to the side of Gawman's Messer 2. The weight on the Galcezon grew lighter, and it bobbed in the water.

The sight whipped up Gawman, and turned his attention to the battle.

"Three! Two! One!"

The command came once more from Civet Angehrn, aboard the second Galcezon.

"Here we go!"

A moment later, Gawman's Messer 2 launched from the second Galcezon.
"...?"

The movements of these types of Mobile Suits felt unnatural under gravity. But since conflicts in space had become commonplace, the military had picked up the habit of using mobile suits in localized conflicts, wherever they played out. Economic reasons had played their part, but it was likely more simple proof that humans are conservative creatures.

When mobile suits fought on the earth, it would be more accurate to say that they fought while taking a pattern of suddenly picking up speed, becoming airborne, and then descending to Earth in a parabola rather than actually flying. During these periods, the speed at which they could change course was greatly slowed, and they were able to accelerate, but it was different than flying. This was true of both the Messer, and the Gustav Karls that were currently in official use by the Kimberley squad.

Bearing with the g-force from the launch, Gawman checked that the automatic attitude control system was accurately superimposed with the real sight display and target of the machine.

He used deductive reasoning based on the detailed lighting from the city of Davao and the shapes of the mountains to take the suit towards the target.

Gawman's first target was the Regent Hotel.

However, instead of using radars, computers analyzed what he saw and compared the image it received with the target display to confirm the target. Therefore, if the appearance of the subject changed drastically, it could not confirm the target. Sometimes things like thick clouds lead to accidental attacks.

"...Now, my condolences to the spirits who will be caught in the middle of all this. Please forgive me."

Gawman deactivated the auto attack, moved the top of the Regent Hotel into his target display, and pulled the trigger.

Boom!

The reality displays surrounding the cockpit were streaked with red flames. The machine went up higher.

The light from the bottom went backwards, then the target moved the machine to the side to adjust its course from the next target.

"...!?"

Leaving the attack system on auto, Gawman ran his eyes over the displays around him.

A bang rang out from the airport to his left, where Kimberley Squad was, and a number of red pillars of flame rose up.

"Golf! Don't get taken out. Your target is the most dangerous of the lot."

Switching back to manual from auto, Gawman rapidly spun his machine around.

The next target was the Tasaday Hotel, where Hathaway was supposed to be staying. But in order to give Hathaway time to escape, Gawman needed to buy some time.

The operation was of course being carried out precisely because of Hathaway's information. And his acting quickly had been a precondition of the operation. Nevertheless, he would surely need some time.



Even if the attack from Golf in Messer 4 and Gawman's one then had caused Hathaway to begin to move, they needed to wait a few minutes.

Gawman had launched last from the Galcezons in order to buy time. And since the Galcezons could not stay in Davao airspace for long, it was up to him to buy more time within the battle zone.

Bzzzzz!

Gawman's cockpit display lost image due to the trees below.

The ground covered with jungle roots was the best place for mobile suits to land, but the machine descended lower due to Messer's weight.

"...!!!"

Gawman confirmed his position on his multi-monitor.

"Ok... 1 minute, 30 seconds... Fantastic..."

At times like these, there was nothing to do but glare at the clock. If you used instinct, you would move before using up half of the time. Stopping your machine in combat space after performing an airstrike was no different from renouncing the opportunity to escape.

Gawman withstood this empty time. There were no signs of ambush above.

"C'mon! Hathaway, get outta there!"

Gawman folded Messer's knees as humans do when they jump, and turned up the main nozzle all the way.

Broooooom!

The hot exhaust gas from the tail nozzle burned the surrounding trees and knocked over several palm trees.

Gawman's vision cleared.

"Where are Fencer and Golf?"

He saw tails of missiles on his left.

"I'm pretty sure."

Gawman turned the machine around to attack Tasaday Hotel.

"Keep out of the way little boy!"

However, this strike meant guaranteed attacks from the mobile suit forces under Kenneth. That's why Gawman took this job.

Gawman ran the expanded monitor for spotting enemies on the reality display. He felt he could do this.

Gawman focused on the target mark on the display.

"Is that them!?"

Hathaway jumped up when he heard the ground shake slightly over his pillow when Golf's Messer 4 struck Kimberley's units.

Needless to say, he had the secret pocket with underwear and some documents on him. He threw on a shirt and jumped out of his room into the living room.

Using the nightlight in the living room, he opened the French window on the opposite side of the bedroom.

"That must be it... Messers!"

Then Hathaway saw the fire from Gawman's Messer 2. He went to Gigi's room and started knocking.

"Gigi! It's an air raid! Get up!"

She had finished her dinner with Kenneth surprisingly early, and ought to have been in bed. But in the time it took to hear her voice, Hathaway was able to go and get his jacket.

"What?!"

Gigi emerged dressed in a nightgown and holding a bag in her hand.

"Put on your shoes! They'll target this hotel too."

"Why?!"

"The higher-ups from the Federation government are staying here. They're after them!"

Before Hathaway had even finished making his excuse, Gigi had put on her shoes, and came tumbling out into the hallway.

"Is it Mafty?!"

"Who knows. They say it's an air raid on the metropolitan area."

"How can you not know?! You're Mafty Erin!"

Ignoring Gigi's shocking words, Hathaway headed towards the elevator, not letting go of her wrist.

"Even if that were the case, Mafty is an organization. It can't just be one individual."

"Right..."

"They might be the private forces from Oenbelli. Who knows."

"Why are you saying so many things!?"

"Reality is not that simple."

Hathaway understood why Gigi said those things, but he was tempted to teach her about the possibilities of what was really going on.

Right when the middle-aged couple running in front of them pushed the elevator button, Hathaway and Gigi arrived next to them.

"You two...?"

The old couple seemed confused to see 2 young people staying on this floor.

"We're staying here."

At Hathaway's seemingly angry tone of voice, the couple, who looked to be connected to the government in some way, fell silent, staring at the elevator door. Before there was time for an uncomfortable silence to settle between the four of them, the door opened.

"Gigi?"

Hathaway looked at Gigi, confused.

"I'm fine. Let's get in..."

Gigi jumped on the elevator. She understood Hathaway's confusion, even though he didn't say anything.

Then the old couple followed and got on the elevator.

"This isn't going to stop, is it?"

The old man asked the woman while adjusting his room wear.

"It'll stop if there's an explosion."

Hathaway was about to say, Gigi made sure of that, but stopped himself. Hathaway accepted Gigi's existence like this.

The middle-aged woman brushed her hair with her fingers and looked at Hathaway as if she was staring at something strange and scary.

The scent of sex in the small elevator was probably not their imagination. Gigi put her cheeks on Hathaway's shoulders.

"...?"

Hathaway did not move because of the middle-aged couple in the elevator.

"Why did you ask me?"

Said Gigi quietly, looking up at him and pressing her lips on Hathaway's shoulders as if to say she did not want the old couple to ask her. But that wasn't it. Gigi was moving her lips so she could bite Hathaway's shoulder.

"I placed a wager on your instincts..."

"Well then, would you clear up the confusion from before?"

Said Gigi. This time, she distinctly placed her teeth on Hathaway's shoulder.

"Later."

"First of all, you were asleep in your underwear."

Hathaway lost his breath at how sharp Gigi was. Gigi felt his response with her body.

"You really do some pretty scary things, don't you..."

Said Gigi, almost licking Hathaway's shoulder. Hathaway felt it was like being licked by the devil. He got goosebumps on his upper body. But Hathaway did not repulse someone like Gigi.

They were the same type.

"Did, did you hear that? An explosion..."

Said Hathaway to change the subject.

"Maybe..."

Gigi replied, not because she decided to stop teasing Hathaway, but because she knew she still had a lot of time with him.

However, Hathaway had of course considered whether or not to part ways with Gigi. He was just unable to imagine whether it would be profitable or a loss, and was unable to decide.

Knowing only that she would be a dangerous woman to make an enemy of, his heart was unable to decide either way.

Boom!

The elevator shook and the emergency break went on. The elevator stopped and the box was now lit with the emergency lighting.

"They got me..."

"Doctor!"

An elderly man and woman cried out in despair.

"Ugh..."

Gigi grabbed both sides of Hathaway's shirt. She was shaking.

"...? That was quick..."

Saying words that he knew would reveal his identity to Gigi, Hathaway pushed the emergency button that was flashing red, and opened the door with his hand.

The elevator had stopped perfectly at a floor. In the dark corridor dead ahead, silhouettes of people wriggled, crying out. The third floor sign painted in luminescent paint starkly stood out.

"Let's hurry..."

Hathaway grabbed Gigi's hips and ran towards the stairs.

"Oh no..."

Gigi was terrified. She grabbed onto Hathaway's arms around her jacket.

The front lobby was lit up with emergency lighting and several lighters. There were people moving, but it didn't look like they were going outside.

"It's Mafty! I heard it on the broadcast"

"They say it's punishment from God. Turn to channel 3"

People were screaming in the front lobby. The flashlights lit up the coconut trees in a strange way.

"The air raid is still continuing?"

"This floor will be targeted next!"

As voices piped up, Hathaway avoided being dragged into the movement of the rabble, and ran towards a small door to the side of the front desk.

"Hathaway..."

"It's fine..."

Hathaway could not believe that the girl shaking and holding onto him was the same girl who bit on his shoulders earlier. He covered her and started looking for a way to get outside.

Running down the stairs that descended onto the street, Hathaway put his jacket over Gigi's head, and dashed to the right.

There were no signs of airstrikes in the streets just yet. The street lamps cast a long thin shadow of Hathaway and Gigi on the sidewalk.

The sky was starting to light up on the east side. There weren't any skyscrapers in that direction.

Chapter.12

Minovsky Flight

Bang! Dakakaka!

There was an almighty crash, and as it died away, the trees on the side of the road shook violently for a moment from the reverberations it left behind.

“Ugh...”

Hathaway's feet halted at the sound of the explosion, so very different to that of the usual Mobile Suits. Gigi, who had clung to his torso, turned towards the sound, and held firm.

The black shadow of a single machine ran across the space that stretched to the east. It ascended as if skimming the surface of the narrow shadow cast by the mountain ahead and began a sharp turn.

“What incredible mobility... Is it really a mobile suit?!”

“W-What?!”

Gigi raised her head from below Hathaway's jacket. Her face looked as if all of the color in it had become entirely transparent.

“It's a mobile suit of the Earth Federation Space Forces.”

“H-huh?”

Nothing was reflected in Gigi's wide pupils.

Still holding onto Gigi's thin back, Hathaway burst into a run again. If it was a new model, he thought, then it had to be Anaheim's doing.

It was common knowledge that a mobile suit's freedom of movement while in flight was limited under the pull of gravity, but there was one exception: Minovsky craft systems.

Engines which harnessed the repulsive force of Minovsky particles as their driving force were not only lighter and more compact than those that burned chemical agents but were also capable of achieving more powerful thrust.

However, there was a difficulty in that only a nuclear fusion reactor was able to generate the level of heat required to stimulate the particles into producing thrust, and the highly technological barrier and prohibitive costs that this brought with it meant that mobile suits equipped with the said engines were still at the prototype stage.

The new Xi Gundam that Hathaway had tested on one of Anaheim's factories on the moon had itself been one of those that made use of the Minovsky craft system. But while Hathaway had had his suspicions that the Earth Federation were using the same technology, he was still shocked to see said suspicions be proven true.

Gasman Nobile's Messer unit 2 had yet to escape from Davao airspace.

After attacking the Tasaday Hotel and immediately escaping out onto the water, he had been intercepted by four of the Kimberley Task Force's now familiar Gustav Karls, and had been forced to ascend.

It was a unit organized to pursue Fencer and Golf that had escaped Kimberley Task Force's anti-air gunfire.

Even though Gawman tried to rise up, his mobile suit couldn't produce enough acceleration. Instead, he tried to fall down in a zig-zag pattern to avoid the attacks while being surrounded by four Gustav Karls.

Now, Gawman only had the choice to turn his back against the city, effectively preventing the enemies from firing destructive missiles at him. He was planning to fight his enemies in close combat, preferably one by one.

He was ready to take on his enemies in a sword fight using his beam saber, a classic weapon among mobile suits, and the vulcan cannon installed in his machine.

"Hyaal! Come on now! Come closer!"

As Messer 2 began to plummet, Gawman readied the beam rifle in its right hand, and let off a rapid hail of fire.

The rifle was linked to the unit's main engine, so he couldn't use it at will. Worse still, mega-particle cannons tended to lose a great deal of their power over long ranges in atmospheric conditions. There was nothing else for it but to use the low energy-consuming beam saber to try to break through the circle.

But even as Gawman left Davao behind, the Kimberley Task Force's Gustav Karls didn't stop firing their missiles at his machine.

As they weren't homing missiles, those that didn't score a direct hit fell towards the city, or exploded nearby before they began to descend.

"You bastards! Have you lost your minds?!"

Gawman was shocked to see how little attention the four Gustav Karls were paying to the safety of the city and its inhabitants in the way they were fighting.

Mafty's pilots had never directly attacked the city except when targeting specific individuals, and even during siege scenarios involving mobile suits, there had never been a case in which the Earth Federation Forces pilot attacked the city directly.

Furthermore, the hotels and alternate residences that important political figures stayed at were almost always on the outskirts of cities, so there had never been a case of Mafty itself drawing ordinary people into a conflict to the degree that they were feared to do. Davao and its ilk were the exception rather than the rule.

But things were different now. The Kimberley Task Force was not the same as it had been until yesterday. It was clear that this change was due to the appointment of Kenneth.

The Gustav Karls continued to fire off their beam rifles at Gawman's Messer, and launched missiles to chase it even as it soared to heights of several hundred metres above the city.

Because of this, explosions were going off periodically around the city, as black smoke rose into the air.

"Ugh!"

The seat that supported Gawman trembled audibly.

Despite the unit's thick armor, direct hits from vulcans had crippled each segment's mobility. If a direct hit was delivered to the backpack that housed the main engine, the reactor would be finished.

Buff!

The vulcan missile had exploded in point-blank range from the armor in the chest area.

"Umph!"

Unfortunately, there were no low clouds he could hide himself in. To speed up his fall, Gawman blasted his tail nozzle, but then he spotted a sign of yet another enemy.

It swiftly flew in like a jet through the arm pit area of Gawman's Messer, grazing it.

"What?!"

It then turned nimbly, began pursuing the Messer, and started pouring rapid vulcan cannon fire in Gawman's direction.

Buff! Boom!

Gawman's cockpit shook violently, and the second time he looked behind him, he could see the shadow of his enemy right behind him, as if it were simply floating over his machine.

His mind blank, Gawman raised his descent speed ever further, crashing into the ground.

Directly below was the Tasaday Hotel, where Hathaway and Gigi had yet to flee from the area. And Hathaway's next contact, Emeralda Zubin, was no doubt there too.

She was a female warrior who had been entrusted in Mihessia Hence's stead with the role of watching Hathaway's movements from the front lobby of the Tasaday Hotel, and acting to support him in the actions he took.

She was a twenty-six year old who had come to Earth after failing the mobile suit pilot test.

She was also the perfect person to ambush the attack point in an operation involving using a mobile suit.

Having spotted Hathaway running out of the building through one of the back exits instead of the main entrance from inside her car, Emeralda came out of the car and leaped towards the road.

"Why is he running in the opposite direction?!"

Although the reasonable thing to do was evacuating from the hotel, Hathaway was running with Gigi away from where Emeralda and her car was.

Vaulting over the guard rail, Emeralda closed in on Hathaway while trying to blend in with the crowd.

"Why the heck is he with some brat?!"

Bickering in her head, Emeralda had closed her distance with Hathaway, leaving only a few meters between him and herself.

"Tsk!"

But then along with a thunderous noise, she saw Gawman's Messer 2 being thrust down to the ground by two Gustav Karls.

On top of that, there were other mobile suits that seemed to be in pursuit of it.

"What the hell is he doing?"

Then, almost instantaneously, just as she tried to swear again, the pursuing Gustav Karl's fire drew a firing line. The fire hit the asphalt in front of her and exploded.

"Aah!"

The blinding light from the explosion had burned Hathaway's and Gigi's shadows on the ground, and some of the small asphalt debris hit Hathaway's back, dealing a crushing blow.

"Uh!"

All the while, Hathaway could feel Gigi's trembling body, and felt attracted to her young and delicate body.

"Damn it!"

Trying to shake off his sudden unwanted desires in such desperate times, he raised his head over his shoulders.

He could see Gawman's Messer 2 falling from the sky that had brightened up a bit.

"Aah!"

"The mobile suit is falling!"

The screams immediately alarmed Hathaway and Gigi.

"Stand up!"

Wrapping Gigi's head with his jacket, Hathaway started running along the crowd with Gigi in his arms.

"Aah! Wah!"

He could hear Gigi's panting from underneath his jacket. Her breath sounded so painful, that he worried if she would suddenly cease to breathe.

"Do you want to be crushed by a falling machine?"

Emeralda had followed Hathaway right behind him, and decided to watch his behavior.

Mihessia had considered Gigi something of an obstacle to Hathaway. However, to Emeralda, it seemed as though Hathaway was simply caring for a girl out of sympathy whom he met during his travels.

Emeralda moved to Hathaway's side, bumping into his shoulder to make him aware of her presence.

"Ah?"

Hathaway recognized Emeralda, and breathed out in relief.

To Emeralda, Hathaway's reaction upon seeing her was enough to make her think that he was not a just some lowlife trying to simply have his way with the girl.

Kwaar! The loud vulcan cannons roared right above the people's heads.

"Kyaah!"

"Aah!"

Stumbling, Gigi fell away from Hathaway's hands and opened her mouth, trying to breathe in deeply.

Dubaba!

Suddenly, with a thick dusty cloud, lumps of asphalt and concrete flew up right in front of them, and the people around the blast seemed to leap up for a second, before they disappeared into the whirling cloud of dust.

"Over there!" Emeraldalda cried, not just to Hathaway, but to all of the surrounding people.

The direction towards which she pushed Hathaway was an entrance to the park that was blown wide open, located to the right hand side of the road.

Nodding to Emeraldalda, Hathaway broke into a run together with her, retreating below the trees in the park. Beneath the trees, he could see the silhouettes of many people running.

"Everything's falling apart!" screamed Emeraldalda, which was intended to mean a lot of other things as well.

"Right now, you're hugging your own enemy! In so many ways!"

Hathaway tried to explain Gigi's presence to Emeraldalda.

"Both above and below?"

Hathaway signaled at Gigi to say yes with a wink.

"...?"

Emeraldalda was forced to accept that there had to be some reason that Hathaway was protecting the girl.

The growl of exhaust fumes being purged from a mobile suit's tail nozzle lingered, and as they raised their heads, a thunderous blast of exploding buildings and structures shook the park.

Doon! Bashaah! Following the immeasurable amount of glass shattering and things slipping, the noise died down for a bit.

Both Hathaway and Emeraldalda, in defiance of the violent clamor, stood up and looked behind them.

"...Gawman!"

Hathaway saw above the park's trees, Gawman's mobile suit slip and fall off a building it was leaning against.

"Is the Earth Federation Space Force over there, too?"

Emeraldalda faced inward the park.

"...what?"

One of the Gustav Karls had landed in the right hand side of the park, and its large feet were trampling on the park's trees. It was only about 20 meters away from her.

Byaaah!

With a roaring noise, the bright light from the mobile suit's gun produced such a violent hot blast that swept Gigi and Emeraldalda, they felt as if their clothes were about to be torn away from their bodies.

The heat wave produced from the beam rifle heated the cold morning air, and produced a deafening noise as it drew a line.

The glass and interior of the building Gawman's mobile suit was leaning against started glowing intensely in white, and everything inside it immediately started to melt.

"Huh?"

Almost letting her body float away, Emeraldalda grabbed on to one of the trees that was beside her.

"Aaah!"

Gigi stiffened her body while holding on to her bag in her bosom and yelled in a high pitch, like an animal.

"Gigi! Over here!"

Holding on to Gigi's slim waist, Hathaway was trying to pull her over to the thick-walled concrete building on the left side of the trees.

Yet, Hathaway was also watching Gawman's mobile suit, shining with the morning sun, being attacked by a Gustav Karl's Manipulator weapon over Gigi's head.

Zap!

While wielding their manipulators, both machines were trying to pull out their beam sabers. However, they ended up checking each other. To do more damage to each other, the 30-meter tall machines were flinging their arms and legs at each other.

Just think of several tanks crashing into each other's armor.

Klam! Pow!

Sparks were flying as the steel arm punched the thick metal armor, and shook the frame of the machine.

It seemed, though, that the Messer 2 machine was faster, and in fact started to overpower the opponent.

However, on top of the steel-colored building that was standing right behind Messer 2 were several other Gustav Karls that had penetrated through the ceiling of the building as they landed on top of it.

As they landed on the ground, pieces of metal and concrete flew away.

Even right in front of him was another Gustav Karl, and every time it took a step, the curbstones rose up and the trees around it fell over.

Gawman's machine was kicked up in the air with a deafening cracking sound that indicated something inside breaking, and flipped up the Gustav Karl's arm that was in front of him.

Gawman's machine had crushed Gustav Karl's beam saber handle. Electric sparks broke from the mobile suit's waist, and blinded Hathaway.

"Gigi! Are you okay?"

As if to push Gigi against the concrete wall of the building, Hathaway thrust his jacket away.

"Ah...umph!"

Holding on to her bag in her chest, Gigi, with her hair sticking to her pale face, shed big tears as she was opening and closing her mouth like a gold fishing breathing underwater.

Though she was crying like a baby, all the strength had left her body, so the color had drained out of her face, and she looked almost dead.

It was the same reaction of pure terror as a child with no resistance.

Byaaah!

Hathaway looked up to see the Gustav Karl that had landed on the park drawing its beam saber. The pink ray of light, however, disappeared soon, as if the pilot was simply testing it.

Although he was concerned about Gawman, Hathaway had no choice but to watch the fight from the shadow of the building, which upset him.

"Emeralda...! Are you really abandoning him...?"

Even if he was screaming inside, Hathaway couldn't possibly let go of the girl who was crying in his arms.

"This is awful... This is all so awful. I'm so afraid..."

Gigi finally found words.

"You're right... It's awful..."

Almost unconsciously, Hathaway found himself agreeing with Gigi's words. Logically speaking, he would have liked to deny such a naive, pure hearted reaction, but somehow he couldn't.

Yet Hathaway was also desperately trying to prevent himself from slipping into Gigi's mind which was in a delicate state.

"All we have to do is keep running towards Emeraldal! That's all we have to do!"

As Gigi kept cowering no matter how many times he told her about it, he decided to think she was putting up an act.

Nonetheless, Hathaway was pained from the thought of leaving her.

"Guess...please help us..."

Holding Gigi's attractive and delicate upper arm and waist, Hathaway shouted.

As soon as he did, the ground shook with a deafening sound.

"Huh?"

Hathaway looked to his left, and the ground shook once again. He could see some of the trees in the park falling over as a Gustav Karl backed up.

Babark! Buburk! Boom!

A rain of concrete debris fell on Hathaway.

"Aah!"

Gigi screamed in front of Hathaway's sight, as if she were watching something scary in the cinema.

Hathaway pushed Gigi's body in the direction of the park, and the two tumbled to the ground.

It seemed as though a Gustav Karl had landed on top of the building the two were standing against.

".....?"

A cursory glance revealed no sign of Emeraldal.

Hathaway felt as if he were being pushed out to the void. But the feeling was soon brought to an end as two beam sabers clashed, producing massive sparks that burned his retina.

Gawman's machine seemed to have thrust his opposing Gustav Karl away, which was being penetrated.

Babshaa!

The sparks flew in all directions, burning the nearby ground and trees, but not Hathaway and Gigi. Even a small bit of the spark had more destructive force than a vulcan cannon.

Hathaway forcibly yanked on Gigi's hands, which were covering her face, without caring whether she staggered.

"Aah!

"Run!"

Towards the next building, Hathaway tugged Gigi's body. As they were running, some of the trees above their heads were set on fire with the heated air from the sparks from the clashing beam sabers.

Baff! Leaning against the wall of the building, Hathaway held Gigi's stumbling body.

Holding Gigi, who had reached a mental breaking point, as hard as he could, Hathaway watched as the mobile suits engaged each other in a sword fight using beam sabers on the other side of the road.

At that very moment, a Gustav Karl started charging at the Messer 2 from behind.

"...!"

Hathaway managed to endure hearing Gawman's painful cries by holding on to Gigi's young body.

Gabaam! Even for Hathaway, it must have been his first time actually hearing the mobile suit's armor melt by being hit by a beam saber.

Think of a massive welding machine exploding in a split second. The valve on the side of Gawman's machine was letting out a steam like a waterfall.

Suddenly, Grrrr!

"...?"

A machine Hathaway did not recognize flew across the sky, and hovered over Gawman's machine. Suddenly, it kicked Gawman's machine's face.

"Huh?"

It was just like a scene from a comic book.

While watching Gawman's machine fall over to the left, Hathaway moved away from the mobile suit while leaning his body against the wall.

Sticking close to Hathaway's chest, Gigi was wetting his shirt with tears.

"Umph!"

Emeralda jumped out from the shadow of a tree.

"Oh, sorry..."

Meeting Hathaway's gaze, she bumped into him on purpose, sticking a hand into the pocket of his slacks.

"...?"

As the frame of Gawman's machine lurched sideways, another Gustav approached, and seized one of its arms.

Seeing this, Emeralda ran further into the park, but Hathaway was unable to run until he calmed down Gigi. One of the Earth Federation Space Forces' Base Jabber was preparing to land.

"...? Negen...?"

Hathaway pulled out and read the piece of paper that Emeralda had thrust into his pocket. He crushed it in his hand as he comforted Gigi.

"Gigi, the battle's over... Gigi..."

"I can't deal with this fear... It's too... Too scary..."

"Listen closely. It's quiet now, right? It's quiet."

Gigi cowered even from the sound of groaning metal and mobile suits taking a step on the ground.

"I can still hear the noise of the machines," sobbed Gigi, as she finally raised her sopping wet face away from Hathaway's chest.

Chapter.13

Commander

Across the park, beyond the trees that hadn't been burned away, Hathaway could see the Gustav Karl thrusting its beam rifle at Gawman's stumbling Messer 2 from both sides. It looked to him like a fight not between two mobile suits but between two people. One of them, having gone down, was on the defensive, and the other, with the upper hand, was pressing that advantage to keep their opponent in check. It was a behavior that was extremely reminiscent of humans themselves.

Gawman's mobile suit lifted its remaining working manipulator as a sign of submission, the other hanging to the ground.

"..."

Hathaway froze at the sound of the Kimberley Forces' Base Jabber descending onto the park's highest field. He didn't like the idea of facing them right now, but with Gigi there, it couldn't be helped. Gigi turned back towards Hathaway, sobbing heavily, as she pulled back the hair clinging to her face.

"Is the Captain not coming...?"

Gigi stuttered as she spoke, and Hathaway saw a figure that looked like Gawman stepping out of the Messer's cockpit.

"Someone's coming out of the Messer..."

"It's all over..."

Gigi dropped to the ground as the strength left her body. As the pilot exited the Messer, his hands raised, the morning sun struck him from the side, casting a large shadow on the mobile suit behind him. Across from him, the other pilot similarly stepped out from his cockpit, his mobile suit making contact with the Messer.

The Base Jabber, with its advanced VTOL capabilities, landed on top of the hill in an almost completely vertical motion, unleashing strong air currents from its nozzle upon Hathaway and Gigi.

"..."

Gigi tucked her shoulders in to endure the wind pressure.

"This our first Mafty prisoner! Make sure he doesn't get hurt!"

As someone shouted from the Base Jabber, several soldiers came dashing out and ran towards the mobile suits, showing no interest in Hathaway or Gigi.

"It's f-f-freezing..."

Gigi fixed the front of her night gown, her upper body shaking from the cold, and Hathaway threw a jacket across her back.

"Hathaway! Gigi! You guy's are alive?!"

"Captain..."

This reunion meant increasing danger for Hathaway, but he couldn't afford to make a move right now. Gigi came home safe last night as well, in a good mood, retiring to her bedroom. If he tried to run away now, it would only make him look suspicious.

"Captain!"

When Gigi saw Kenneth walking down the gangplank of the Base Jabber, she lifted herself onto her feet, unsteadily, dropping Hathaway's jacket to the ground.

The thought of escape kept running through Hathaway's mind as he picked up his jacket, but to keep up appearances, he began walking towards Kenneth.

"Are you hurt?"

"Ah, no need to worry."

As Hathaway answered, he put his jack back on, and Kenneth ran over to the staggering Gigi and caught her in his arms.

"Captain, I was so scared! I was so scared..."

Gigi turned her back to Kenneth, as if to invite him to comfort her.

"It must have been terrifying...I amazed you got away. The hotel was attacked as well, wasn't it?"

Kenneth caressed Gigi's back as he listened to Hathaway's reply.

"Yeah. We ended up escaping from right under a scuffle between two mobile suits."

"That sounds awful..."

"It was miserable. I had no idea what was happening."

"Get in the cockpit. It's warmer in there."

"Thanks."

Kenneth put his arms around Gigi's back as he guided them towards the Base Jabber's gangplank.

"..."

The two of them looked like they were getting along a little too well to Hathaway, and he couldn't help but feel jealous. That paired with the fact that he now had to ride in the Kimberley Forces' Base Jabber, and he found himself wanting to turn back all the more.

"Look after this young lady!"

Kenneth shouted into the cockpit, and Hathaway stood at the base of the gangplank, looking back at the mobile suits. The morning sun shone beautifully on their upper frames, and the mobile suit that had taken out Gawman's stood a head taller, displaying its height.

"Is that it? The mobile suit from the Mafty group, or whatever they're called."

"Looks like it. This is the first time I've seen it as well...Not bad for its first day on the job."

"I suppose so..."

Hathaway began to shiver. As the adrenaline rush from his ordeal faded, he felt the cold morning air pierce his body along with the irony of his own actions.

"That big one was pretty amazing. What is it?"

"A new model. It was sent in before I was appointed."

"It just took out Mafty's mobile suit."

"Don't be mistaken. Lane Aim failed to show you what it's really capable of. I expected more from him."

"A new model, huh..."

"Have you heard the bad news? The moon and the Brutz Holts Colony have signed papers for weapons provisions. It's unbelievable..."

"That'll probably be more convenient for Mafty."

"Exactly. We have to beat the information out of them to figure out where they're getting their weapons...And to boot, we have to retrain those punks from the Kimberley Forces. That ex-desk clerk Kimberley is only good for turning soldiers into wimps."

"Captain! Your orders?!"

"What are you talking about!"

Kenneth lifted the small radio on his wrist to his mouth and shouted into it.

"Shall I'll take care of transporting the prisoner?"

"Idiot. Bring him to me. I'll handle him personally."

"Roger!"

"Jeez. All these mobile suit pilots are so full of themselves. This is why they can't handle proper tactics."

Hathaway scrunched his shoulders from the cold, crossing his arms and making his way up the gangplank. He peered into the cockpit, where he saw Gigi blowing her nose with a tissue.

"Get the captured Messer transported! And keep the roads blockaded until it's done! Just call in a carrier!"

Kenneth's voice carried loudly as he shouted into the radio. Hathaway couldn't help thinking that their work would become a lot more difficult if this man were put in charge.

"You listening?!"

Hathaway listened in on Captain Kenneth.

"Get in! We can head back to the hotel now!"

"There's some luggage left, but do you think it's still there?"

"I'll have you look into it later."

Amongst Kenneth's shouting, a pilot stepped out of the cockpit and invited Hathaway in.

"Sorry about that."

Hathaway moved diagonally across the rear cabin and entered the cockpit. The Base Jabber's cockpit was exceptionally long from side to side and resembled the bridge of a ship.

"Pardon me."

"I heard you a rough time out there."

The pilot seemed friendly, showing consideration toward Hathaway.

"Yeah..."

Gigi wrapped her hands tightly around a cup of coffee as she drank it.

"Did you want some?"

"Huh...? Oh..."

Hathaway was taken aback by Gigi's comment, who seemed as if she had completely forgotten the terror she had been feeling until a moment ago. However, she didn't look composed enough to notice his own hesitation.

"...haaa..."

Not sure what to say, Gigi let out a long breath and urged him to take her cup. Hathaway explained that he thought she was referring to a different cup, as he grabbed hers and took a sip.

"Ahh..."

As Hathaway put his lips to the same cup that Gigi had as well, the warmth of the coffee filled him with a complicated feeling of relief. Gigi let out a long yawn, and after glancing at Hathaway who was staring absent-mindedly at his cup, she laid her head on his lap.

"I heard you got hit by an air raid."

The Base Jabber's pilot sized up the two of them.

"Yeah, we were at the Tasadai Hotel."

"That must have been tough."

"It was horrifying."

Hathaway felt comforted by the weight of Gigi's upper body against his thigh, as he looked out the back left side of the cockpit onto the park. Gawman Nobile was being escorted towards Kenneth and the others, his hands cuffed and a gun to his back. He looked rather pathetic with his helmet removed. Worried he might be noticed by Gawman, Hathaway sunk into his chair slightly, put his coffee to his mouth and directed his attention toward the mobile suits. The Messer 2 was being inspected by the Gustav Karl, as the tall mobile suit began a vertical ascent.

"Wow...I've never seen a mobile suit take off like that before."

"Yeah, it's the Minovsky craft system."

Like Hathaway, the copilot in front of him was following the movements of the new model mobile suit as well.

"Over here! Make sure you've got him covered from all sides. That's the first member of Mafty we've captured!"

Several soldiers came stomping up towards the rear cabin, with Kenneth in the lead. Hathaway focused his attention behind him, hoping to sense Gawman's movements, but he didn't forget to throw a quick glance towards the hatch. If he had kept too still, he'd end up looking more suspicious. Beyond the soldiers climbing the gangplank, he could see Gawman's lower body.

"Over there!"

Someone gave an order to Gawman, and he disappeared from Hathaway's field of vision.

"Just where in the Federation were you..."

"The 183rd Western Forces."

It was Gawman's voice.

"What were you doing there? That squad's just a bunch of hooligans."

"Not at all. During Char's Rebellion, they underwent combat training everyday. It was harder work than a real battle."

Hathaway had figured that Gawman would stay strong if he were ever captured, but he didn't expect him to be this put together. He realized that otherwise Gawman wouldn't have been able to pull a stunt like attacking the hotel he was staying at.

"...Just so you know, I'm not like Kimberley. When we get back to base, we're going to have a nice long chat, so enjoy yourself in the meantime."

After spouting some threats, Captain Kenneth entered the cockpit and ordered him to leave.

"Is it okay to keep these two here?"

"You've got cards, right?"

Kenneth looked at Hathaway and Gigi as he asked.

"This?"

Hathaway pulled a card from a hidden pocket beneath his shirt and showed it to Kenneth. It looked as though Gigi had really fallen asleep on Hathaway's lap.

"Alright. As long as you have that, you're a passenger. These two are authorized guests of the Federation."

"Roger!"

Meanwhile, the Gustav Karl had latched onto the upper deck of the Base Jabber and leaned its weight into it.

"Tell them to keep it down!"

After shouting another order, Kenneth looked at the sleeping Gigi and quietly told Hathaway that he didn't understand the girl.

There was an eruption of sound as the intrusive roar of the jet engines enveloped the Base Jagger, and it began its ascent with the usual abrupt force of a military vessel.

"Mavis! Can you hear me! We're going to head to the hotel to check on Gigi and Hathaway's luggage!"

As Kenneth shouted, his voice echoed across the bridge, and Hathaway wondered if Gawman could hear it from the back cabin through closed doors.

Chapter.14

Young Pilot

In two short breaths, the Base Jabber Kessaria, with Hathaway and the others on board, caught sight of the airport runway ahead and descended toward the corner occupied by the Kimberley Unit.

"Looks like they got them here too."

"Yeah, they're pretty crazy. They know exactly where to strike."

This was the first time Hathaway saw the details of the base from above as well. It was nearly impossible to see anything from the Haunzen's port-side window. The building in the middle of the runway had not been attacked, but there were some signs of explosive impacts on the row of hangars at its southern end, the roofs sooty and black. But while Hathaway was away from Earth for the past month, another hangar had been added, and he noticed that it alone had been left untouched.

He realized that if Captain Kenneth were in charge of reinforcing the Kimberley unit, it would have gained a considerable amount of firepower. Units like Penelope might only be the tip of the iceberg.

As soon as we manage to get our hands on one Gundam with our sweat and hard work, there's this mess..."

Although this encounter could be seen as a mere coincidence of fate, "The heavens are drawing us into a battle," he thought.

His mother, Mirai Yashima, may have influenced his ideas about the heavens, a concept influenced by his Oriental blood.

"Is it that unusual?"

Kenneth's voice suddenly rang in his ears.

"Well, yes. I haven't seen such an orderly sight since the colonies, and it makes me think of how these artificial objects are polluting Earth."

"That's a biased view from someone specializing in plants. If it weren't for the rumor that Mafty has a base in the South Pacific, we wouldn't be doing this."

"Is that rumor true?"

"We've made contact with Oenbelli. Kimberley says he won't come back until he ousts the private army gathered there."

"Kimberley is your predecessor, right? He left, knowing you were coming?"

"That's right. Didn't I tell you? That's the kind of guy he is."

"What are we going to do?"

"I'm going to take charge myself. I have orders giving me full right to."

Kenneth laughed and took out his ridding whip from beside the sheet and slapped it into his palm.

"Did the Earth Federation government not know?"

"They must not have... The idiots don't know how dangerous gathering on Earth is, nor do they realize the Mafty is serious. Four more were killed this morning."

"That many...?"

"Mafty's declaration will be broadcast in another hour. They're going to hijack a signal."

Slam!

The Base Jabber landed before the hangar with a light shock, undamaged.

"Wait one second."

Kenneth hopped out of the center seat, slapping the ridding whip, and moved to the back cabin.

"You can get out, you know," the pilot said to Hathaway lightheartedly.

"What...?"

The floor beneath Hathaway clicked, and a ladder rolled out of the opening.

"...? It's okay?"

"It's not cold anymore, right? We can't let the girl sleep in here forever."

"You're right... Gigi, get up. Gigi..."

"Don't walk around too much; a car will come for us."

"I'm sorry."

"It's so cold..."

Gigi sat up, curling her knees into her nightgown.

"It's warmer outside."

Hathaway climbed down with his back to the rudder as Gigi leaned her upper body against the backrest next to him and stood beneath the Base Jabber's fuselage.

"...?"

The hatch on the side of the Base Jabber opened, and a petty officer spotted Hathaway. Without saying a word, he turned toward the cabin and yelled at Gawman.

"Get out!"

In the meantime, maintenance vehicles and wagons began to gather one after another in front of the hangar to transport the crew.

"Get out now!" a voice shouted from the cabin of the Bass Jabber, and Gawman stumbled down the ramp.

"...!?"

Gawman had his hands cuffed behind his back and was unable to keep his balance. Halfway up the ramp, his upper body slumped forward onto the concrete apron.

Hathaway instantly ran to him.

"Are you okay?"

Hathaway lifted Gawman with his shoulder under his arm and shouted at the petty officer on the ramp, "You're being too rough!" Hathaway yelled.

The petty officer looked down on Hathaway with a sneer. "Civilians should stay out of military affairs, Hathaway."

Kenneth snapped his whip and got down from the trap.

"You know..."

"Botany applicants just don't get it. Do you know what the people are saying about Mafty?"

"I do. He attacked the hotel I was staying at with explosives, right?"

Hathaway tried to dust off Gawman's knees as he picked him up.

This was all to cover up Gawman's distress, but Kenneth removed Hathaway's hand with his riding-whip and said, "Hathaway, I'm being nice to you because you rode with me in the Haulzen. But if you don't do what I say, I'm going to have to beat you."

The tone in Kenneth's voice has a poison in it he had never heard before. It had the scent of an enemy.

"...Sorry. But... No more violence."

"The people are hailing Mafty Erin as a modern Jeanne d'Arc. Mafty's army will be the reality in no time. Do you have any idea what this means?"

"I know that Mafty thinks it has the support of the people."

"Indeed. That's what we're on our toes. Put him in confinement! Interrogate him immediately."

"Yes sir!"

Hathaway scratched his head, as though this was all troubling to him, and stole a glance at Gawman.

Gawman saw the look on Hathaway's face and, despite his frustrated expression, gave a look of understanding as he headed toward the wagon.

"Mafty will become an idol of the true political struggle if we keep babbling on. Jeanne d'Arc will be burned to death. That's what I've come to this unit to do."

"...Amazing..."

Kenneth had no time to pay attention to Hathaway's grimace as Gigi descended the Base Jabber ladder.

"How are you? Have you calmed down a little?"

"Thank you... This is where you work?"

"More or less."

"It's nice. So wide and tidy."

Gigi's eyes, once swollen from crying, finally cleared, and she looked around. "Aah!" she said, surprised.

The Gustav Karl's huge feet came down from the Base Jabber deck and landed with a thud on the rubber floor of the apron.

Gigi backed away from Kenneth as though she had remembered her previous terror.

"Airen! Get away from the Base Jabber! Can't you see she's afraid!"

The Gustav Karl came to a stop, and the pilot was peeking out through the hatch. He sped up a bit and began to move towards the hangar.

"Hey, bring the car over!"

Kenneth called one of the cars that had rushed to accommodate the Base Jabber crew, opened the back door, put Gigi inside, and called to Hathaway.

"I'm sorry."

Hathaway climbed into the back seat of the large passenger car with mixed feelings.

Screach.

The sound of a unique vehicle in flight was approaching again. It was a new model.

"...?"

Hathaway stared at the aircraft as he closed the door. It became a black shadow against the morning sun and landed in front of the hangar next door.

"Wait... Gigi, can you wait a second?"

"Yes..."

Gigi fell back over on the sheet and faced away from Hathaway.

"Lane! I'm in the car in front of the Base Jabber! Get out!"

Kenneth shouted again into the wireless communication device on his arm as he sat in the passenger's seat.

That must have been the name of the pilot of the new mobile suit.

The mobile suit landed on the rubber floor in front of the hangar with graceful knee operations and stood upright. The hatch under its chest opened.

The pilot emerged, ducked under the hatch, and then, using a wire rope, descended a dozen meters from the hatch and came running. His brown hair gave him the impression of being a trustworthy young man.

Kenneth stood up from the passenger seat and began to yell at the young man as he ran.

"Think of all enemy mobile suits as Gundams! Don't think that kicking them down once will make them lose their will to fight! Why didn't you finish them? It's a good thing that the other pilot was a pushover. If you do that again, I'm going to take Penelope away."

"YES, SIR!"

Hathaway saw the young man standing and saluting and understood. A pilot with no real combat experience using a new model is bound to become overconfident.

He was exuding conceit.

"Go! Take care of the Penelope!"

"Yes, sir!"

The pilot, Lane Aim, clicked his heels together with a crisp clack, then turned and ran towards the new craft.

"Excellent test pilots make for poor workers," Kenneth said to Hathaway, indicating the pilot with his chin.

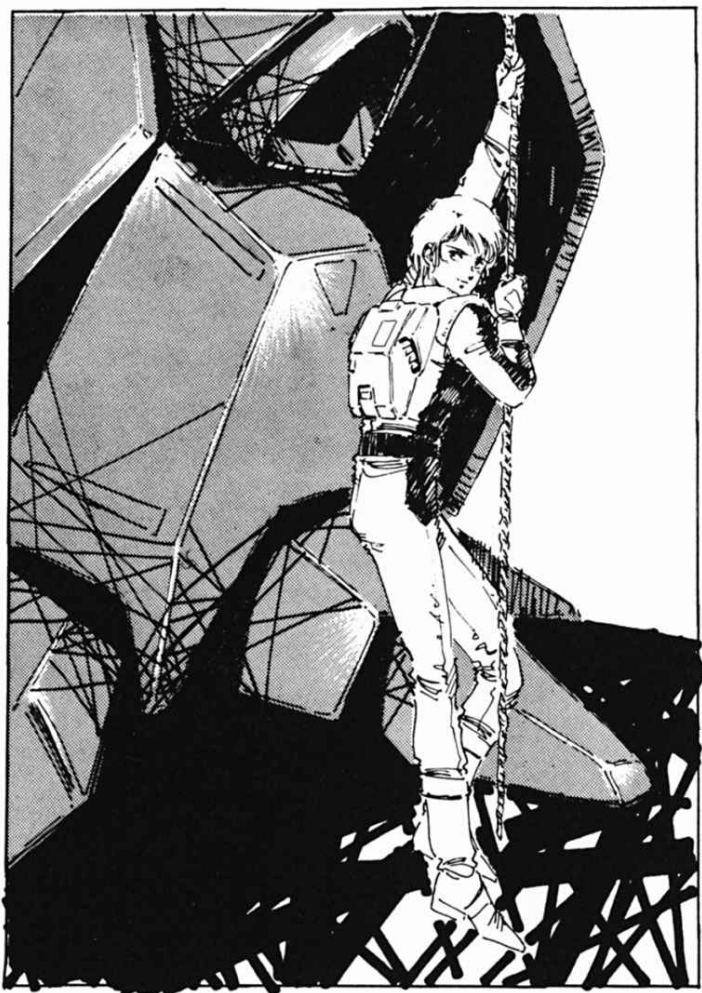
"But, I can sympathize with him," said Hathaway, who continued with a grimace, "He's just like I used to be."

"Yeah...?"

"I mean, when I stole a mobile suit from the army during Char's Rebellion, I became too overconfident and full of myself. I see that in him."

"Is that so."

Kenneth gave a wry smile and looked up at Lane climbing the wire to get to Penelope's hatch.



Chapter.15

Circe Unit

Hathaway and Gigi were provided with rooms at Kenneth's base so they were able to get some rest. He didn't know how Kenneth would have noticed, but Hathaway also had a set of clothes delivered.

"Please wait here for a bit until breakfast is ready,"

A female officer who brought the clothes said in an overtly well-mannered way, which made Hathaway think she was sent to keep tabs on him.

A while later, Gigi reported to Hathaway's room, holding a large paper bag.

"I got these from the shopping center for families on base. They said they would charge it to the Earth Federation government."

"Good, I'm glad for you."

At a loss for words, Hathaway wondered why Gigi had come to see him without telling him. However, Gigi wanted to immediately try out the clothes in the paper bag, so she returned to her room without saying a word more.

"Breakfast is ready. This way, please..."

About thirty minutes later, Wave, who brought the clothes, showed Hathaway to the cafeteria.

Hathaway caught a glance of the building map displayed in the corridor twice, but memorizing that would not have been enough to figure out the base's detailed layout. The display only shows the general layout and does not show any crucial information. It was enough to make a fair guess that the east side of the building faces the aircraft runway and control tower, while the south side is where the hangars are. Hathaway and Gigi's rooms are on the northern side, and he could see a line of small warehouses from his window. Judging from these facilities' arrangement, all he could infer is that they are keeping Gawman captive in the southern part of this building.

"They didn't destroy this building, huh?"

"No, but a near hit broke the glass, though..."

He was shown to the officers' dining hall.

It was busy in the cafeteria, with teams of two or three coming in, quickly finishing their meal and leaving without drinking any tea, giving the impression that an operation was underway.

"...."

Hathaway never expected that he'd be eating in the mess hall of the unit he'd be squaring off against, so he wasn't in the mood of checking it out.

Gigi was brought there, too, after a while.

"Well, how do I look? "

As the clothes were bought from the shopping center on base, it was inevitably casual, yet she looked quite good.

"It's a good combination considering they probably didn't have anything you'd like."

"Ugh, it's so hard to decide... Have you picked out anything yet?"

"I was waiting for you."

"Oh, really... What should we get?"

"Umm..."

Wave, who brought Gigi there, interrupted them with a smile, saying, "The Captain said he would be late but wants to join you two."

"I see..."

"What should I eat...?"

Gigi's mood must have changed too after changing her clothes. She ran over to the counter like a child in high spirits.

"Energetic girl, huh? "

Wave, who apparently came from this island, talked to Hathaway in a friendly tone.

"The individual from the Bureau of Investigation said they will be here at 10 o'clock and wanted to meet you too."

"They have permission from the Captain, right?"

"They do."

While silently cursing his luck for being stopped in his tracks again, Hathaway thanked Wave and headed to the counter. They both sat at the table, and as they started eating, Kenneth went to the counter and came to their table.

"I have news. Interested? "

He started off the conversation with that.

"...? "

Hathaway, while believing that it can't be that Gawman had confessed, was scared deep down.

"The name Kimberley Unit sounds weak, doesn't it? On the other hand, Kenneth Corps makes me feel like I'm self-aggrandizing, so I don't like it."

Kenneth munched on his toast bread as he convinced himself.

"Are we discussing philosophy now?"

"Obviously. Just being loud isn't enough to make you a commanding officer. Anyways, Gigi..."

Kenneth, turning his attention to Gigi before making his point, showed how childish he is.

"I've got the perfect name for my unit. What do you think it is? "

"Oh, I don't know... South Pacific Corps?" "

"Oh, don't be silly. It's Circe Unit. Great name, huh? You should know what it means, right, Gigi?"

"You're weird... But it sounds strong. It still sounds weaker than Mafty, though."

"Circe, huh? I've heard of that before."

Gigi smiled as Hathaway uttered that.

"I'm pretty sure, at least. You meant that Circe, right? Circe's magic tames ferocious beasts... I think I read that in the Odyssey. It's the name of the daughter of Helios, the God of Sun."

"That's right. Mafty can't beat this."

"But Mafty is a combination of different names in the hopes of beating the gods in Greek and Roman mythology, right? Don't you think so, Hathaway?"

"Hahaha... That's true."

Hathaway laughed it off as Gigi directed the question at him instead and was glad he could brush the topic off. Gigi is teasing him.

"One thing, though. It's not always about the number of gods you have on your side."

Kenneth answered earnestly, putting scrambled eggs on bacon and devouring it.

"You come off like a completely different person here compared to when you're in front of your troops... Why is that?"

"I have no idea either..."

Hathaway asked, as his nerves calmed. Kenneth put his fork in front of him and shrugged.

"He's just acting like that because I'm here."

Gigi said smugly, but Hathaway didn't realize she was being cheeky.

"Yes, it seems that your charm has such effects on men."

"To be honest, though, I don't actually know if it's me. I've only met men who are fun to be with, so it gives me that illusion."

Gigi's ability to eat an egg from its egg cup with her back straight is impressive. Hathaway thought he had a faint clue how to get to Gigi, but Kenneth pulled the plug on their conversation as if it were nothing.

"It's one of your virtues... Anyways, your date tonight is canceled since the cabinet members all died, right? How about we go out, huh?"

"Aren't you busy?"

Gigi couldn't help showing disgust at Kenneth's remark.

"I always have time for you, Gigi. It will benefit the Circe Unit, too. Like I said, your presence inspires men, Gigi. In other words, Gigi, you're the goddess of fortune. So, if you sleep with me, the Circe Unit will become the essence of Circe."

"Captain, you're going a bit too far. I may be thinking about the same thing."

"Huh...? You?"

As Kenneth grimaced, an officer rushed in.

"Commander! The search party has been dispatched to the 4th squadron, but what about the rest?"

"Send all of them. ALL OF THEM!"

"Yessir...!"

During that time, Gigi threw a glance at Hathaway, whispering to him, "You really mean that?" with one elbow hiding her mouth.

"Huh...? Oh, well, I am worried about you..."

"Oh my goodness, that's so cliché!"

Gigi quickly turned her body back around and scooped up the last bit of egg white from her egg holder.

"See? You're still such a weakling," Kenneth said teasingly as he watched the officer turn about and leave.

"Even so, I hate the way you talk like an adult who's seen it all, Captain. I don't have the ability to invigorate men in any way."

He had it coming. Gigi stood up abruptly and turned over her half-empty cup, and it stained the table with milk. Gigi slid through the tables in the officers cafeteria as all eyes of both male and female officers fell upon her, some whistling, and left like the wind.

"...? It's not my fault."

"It's because you spoke your mind. This wouldn't have happened if I just went for it last night..."

"I hate that. That kind of expression..."

"It's the other way around. Saying I love you or being loved, is even more deceitful."

"Is that so... I guess you could be right."

"You're just too naive when it comes to things like this."

"That's true, but it's not my fault. I suffered a terrible heartbreak."

"Is that so?"

"Well then, oh wise one, riddle me this: Why is Gigi so attractive when she's still so young?"

"Huh? Hmm... Let's see. She has the same vibe as an actress who lived a long, long time ago, called Marilyn Monroe when she was at the height of popularity."

"Like Gigi?"

"I'm just saying that she has the same kind of attractiveness. Marilyn was not just a sexy actress. She also had tremendous talent."

"There's nothing sexy about Gigi, though."

Hathaway said that as he recalled her naked body, he caught a glimpse of in the hotel room.

"Well, about that, she has a glass heart, but on top of it all, she has an extremely fresh and young body..."

"Oh... I get that expression"

Hathaway put down his coffee cup and said, "I'll go home myself after the interview with the Bureau of Investigation. I don't want to bother you any further..."

"Is that so? Your luggage from Tasaday Hotel should be here soon. Don't blame me if anything is lost, okay?"

"Sure, you can send me the floppy disks after you're done with them..."

"Oh, about that. I had my people check all your floppy disks. As our mission is to eradicate Mafty, we have the duty and authority to do so. Forgive us."

"I wouldn't have found out if you didn't say anything..."

"I can't do that. Not to a friend. And in any case, I don't have faith in the abilities of this unit. Many of them don't mind breaking other people's stuff."

"Oh... I guess it's complicated. Leading people..."

"That's right... You probably don't have that kind of trouble with plants, huh?"

"What will you do with Gigi?"

"Haha, so you are interested. Once things settle down, I will send her to Hong Kong. I don't mind sending you her address. It's the least I could do."

"I'll find out myself."

"Good. That's my man."

"Now then, I'm going to take a nap until the Bureau of Investigation is here."

"Be my guest. I won't be getting much sleep for a while, thanks to Mafty."

Kenneth stood up, and they returned the trays to the counter.

"You can annihilate them in a single stroke with the Penelope, right?"

"You're wrong about that. In war, military power is what ultimately wins all kinds of skirmishes. And it's not determined by the capabilities of a single mobile suit."

"But Mafty doesn't have much military power, right?"

"For guerrillas, they can make do with it. Those on defense or cracking down on them can't. Including today's statistic, eighteen ministers have been killed."

"You could just stop the ministers from landing on Earth..."

"We can't do that. They have families and homes here on Earth. They can't forget their privilege."

"So, that's why the majority of the public supports Mafty's acts of violence. Why can't the military just send the ministers back into space?"

"We wouldn't be forced to do such a dangerous job if we could do that."

"On top of that, you've got the top brass of the military impersonating Mafty, giving them even more traction."

"Uh-huh... Now you sound like Mafty too."

"All the newspapers are saying the same thing. Gossip magazines too. They're part of Mafty in a way. All of them."

Hathaway kicked himself for his big mouth, yet affirmed his belief.

"How many civilians do you think have died so far due to Mafty's bombings, which they call justice? More than 300, you know?"

"I see..."

Hathaway became gloomy and walked off to return to his room.

"It's this way. Civilians are not allowed in there."

"Oh...? Sorry..."

"What's wrong? "

"Nothing. I just thought that while Mafty has a clear motive for fighting, they would eventually be sacrificed if they continue to kill so many people. That's all..."

Hathaway truly felt that way. While sensing some dangerous signs in his conversation with Hathaway, Kenneth could care less about their relationship now as they have gone so deep into the subject. And yet, it is sad that they reached such a conclusion.

"Uh-huh. I'm going to cut off his head."

"I'm counting on you. Captain... I can't fully agree with you, but..."

"I get it. I feel the same way. I don't fully agree with my own stance either..."

Hathaway had to give him credit for that, although he kept it to himself. In other words, he is terrified of the man who understands the situation well and yet carries out the mission unabated. At the very least, he has the ability to grasp the bigger picture when fighting a battle.

"Why don't we both join Mafty's private army in Oenbelli, Australia, and fight the Earth Federation Forces? "

"Are you serious? I don't think you can actually create a private army."

At that point, Hathaway became desperate to change the topic of their conversation.

"The population on Earth itself is being driven to desperation, so it's actually pretty easy to gather enough people. Just look at the Haunzen, and you'll realize how complacent the Earth Federation government is. I wouldn't count on Kimberley to change that. We need to prepare to plant a spy too."

"Sounds like a lot of work."

"It's straight down this corridor. Just give me a heads up before you leave."

The wireless communicator on Kenneth's hand started blinking, so he yelled into it immediately.

Hathaway must have slept for at least 2 hours.

Wave, who showed him to the cafeteria, came to get him. Hathaway met the Criminal Police Organization's chief, Geise Hugest, in a nondescript room on

the building's second floor, but all he asked was each person's location on the Haunzen. That was the end of the interview.

"Thank you. That's all, and we won't need you back here again."

"Thanks for the hard work. What I don't understand, though, is why there were so many Cabinet members on a plane entering airspace with a strong Mafty presence. In fact, the Tasaday Hotel was even attacked last night, right?"

"I wouldn't know. As I work in such a remote area, I have no idea what's going on in outer space. I am concerned that the people might come to worship Mafty amid the political strife if we are careless..."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Like Joan of Arc. Mafty wouldn't even have to lift a finger, and Mafty insurgents would pop up everywhere."

"Hmm..."

Ultimately, he's saying the same thing as Kenneth did.

"Oh... Please keep this between us."

"Of course... But, is the so-called general consensus on Mafty positive?"

The head of the Criminal Police Organization did not answer Hathaway's question and opened the door, saying, "Well, their tactics are that of terrorists, so they will lose support in the long run."

His eyes behind his glasses seemed to be smiling.

"Your suitcase has been delivered to your room."

"Thanks."

Hathaway returned to his room, led by Wave again. He changed out of the shirt he was given and went out into the corridor.

"May I see the Captain?"

"I will bring you to him."

Wave brought him to the command room on the second floor of the building's southern block.

"Get them! That's all!"

Kenneth's angry voice bellowed through the door, so Wave put her tongue out before knocking on the door.

"Who is it?!"

"Hathaway Noa is here!"

"Alright! Carry on with your training, all of you. Don't even think about slacking off just because you're back up. You are the core of the Circe Unit. Never forget that fact!"

"Yessir!"

Wave opened the door and the men in the room neatly clicked their heels together in a salute. Hathaway stood on the left side of the door and looked on as the pilots marched off. The young pilot of the prototype mobile suit, which Captain Kenneth shouted at in the morning, was among them. He was the only one who gave Hathaway a nervous look, bowed lightly, and walked out.

"The pilot of the new model looks pretty good."

"Lane Aim? Could be better could be worse, unfortunately. Are you interested in joining our unit?"

"No way..."

"Come on. You haven't lost your edge. So, what is it? "

Kenneth sat on the sofa in front of the desk and took Hathaway's records that were on top of the table and passed it to him. The events of the Haunzen incident were printed on them.

"Is this where I sign?"

"Yes..."

Hathaway signed it with the ball pen on the desk while saying, "I was in the military for a while after Char's Rebellion, and even when I went to college, I worked in agriculture. When I finally got to the colonies, I continued to do manual labor in the agricultural blocks."

"Is that so... I thought I saw the makings of a Newtype in you. I'm sure you could handle that Penelope."

"It will take 2 or 3 years, at least. That won't do, would it? "

"I went through Amuro Ray's records, and he became a Gundam pilot in no time. You piloted a mobile suit on the spur of the moment and even managed to shoot down a mobile suit."

"My achievement during Char's rebellion was pure luck. I was given publicity by the Earth Federation Forces just because I was a kid and they won the war."

"Is it also by chance that a kid managed to engage the Alpha Azieru, the new mobile suit of Char's forces, in close combat?"

"I believe so."

That is the very battle that Hathaway was desperately trying to forget. When the girl he met by chance on the spaceship, Quess Paraya ran over to Char Aznable, who rebelled against the Earth Federation government, he became the pilot of a giant mobile suit. She is probably the one who had the prerequisites of a Newtype. Hathaway would never have approached the giant mobile suit if it wasn't for her attraction, and as a result, Hathaway became a murderer in the battle. Although it wasn't considered murder during the battle, Hathaway was forever haunted by the trauma of killing the person he loved. That is the story of his encounter with Quess Paraya and his internal struggle.

"Is that so. Newtype?"

"They said the same thing to Amuro Ray, and he got angry and called it meaningless words."

"Hmm, I see. So, you were in direct contact with Amuro Ray, too?"

"He was a friend of my father."

"Is that so... So, your father was a part of an elite autonomous unit during the White Base era."

"I'm just a son of the captain, Bright Noa."

"Once I settle this score with Mafty, let's go trolling together, deal?"

"Sure. Anyway, I'm leaving. Is that all?"

"You'll need a lift from the airport here, won't you?"

"Yes, but I'd like to pick up some things for my stay in Manado before I go. I will head into the city. I'll get a lift home from there."

"Do you need to say farewell to Gigi?"

"I was brought here directly, so I forgot to tell her. But, I think I'll pass. I'll just have regrets if I see her. Tell her I said goodbye and tell her to come by if she can... Is that too much to ask?"

"I don't know where she'll settle in to... But I can tell you where she is once she's settled in."

"I'm not following you."

"It is suspicious. She came down to Earth without a permanent address. The address she told us was an abandoned apartment."

"Huh? So, you actually look into that kind of thing, too."

"Hey, don't forget that we're the Circe Unit tasked to annihilate Mafty."

"Sure."

Hathaway chuckled as he left Captain Kenneth's office.

Chapter.16

Runaway

Hathaway took the limousine that Captain Kenneth arranged for him to the shopping center in Davao. Alone, he finally wondered if Gigi had not mentioned what she had felt about him to Kenneth.

"She seems like she'd be the type who would talk, yet doesn't... Why?"

He felt the urge to return to Kenneth's base when he realized that the girl who at first glance seemed like she would try to flirt with any man was really a completely different girl. Still, he felt obligated to recover the Gundam himself, so long as he was able to.

"I shouldn't draw any conclusions about Gigi. She may be telling Kenneth that I work for Mafty at this very moment," he said as if to abandon the expectation that remained deep within him. While he had escaped danger, for now, he was running out of time. He had to hurry.

"Where shall I drop you off?" the NCO in the driver's seat asked.

"Oh, just let me off wherever it's easy to stop."

Hathaway didn't trust the driver, who did as he asked. There was another non-commissioned officer next to him in the passenger's seat. Even though he was slightly panicked, he knew he could not do anything that would arouse suspicion.

Coin-operated lockers are always located near tourist information centers.

Hathaway entered the bank and exchanged a fair amount of money, then left his suitcase in a locker and went to the information center to check the time of his flight to Menado.

"Looks like I'll be flying out in the evening," he intentionally said to himself in front of the woman at the counter and then headed off toward the Port of Davao.

The people at the information counter were there to monitor the flow of people and check for illegal residents. Of course, some people wanted to remain on Earth and use the bureaucracy to create new positions. The former reason, however, was more relevant.

Hathaway headed for the shopping arcade, made some purchases that would please the old professor, and waited for contact with his allies, being careful not to be followed.

"...would like to apologize for the losses sustained to the civilian population. However, I urge the people living on Earth to understand that we live in an era

where it is considered a crime to reside on the planet's surface. This is something everyone truly needs to understand."

The voice came from Mafty's speech that was being broadcast over the hijacked airwaves. It was not Hathaway's voice, but he was present at the scripted speech recording.

"You've gotta be freaking kidding me! They're the ones who were willfully blowing everything to hell!"

"They say it wasn't Mafty that did the worst part of the bombing this morning. You didn't hear? Everyone knows the mobile suits from Kimberley were much worse."

The conversation of people passing by him stung his ears.

"We attacked out of necessity, to make the current government reflect on the fact that they have forgotten the meaning behind space immigration. War has been declared, but the Earth Federation government refuses to recognize the existence of Mafty. I sincerely hope those living on Earth understand their indolence."

Hathaway left the arcade district as though fleeing from the speech's sounds pouring out from the radios and televisions. If Mitsuda had also evaded the Hunters, he would find him, and Emeralda admitted she was still here, so it seemed he had nothing to worry about.

Hathaway headed off to find a fishing boat code named Nejen somewhere south of the Port of Davao.

"..."

He moved south along the port. Samar Island cast its shadow like a breakwater off the shore. It was aggravating for him to have to pretend just to be taking a stroll. He wanted to run or even steal a car to get to his destination.

"You're from space, right? How about it? I can give you a good deal on a trip around Samar Island."

He didn't know how the people in the harbor could pick people out, but there were always men and women who would call out from piers where small boats sat moored.

"No thanks. I'm just taking a walk..."

He somewhat hoped that he would find his allies among them but had no such luck. The reality was, he had to progress slowly, at a pace that would bore anyone watching. He was forced to endure as he moved forward. It was nerve-racking to pretend to be a tourist or local resident and avoid looking about or showing any sign of alarm. Still, he needed to avoid being suspected of anything and worked to blend into the surroundings.

The heat of the ocean coast became hard on his body as noon approached.

"Guess, what should I do. Tell me how to move forward..."

Hathaway could not forget his conversation with Kenneth and repeated her name silently. If only doing so could reverberate deeply into him and coax a response, but it did not.

The name Quess Paraya sank to the bottom of his heart, still shouting out those haunting words.

"Char!" it cried.

She had run to Char right before his eyes and never returned. Still, the image of her leaving left an indelible impression on his heart as if it had all happened yesterday. It is human to be haunted by such memories, and this is just the way people are in the narrow space that is reality. People are small. They cannot send their thoughts into other dimensions.

"...?"

The gentle slope of the sandy beach was lined with coconut palms. Being in a place like this would be suspect to any hostile entity, so there was no way there would be even a trace of the fishing boat trying to contact Hathaway.

"Have you heard of the Nejen?"

The boy was about fifteen or sixteen years old, wearing only a pair of swimming trunks, and stood over the bow of an old canoe smiling at Hathaway.

"What do you mean...?"

"If you've heard of it, get on. If you give me ten dollars, then I'll take you there."

"A bit steep, no?"

"Just doing business."

"Okay, I'm in. What do you normally do with your time?"

"Hold up the bow. I'll push..." said the boy in a friendly manner and continued as he pushed the canoe off the beach, "I usually find my customers here. I have a permit. Look..."

He had no time to think about his shoes as he waded into the water to look at the tourism business permit inside of the plastic bag around the boy's neck.

"Why do you have something like that?"

"Why? My family has been doing this since my mother's generation. People from space like this kind of thing, right? Hop on."

"Alright..."

Hathaway struggled to get his lower body out of the water and clung to the canoe as he plunged his upper body into it.

"You aren't very good at this..."

The boy already had his oars in his hands before he had time to laugh.

"I'm not used to the water... Even though it's been three years since I moved to Menado..."

"Maybe you're just not used to looking at the ocean."

"Yeah, I work with plants."

The boy looked out at Samala Island and paddled both oars to take the canoe out off the shore quickly.

He seemed well-versed; you could tell he did it every day.

"Do you want an overview of the landscape?"

"Sure... Who asked you to do this?"



"No idea. A woman came just before you got here and told me to tell you what I did and get you in my canoe. That's all."

"Hmph."

"You aren't used to the ocean, right? The woman said as much. She said that as we approached, they would make preparations... Are you getting married?"

"Married...? Yeah, at least that's what I intended..."

"Hahaha... So you like older women? Sounds nice. I want to find one myself."

"Where did she tell you to take me?"

"No idea. She said she would come get you after thirty minutes of rowing. It might take an hour. That doesn't matter, though. I'm fine as long as I get back before dark."

Hathaway suspected that he might regret having met this boy, but there was nothing else he could do.

"Up to an hour, huh..."

Hathaway felt it would be too late to fully utilize this area to make it in time to meet the Gundam that was to descend to Earth later on.

"The Gundam will fall before Kenneth's eyes. Kenneth should catch it."

Hathaway and the others chose these waters to receive the Gundam because it was relatively stable at this time of year, and at the same time, there were numerous islands suited to setting up a temporary base. More importantly, it is also perfect for making the shuttle seem like a falling meteor thanks to its position near the equator. Somewhere in the back of his mind, though, he couldn't deny the fact that they were underestimating the Kimberley Unit.

Hathaway took a couple of dips in the ocean to cool off and drank some of the soft drink that the boy gave him.

"It's been almost an hour..."

As the boy looked up at the sun to calculate the time, two Kessiarina units from the Circe Unit passed by using the Kimberley Forces' identification colors.

A white wall of spray splashed up near the canoe.

"Whoa!"

The canoe rocked wildly, and the boy tried to stop it with his oars. Hathaway was tossed out of the canoe.

"Those were the Kimberley Forces!"

"Is it that bad...?"

Hathaway latched onto the side of the canoe.

"Of course. The Mafty attack this morning made a mess of the city, but how do you think the amount destroyed by them stacks up with the Kimberley Forces?"

"You're saying the Kimberley Forces are better, right?"

"It's like a manhunt. The Earth Federation government is much rougher. Everyone says that they should just let Mafty do everything."

"You mean those hijacked Mafty broadcasts?"

"Yeah, that young voice was saying that the Earth should be returned to nature or the Earth will die."

"You think the humans on Earth should all live in space like Mafty says?"

"I don't really agree with that. Whether or not the Earth is polluted is something I can't judge, but leaving it as nature intended is something I can understand. But, I just do sightseeing..."

"So wouldn't you be out of work?"

"Yeah... The Earth Federation government isn't letting normal people onto Earth, but they will let the higher-ups go. You can see the writing on the walls when you do this type of job. You can tell who they are based on how they talk and spend money. They look down on us."

"That means I'm the same..."

"True... If you weren't one of the privileged, you wouldn't be able to get to Earth."

"Does it make you hate me?"

"Let's not talk about that. Life is easier letting the unknown remain unknown, and letting the dumb remain dumb."

"You're really something, you know."

"People from space say that just living on Earth will make you happy, but that's a lie. You have to pick up after the higher ups, you're like a slave. So I try not to think about it."

"Really..."

Hathaway could see that the boy clearly knew the type of work he was being asked to do. Letting the unknown remain unknown was a piece of wisdom needed for commoners to make their livings. But this did not mean they knew nothing. It means they do not try to know that which could harm them.

A large cruiser that approached from the front looked like a trolling boat.
"...?"

Hathaway doubted his eyes; the cruiser came around to the canoe's Davao side, and Emeralda appeared on its fly deck.

"...!?"

Kenji Mitsuda appeared from the back of the cockpit and threw a rope toward the canoe.

"Hathaway, switch with me!" Mitsuda said and jumped out into the canoe.

"Something bugging you?"

"My suitcase is in a coin locker. We should get it."

"Alright... I'll get your jacket."

"Hurry!" cried Emeralda from the fly deck.

"Right!"

Hathaway clasped his hands onto the deck and climbed the cruiser.

"That was fun. I'd ask you your name, but the less I know, the better, right?"

"Yeah. Come back some time..."

"For sure."

Hathaway slipped into the cabin from the rear cockpit. The cruiser quickly changed direction and sped off at full speed, its hull lifting out of the water.

It was a hydrofoil boat.

Chapter.17

On the Ocean

"...What do you mean?"

Following Emeraldalda Zubin, Iram Masam, and Raymond Cain came down to the cabin.

Raymond threw a glance at Hathaway as he took the helm.

"I'm just saying that I got myself out of the awkward relationships I developed on the Haunzen."

"Is Gigi your new girlfriend, then?"

Emeraldalda shot a cursory remark at him.

"I would have liked that, but Kenneth—the new Captain of the Kimberley Unit—suspects that she's a Mafty liaison and won't let her go."

"So then...?"

Seeing Emeraldalda's wary eyes undeterred, Hathaway smiled wryly.

"There's a slight problem. She's an incredibly perceptive girl and figured out that I'm Mafty."

"...?! If that's the case, does that mean Kenneth let you go on purpose, Hathaway?"

"What?! Come on, Hathaway!"

Emeraldalda and Iram turned red with anger while pressing him hard for answers.

"No, you've got it wrong. It's hard to explain, but I know Gigi Andalucia didn't tell the Captain about it. I can guarantee that she won't reveal my true identity."

"That's not very reassuring. I don't know what happened between you, but if she knows your true identity, she'll let it slip one way or another. Even if she doesn't intend to, as long as she knows it, she might spill the beans,"

Raymond growled while tightening his grip on the helm.

"I get where you're coming from, but it's not like that. Just trust me on this..."

"I don't like this at all, Hathaway. I think she's got the best of you."

Iram's thoughtful eyes were fixated on him.

"Uh huh... I get why you'd think that way, Iram."

"Yeah... I don't get it," Raymond said, flatly rejecting him.

"What I said about her is true... Either way, this area is under the Circe Unit. I thought we're all prepared for the worst."

"I just don't want to die for nothing but your carelessness."

It was Raymond.

"That's enough, Raymond. Hathaway's instincts have never failed us once, have they? Let's just trust Hathaway and carry out our duties!"

Once she's made up her mind, Emeralda is more decisive than a man.

"I already am!"

"It's fine, Emeralda. I could have been wrong..."

"Don't jinx it. I believe you, Hathaway. You've seen Gigi too, haven't you, Emeralda?"

"Uh-huh... I kind of understand what Hathaway is saying."

"How can we be sure?"

Iram carefully kept Emeralda in check.

"Gawman is still being detained by them. We don't know when he might confess, so the situation is still pretty precarious."

"Gawman won't reveal us even if they gave him a truth serum!" Raymond pouted as he barked out.

"Just keep an eye out, Raymond. Hathaway, we've analyzed the data. We are currently doing the final calibrations to the Galcezon and Booster Bed."

"I see. So, Mihessia managed to escape..."

Hathaway took a sigh of relief while getting some water to drink from the water cooler under the table.

"However, there are some puzzling figures. You have a spare copy, right, Hathaway? I want to check it with yours."

"Sure, here you go."

Hathaway took out the microfilm from his notebook and passed it to Iram.

"Hm... Mihessia held on to it with her dear life to deliver it to me, so... There are fragments of particles on the film."

"Is it that bad?"

"It's nothing to worry about."

"Thanks to that, we were forced to cover your ass."

In response to Raymond's insults, Emeralda stood up and slapped him hard across the face.

"What was that for? Eme--"

"Stop behaving like a spoiled child. We're all risking our lives on this."

Emeralda went up to the flybridge while chiding Raymond all the while.

Iram started using the computer tracer in the cabin to playback the film and record it on a floppy.

Hathaway passed Raymond, who was looking sulky and stood beside Emeralda on the flybridge.

"Emeralda, I wasn't followed. I didn't find any tracking devices on my body either."

"I trust you, Hathaway."

"But... I'm sure they have increased surveillance now."

"That's why I didn't go to the beach directly."

"I'm sorry that you have to go through all this trouble..."

Hathaway lightly slapped the back of Emeralda's hand and thanked her.

"If there's one good that came out of this, it's that the havoc raised at Oenbelli has kept Captain Kenneth busy."

That gave Hathaway some consolation.

"Those people who hijacked Haunzen must have been with them."

"I think so too. However, I understand that the Kimberley Unit stayed put because Kimberley went to suppress Oenbelli himself, but... I heard from Mihessia that Quack Salver didn't know about Oenbelli's plans."

"Quack was rejoicing, saying that this is the sign that the Mafty rebellion is finally making a mark."

"Hmm... It's true that Mafty's intention is to voice out the frustrations of the general public, and only real action can bring down the Earth Federation, so Oenbelli's actions are very helpful, but can we really believe that Quack is not the person behind it?"

"Sure. I mean, think about it. About 30,000 people have gathered in Oenbelli in just a month. What about us?"

"True... How pathetic. Even if we put all our efforts into it, we won't be able to get that many people."

"That's how things are. How many people do we have under Mafty? 2,000 tops?"

"Yes, I see your point. So, the Earth Federation wanted to display their strength by leading the charge with a Mafty extermination unit and called a Cabinet meeting in Adelaide."

"I suppose that's the bureaucratic procedure. On top of that, they'd get some holiday and time for sightseeing."

Hathaway knew very well that this is not just Emeraldalda's own guesswork.

"In any case, four cabinet members died in the attack this morning... so the meeting in Adelaide will be postponed or moved to another location."

Emeraldalda nodded with both elbows on the panes of the front glass and let out an evil laugh.

"He he he... Nobody could have imagined that those people are the same as Mafty."

"Hmm... Kenneth will probably find out soon. Even if Gigi keeps her mouth shut."

"Is that what he's like?"

"He has strong self-control and yet is very fierce. I'm sure you figured that out after seeing how he countered Gawman and his team."

Being convinced by Hathaway's argument, Emeraldalda then asked,

"Is the pilot of the new mobile suit a Cyber-Newtype?"

"I don't know... I wasn't able to figure out that much, but the Penelope is as powerful—if not more—as the new Gundam. Things will only get tougher."

Hathaway recalled the young pilot's face whom Kenneth yelled at and was certain that Circe's mobile suit unit led by him would be a force to be reckoned with.

The cruiser wrapped around Cape San Augustin along the coastline before slipping through into a bay formed by some rocks.

"It may be dangerous, but we'll be traveling by air from here on. I'm sure you want to go and get your Gundam yourself, right, Hathaway?"

"Well, I loaded it up myself after all."

Hathaway smiled as he finally felt relieved by the elaborate plan drawn up by Emeraldalda and the others.

The person who chose this place as the most appropriate location to receive the new Gundam is Quack Salver, the person supporting the whole Mafty organization.

He is the true mastermind behind the anti-Earth Federation organization believed to be led by an imaginary persona called Mafty.

They only know that he was a "General" who served an important role in the Federation Forces Earth Theater Army, but this General, who goes by the pseudonym Quack Salver, has appeared in the flesh in front of Hathaway and the rest, as well as demonstrated impressive capability in procuring supplies and organizing a maintenance unit.

The only thing that kept them skeptical was the codename that meant "fake doctor" in Dutch.

As the cruiser entered the cavity that formed a bay, the bottom of the ship touched the water's surface and landed on a rocky area.

Further ashore, a shabby-looking light floatplane painted in a dark-green camouflage was awaiting them.

Emeralda took the control stick of the floatplane to fly Hathaway, Iram, and Raymond to an island codenamed Lodoicea.

The youngsters who were guarding the floatplane had orders to get on the cruiser, return to Davao, and keep an eye on the Circe Corps' movements.

A little more than an hour later, the floatplane headed further south past Menado, where Hathaway was supposed to return to and headed eastward through the island of Halmahera near the equator to reach the eastern coastline.

"Now that we've come this far safely, have your suspicions cleared up, Hathaway?"

Raymond's cheerful nature finally returned.

"Thanks. All this is thanks to the fact that the Circe Squad is being tied up with Oenbelli. Either way, we didn't hear any rumors about it while at Anaheim on the moon. So, it was shocking."

Feeling relieved, Hathaway also became more talkative.

"Well, Anaheim is no intelligence agency, and Anaheim didn't even directly own the factory you were at, was it, Hathaway?"

Emeralda asked while switching from autopilot to manual control.

"That's right. Some people say that kind of corporate organization is the source of all evil."

"It's the same for the Earth Federation. We've reached a point in history when instead of being at the mercy of nature, we are now at the mercy of conglomerates."

It was Iram.

"But what is it about spontaneity that brings people together so much?"

"It's history. It's just history repeating itself. In the beginning, it slithers forward slowly like a snail, but it suddenly swells up in size somewhere somehow. Like how religion spreads."

"Does it sound any more convincing when you put it like that? Alright, everyone. Brace yourself and hold onto something!"

"Huh...? Is that the Lodoicea?"

"Uh-huh..."

Before Emeraldalda managed to finish her sentence, the plane began descending rapidly.

The jet landed abruptly on the surface of the sea, which looked very close due to the inclined evening sun.

The sea that stretched out in front of Hathaway turned deep blue as they headed straight for the coastline lined with coconut palm trees. Several rubber boats kicked up white foams as they approached from a corner of the coastline, but it was unclear where they appeared from.

Chapter.18

On the Ocean

Kenneth Sleg finished organizing the remaining mobile suit forces at the Davao base and was swamped with deciding their battle plan and what to equip them with, but took some time off to head to the officer's cafeteria for lunch because Gigi was waiting for him.

"I get the feeling... there's something more to that girl..."

Smiling wryly to himself won't get him anywhere, but since he's angry at Kimberly's ways of handling things, her presence was comforting at the very least.

His comments to Hathaway about Gigi being suspicious were nothing but an excuse.

"Kenneth here. We have a cottage for guests, right? Can you see to it that one is readied?"

On the way to the cafeteria, Kenneth used the wireless communicator on his wrist to get the General Affairs Department to make arrangements for Gigi.

"Sorry I kept you waiting."

Gigi, seated alone beside the window, had already started eating.

"It's okay... I'm used to waiting."

Her carefree reply took Kenneth by surprise, as it was not what he had expected.

"Really now?"

"Yes. Tell me, why did Hathaway leave without saying goodbye to me?"

"He said he'd just have regrets if he sees you, so he sent his regards. I understand how he feels."

"How rude."

"As a man, I understand where he's coming from. It might have turned out differently if you had planned to stay with Hathaway, yeah?"

He was teasing her.

"Ya think? Hathaway isn't the type of person who thinks of such things, though."

Kenneth started eating without answering that statement.

The wireless communicator on his wrist beeped, and he was informed that Gigi's cottage had been reserved.

"Once things settle down with this operation, I will send you to Hong Kong. In the meantime, I got you a place to stay. It's called Göttingen House."

"How kind of you... but it's not going to get you anything, you know?"

Met with such a surly remark, Kenneth didn't really feel like arguing.

"Tee hee. So, I'll leave. I just need to find another hotel, right?"

"What's up with that? That giggle?"

"I know you didn't fancy the way I put it. Oh, but I guess you won't be satisfied unless you put me under surveillance?"

"Hmm... Listen, I dug around. I found out that you got a ticket on the Haunzen using Boundenwooden's terminal..."

Annoyed about being overwhelmed by her, Kenneth blurted out what he wasn't planning to say.

"So what...?"

"Are you extended family?"

"Of course not..."

Gigi put the last piece of her brown toast into her mouth and grinned at him.

"How did you get on the Haunzen, then?"

"Because I have an intimate relationship with Cardeas Boundenwooden."

"...?"

That is the name of the founder of a major insurance company that even Kenneth knows.

"Now that you know, everything should make much more sense, and you must feel really stupid about booking that cottage for me."

"Is that really true?"

"If it isn't, how would a girl with no status like me get on the Haunzen?"

This revelation left Kenneth at a loss for words.

"Wait, wait... If I remember correctly, Mr. Cardeas is over 80 years old..."
Kenneth became so flustered, unbecoming of someone his age.

"Yes, that's correct. While he is a very healthy gentleman, he is also a very lonely person."

"Is that so... Your apartment in Hong Kong was empty."

"Of course it is. The Count just bought it for me, so I'm going to see it for the first time."

"I see..."

With Gigi's explanation, Kenneth was able to connect the dots and was convinced. Even in the mass media, very few people knew that the founder of the Cardeas Insurance Company, Boundenwooden, is a Count. If Gigi knows this fact, she must be telling the truth about her relationship with him.

Staring at Kenneth's dejected countenance, Gigi smiled widely, showing her pearl-white teeth, and tossed her shoulder-length shiny blonde hair in a display of pride and victory.

"Somewhere along the way, you were thinking that I'm a Mafty informant, weren't you?" she teased.

"Well, it's my job to do so."

"You prefer that instead, don't you? The truth is so much more obscene, isn't it? I will leave after I've finished eating."

Gigi, with her head held high, seemed very resolute and somewhat unapproachable to men.

"No, you can stay. You're the goddess of fortune. That's my hunch. I've had faith in this ever since the hijacking... Unless the Count is coming on the next plane to fetch you, though."

"Why would you think that? "

"Don't you remember what Hathaway said? Thanks to your remarks, we were able to bring down the hijacker, and thanks to your presence in Davao, we were able to capture a Mafty mobile suit. It could be just a coincidence, but I guess people on the battlefield just need something to anchor their faith upon."

"Is that so... If that's the case, I guess Hathaway is just dense."

"Why?"

"Because he keeps avoiding me."

"He's never served in a real army, so he's just a normal boy."

"Ya think...? "

"He mentioned that his last love broke his heart too... Wait, Gigi, what did you say just now?"

"Just wondering..."

"What do you mean?"

"What do you mean, what do I mean?"

"Yes, what you meant... You are sensitive to details. You are very good at judging people... What did you see in Hathaway? No, wait, did Hathaway tell you something?"

"No... Captain, even you know that he never talks about himself."

"Why doesn't he talk, then?"

"How should I know?"

"No, you're lying. Gigi Andalucia... I think you know why Hathaway was able to pin down the hijacker so perfectly."

Gigi noticed that Kenneth is finally wrapping his head around Hathaway but did not think it would put Hathaway in any danger.

This is because she knew that things were already developing behind the scenes.

If it weren't, Hathaway would have said farewell properly before leaving the Circe Unit. Gigi is already aware that he is the kind of person who knows his thing.

"Wait, he got a ticket on the Haunzen from a terminal at Anaheim Electronics... That place has various Foundations and biotechnology departments, so I believed him when he said that he's aiming to become a certified biological observer."

Kenneth observed Gigi's expressions as he voiced out his suspicions. However, as Gigi did not avert her gaze, Kenneth became doubtful of his own suspicions.

"His father is still in the army, right?"

Gigi asked while taking a sip from her cup of tea.

"There's no guarantee that a son has the same beliefs as his parents. Gigi, if you're going to the cottage, talk to General Affairs. I'll make arrangements."

While saying that, Kenneth called the Intelligence Department on the wireless communicator on his wrist.

"Sure, let's see if I really am the goddess of fortune like you said, Captain. I'll stay here for 2 to 3 days, deal?"

Gigi opened up a tourist guide on the display interface set up on the table after saying that.

"That'd be great. You'll probably find this choice more interesting."

"We'll see."

"I'm sure of it. I'll see you soon."

Kenneth took his hat and breezed out of the cafeteria. The cafeteria was quiet, as it was already past two o'clock.

Gigi figured that the cottage that Kenneth prepared is the perfect place for her to observe the two of them go at each other without getting in the way.

Gigi browsed through some tourist guides but did not find anything interesting and stood up to leave.

The order for troops to assemble sounded, and as the commotion spread like a wave throughout the building, Gigi stopped by the General Affairs department and asked to be shown to the cottage. Even in such a situation, she was not troubled by being an outsider where she did not belong. For as long as she remembered, she has been treated in this way and is used to it.

"We'll arrange for a car, but you'll have to wait just a little while. Please go back to your room first. Someone will come for you."

Wave, who is seated behind the counter, remarked with a friendly note.

"Okay... Thanks in advance, yeah?"

Gigi returned to her room while imagining Hathaway flying around somewhere.

Chapter.19

Lodoicea

Lodoicea is the scientific name of the sea coconut, and its seeds are the largest among all plants. It is the code name of Mafty's base in this area. The Earth Federation Forces also used this base in the past. Initially, the navy's dry dock was set up along the coast, but it is now camouflaged by a coconut forest, while the skies are covered by a forest of light plastic, making it invisible when seen from a higher altitude. That is where the floatplane hangar is located, as well as the launchpad for Galcezon and Messer. The discovery of such a place would not have been possible without the backing of Quack Salver.

"This place should be safe from scans by computers that the Earth Federation Forces has at the moment. After being put in charge of supply and logistics for so many years, you'll find tons of ways of erasing supplies and minor bases from the army's records."

That was the secret behind General Quack Salver's magic tricks. The code name Lodoicea was probably adopted in the same vein and is the kind of name that an old man like him—who sets his own code name as Quack Salver, which brings up images of a "quack doctor" ravaging the populace in medieval Europe—would come up with.

As soon as the light floatplane touched the dry dock entrance, dummies and the leaves of coconut palms jutted out to cover the plane. Then, as they exited the junction between the real and fake forests into an opening inside the dock, they were greeted by a large maintenance facility. On top of the Galcezon catapult was the 1st Galcezon attached to a Booster Bed ready to launch, and behind that was a Messer that attacked Davao, on standby and laid out on the deck with other Galcezons.

These were all hidden under the dummy forest.

"It's squeaky clean..."

Hathaway showed his admiration as he entered the mechanic booth under the catapult with Iram Masam.

"How is it?"

"Going great. The calibrations are mostly done."

The chief mechanic, Maximilian Nicolai, replied with a handshake.

"Did the Valiant manage to deploy as planned?"

"Yes, it should already be on standby near the planned landing site on the ocean. It has already entered the radio-quiet phase."

Maximilian answered Iram's question concisely.

"Won't it draw attention?"

"Obviously, we're disguising it as a fishing operation."

Maximilian laughed off Hathaway's unwarranted concern.

"But the docking will be done while airborne? We should have let Valiant take care of it all..."

Emeralda Zubin who came in later shot the query.

"It would take more time with the Valiant. As we need to be prepared for any movements from the Davao base, speed is of the essence. In any case, once we have the Xi Gundam, we'll be able to scout out the Oenbelli situation, and don't forget we still have a mission to rescue Gawman. We need to rush everything."

"Uhuh! So this Xi Gundam is a Ξ G, then?"

The mechanic in Maximilian got excited at the mentioning of the name, but the rest of the crew didn't even bat an eye.

"That's true, but..."

Iram clearly showed his distaste for Hathaway's aggressive plan and tried to get Emeralda's support.

"Kimberly has deployed his forces against Oenbelli. So, I want to rescue Gawman at least beforehand and suppress Kimberly who's deployed against Oenbelli after that."

"That's too idealistic," said Iram.

"You can't handle all that with just one Ξ Gundam, you know? It's even possible that Penelope is going to intercept you. I know Raymond's words are getting to your head. Don't let it,"

You can always count on Emeralda Zubin to keep Hathaway's quick temper in check. She's a reliable, mature woman.

"Emeralda, that's not what it is. I have the same hunch as I got before the trip to the moon. I will check on the Messer and change my clothes."

Hathaway exited the mechanic booth and headed to the pilot booth. Iram went after him, saying,

"We've got the guys and gals from the cruiser keeping an eye on Davao, so don't worry about it. It will work out somehow."

"Iram, don't underestimate Kenneth. He's a brilliant commander. Raymond may have been right."

Hathaway is still not perfectly reassured about Gigi.

"That's the kind of man he is, huh..."

"It's better to assume that he is tracking us. Increase the density of Minovsky particle dispersal to combat density."

"Alright..."

Iram carried the floppy case and ran to the control booth.

However, the situation was already developing rapidly. While Hathaway was changing into a pilot suit, a warning siren echoed through the whole dock.

"What was that?"

Hathaway contacted the control booth using the intercom in the booth and received a report from Mihessia Hence in the control booth about the detection of something that looks like a submarine in the vicinity.

"Seriously...?"

"We intercepted an enemy transmission while dispersing Minovsky particles. It appears that they have sent a transmission to the Kimberly Forces."

"Which Kimberly Forces? Ambush it with the Messer"

"Yessir! By the way, there are two Kimberly Forces?"

Hathaway sprang out of the pilot booth and immediately darted off to the control booth.

"The Kimberly Forces is currently separated into two entities. Kimberly Hayman himself has deployed against Oenbelli."

"Oh, right. Iram just told me... Sorry."

Mihessia slightly raised her hands to her chest and took the microphone.

"Messer No. 3, Fencer, cleared for launch! Please support the Galcezons!"

"Copy that! Godspeed."

Mihessia's encouraging words are sweet and have the power to increase the morale of the men on the battlefield.

"Next, No.4! Golv!"

"Godspeed!"

From the back window of the control booth, Hathaway looked on as they pierced through the coconut palm forest that covered the dock.

"Get my Galcezon ready ASAP too!"

"Yessir...!"

Mihessia called out to the 2 Galcezons.

"The newly appointed commander, Kenneth, calls his unit the Circe Corps, but I don't think the navy has been notified about it yet."

"Is that so... So what do we do now?"

Hathaway didn't answer Mihessia and instead asked for the contents of the transmission from the submarine.

"Here it is. They were asking the base what they should make of the jet with you on it landing on the water here, Hathaway."

Mihessia explained that they were unable to jam the radio waves with the Minovsky particles completely, and it is possible that it reached as far as Davao.

"This is the first time this has happened. There isn't a submarine in Davao, right?"

"There shouldn't be... That bastard, Kenneth, must have pulled some strings to complement his assignment. I underestimated him."

Hathaway recalled Kenneth's pretentious happy-go-lucky face.

"Yesterday, and today, Oenbelli sent out non-encrypted messages declaring that they are the Mafty First Army and requested for support from Mafty."

"I can't believe this..."

"They reported that dozens of Gustav Karls from the Kimberly Corps attacked their city..."

"Goodness... They don't realize how much of a hindrance they are being."

"But General Quack said..."

"So I've heard. Where is the general?"

"He's at the Lodoicea Tree"

The additional word "tree," refers to a different base. Even Hathaway has not been informed of the location yet.

"Understood. Tell me the battle results. I'm deploying with the Booster Bed."

"Yessir..."

Hathaway was about to turn around before looking back and putting his arm around Mihessia's shoulders, saying,

"Thanks. I heard that it got messy the other day. Did you get hurt?"

"Thanks to you, I have a slight cold."

"You dived, huh... I'm so sorry."

Hathaway kissed Mihessia's dried-out cheeks and earnestly thanked her once again.

"At the extreme, how long can it last?"

"From Davao, it will take 40 minutes on the Kessaria. From Oenbelli, around 2 hours..."

Hathaway climbed into the 1st Galcezon and used the console panel to ask Raymond—who was calibrating the data—about the deployment time of his Galcezon.

"Is that so... So I've just got enough flight time and no more."

"What's your plan..."

Emeralda subsequently came on board in a pilot suit.

"It is ETA 1 hour to the Gundam's descent and our contact with it."

"I see... So, our only option is to intercept it while it's airborne... It'll be impossible to rescue Gawman after all, huh?"

Kaboom! A low-pitched explosion came from the coast.

Hathaway took hold of the microphone on the console panel and asked Mihessia about the situation with the submarine.

"Did we get it?"

"We cannot confirm."

"Can we check from the air?"

"Please wait a moment."

"Continue intercepting the radio transmission, too."

"Yessir!"

Hathaway was getting anxious. However, even if Davao comes to attack by chance, he was determined to wait to deploy the Galcezon until the right time, as planned. The 1st Galcezon on the Booster Bed has no more than 10 minutes of leeway in flight time with regard to the planned docking time.

"Raymond, Emeralda, ready?"

"Now or never..." Emeralda smiled and winked at him.

Chapter.20

Pathway

"That's it, I guess. This must be the cruiser that came back to the bay once. I wish it were possible to track it..." reported the young intelligence officer to Kenneth, showing the Port Authority's ship entry/exit table on the display.

"Any information from the police?"

"Not yet..."

"Remind the Port Authority and the Navy to report even the smallest movements. We don't have the manpower. Ask them to cooperate a bit."

In response, the intelligence officers finally began to hurry their subordinates. They didn't really seem to understand what they were doing, nor why.

"Did Davao's Chief come out? Give it here! It's Kenneth. Commander Kenneth of the Circe Unit. No idea, you say? It was an attack by Mafty shortly after our morning greetings. It doesn't matter if Kimberley isn't talking. I'm actually at the location of the Kimberley unit now. Alright? If you can't meet this request, I will bomb you just like I did Mafty! Where did you say? The police station right in front of you!"

"Captain Kenneth, I have heard of your name in the official bulletin, so hear me out. We, the Earth Federation Government, have standards to keep, whether officials or military personnel. Can we cooperate or not with somebody as obstinate as you, Captain?"

As if trying to cover up the Police Chief's words, Kenneth said, "I'm going to give you a new mobile suit. Alright?" Kenneth was serious.

"If he apologizes, I'll put a stop to it. Those who only show a fake facade towards others deserve to be bombed!"

Kenneth screamed at the intelligence officers and urgently convened a meeting with the mobile suit pilots.

"This is training, but if it comes to it, you can do the same thing as you did with Mafty. Conduct an intimidation flight over the Davao police station, and throw in some type 3 bombs if it comes to it."

"Live ammunition?"

One of the pilots raised his voice.

"You are soldiers. Are you armed with toys? We're not playing some game here!"

Directing them with his horse riding-whip, Kenneth launched two Base Jabbers equipped with 6 Gustav Karls centered around the Penelope into a training formation flight.

"Haha... The police seem surprised to see mobile suits flying by themselves."

The Circe unit's control center buzzed with excitement when it learned of the Davao police's reaction.

"Stop the intimidation. Make it serious."

After that command from Kenneth, things became easy.

Reports from the Hunter and patrol units scattered around Davao were sent to Kenneth one after another, including sightings of Hathaway's light jet.

However, it was already almost 5 am.

"We've gotten information from the Navy and the submarine. It's under Minovsky particles, so it takes some time to analyze, but it seems that a unit of unknown affiliation was caught in the center of Halmahera Island, along the east coast."

Upon receiving this report, Kenneth finally went to the room where the prisoners were held.

"Mr. Gawman Nobile... Do you finally understand? I'm happy that we can do things humanely without having to force your confession."

".....?"

"So, how strong are you actually? I was able to form a rough guess during this morning's battle, but there is still one thing I don't understand. Why such a place?"

"I don't know. I'm just a pilot. I haven't been informed of the whole operation. If I had been, I would have been forced to confess to you now, wouldn't it?"

"It makes sense. Mafty isn't like a big family, after all. But there is no way you don't...? I finally remembered when I met Hathaway Noa this morning. I thought it was strange and...? Wait, is Hathaway part of Mafty?"

"Mafty, eh. He's playing the part of being Mafty."

"This isn't the time for jokes! There has to be a mastermind behind this! Who is it?"

"Quack Salver."

"You!"

Kenneth heard the name, and blood immediately rushed to his head. He reflexively swung his iron fist at Gawman's cheek. Gawman's body flew from the chair.

"What..."

"Talking about fake doctors? They're often called quack salvers! Yes, that's what your mastermind is!"

"That's right, isn't it? Mafty Erin is more credible than a quack salver, isn't he? But I'll say it again. If you knew everything, you would be so overwhelmed you couldn't do anything. You really don't know a..."

"If that's the case, then I'll make you Mafty, and I'll execute you."

"Go ahead. Who would ever believe that I was Mafty? It's ludicrous... As you can see, I'm just a typical down-on-his-luck pilot. This is so unbelievable. On the day you execute me, Mafty will do another big hit somewhere else... it won't work... So, what is the Circe Unit? That's a name that'll just end in tears, let me tell you."

"Don't speak! The forces gathered in Halmahera will be arriving this morning. I'll show you our striking power. I know they're not that strong."

"If that's the case, do it. Go ahead, show me."

"You!"

Kenneth lifted his riding whip and struck it at Gawman's face.

"Tsk!"

Gawman didn't flinch. He struck out his foot, swiped at Kenneth's leg, and struck him, but was quickly overwhelmed by soldiers on the left and right.

Then, when he woke up, Gawman noticed that he was in a strange place.

"Where? Where is this...?"

Gawman's limbs were handcuffed and tied up with his chin resting on his lap.

"As you can see, this is a mobile suit cockpit."

At the top of Gawman's line of sight was a pilot's seat to the right, and behind it was a pilot of the Earth Federation army, wearing a pilot suit, looking into his face.

"A mobile suit?"

"The Penelope. Lieutenant Lane Aim. Nice to meet you."

The young pilot quickly introduced himself.

"Why am I here?"

"Commander Kenneth said to use you as a hostage. Basically, if it looks like we're about to lose when we try to get the information, we'll put you in front of us and use you as a shield."

"You...what a dirty trick!"

"I don't think so. Compared to Mafty's indiscriminate terrorist attacks, the loss of just your life is quite cheap. But I won't do anything like that. As long as I'm fighting in this Penelope, I will guarantee your life."

As he said this, Lane Aim broke out into a little singsong laugh.

A beautiful sunset was spreading along the horizon, just in front of Gawman's eyes.

Chapter.21

Take Off

The submarine had been sunk; there was no denying that. It was a relic from a previous century, a 250-year-old antique once used by the Navy deployed to the South Pacific.

It could no longer be used, but what could be pulled out to be salvaged was salvaged. Antiques were antiques, after all. The close-range bombs fired from the two Messer units had triggered an explosion that had caused a water leak, preventing the submarine from surfacing again.

Still, thanks to that one vessel, Hathaway and the rest had been forced to depart from Lodoicea earlier than planned. They had learned from a telephone relay report of the approach by three Kessaria units invading from Davao and a mobile suit flying alone.

At least it was impossible to see the launch from the dry dock.

"Somehow, I'll manage to hang out in the airspace where the Gundam will be coming down and buy us some time."

With Raymond Cain saying the words, they sounded almost like a guarantee.

The 1st Galcezon placed the capsule-mounted Messer atop the deck and launched from the dry dock. A mass of jet engines ignited, lifting them upward on a long booster bed, which carried them ever higher, rising over the South Sea islands at an angle of 40 degrees. Heading due west, increasing altitude, and speed, they switched over to the second pulse engine.

"Accelerate! After that, autopilot."

The 1st Galcezon passed the sound barrier, its pulsejet generating a powerful thrust that sent it to a higher altitude as if it was chasing the sunlight. The Messer and Galcezon, who had taken out the submarine, returned to the dock to replenish their equipment, then set out on the Valiant support ship toward the place where Xi Gundam was supposed to land.

At that exact moment, something that looked like a meteorite was 200 km over the Malay Peninsula, its surface melting with the heat of air friction as it plummeted earthward. From the molten surface, a simple aircraft with no windows emerged. It was an ancient cargo ship, Pisa, from the time of the space shuttle era. The vernier engine at its nose corrected several times for attitude, then began to decelerate as the craft flew over Borneo. The unmanned flying machine then continued to descend toward the previously determined landing point.

Waiting in airspace near the landing point, the Galcezon, along with Hathaway's Messer 1, used the booster bed to gain altitude.

"Hmm, this is strange... It looks like we're being tracked from the north. No doubt about it."

"How much altitude can we gain?" asked Hathaway, ignoring Raymond's anxious tone.

"About five more seconds worth. We're at 58,000 meters."

"Take an azimuth that corresponds with the cargo ship."

"Hold tight. Checking database variables... it's possible! Shall we do it?"

"Hang on... I'll move to the Messer."

"I'm counting on you."

Raymond was left alone in the cockpit of the Galcezon as he anxiously watched Hathaway as he began climbing toward the docking tube atop the cockpit before shimmying up the metal ladder on the inner tube wall and squeezing into the Messer 1 cockpit.

"What's the situation?" he asked Emeraldalda Zubin, who was seated, furiously typing data into the Messer's computer.

"It's a real hassle. Did Hathaway make this program?"

"Huh, really... what do you know?"

"There. Finished. If Raymond's not wrong, and we're silent, we'll slam Messer right into the cargo vessel."

"Perfect..."

Hathaway tried to jam his pilot suit into an auxiliary seat attached to the back of the main seat, but it was more than a bit of a pinch. The cockpit of a mobile suit is really just a one-seater, but in order to use the visual display, there was a gap between the seats where one person could squeeze into a temporary seat attached to the waist and head.

Hathaway decided to leave control of Messer 1 to Emeraldalda, intending to board the cargo vessel that had descended from space.

"But if the Circe Unit spots this, the Valiant moving towards the landing point will be in danger."

"We don't have much choice. The Messer should be able to defend itself."

Hathaway fastened his seatbelt and checked the condition of his helmet. As he did so, the faces of his comrades from the Valiant floated up into his thoughts, and he sighed.

"I'll show you what the Gundam can do."

"You mean the Xi Gundam? Can't wait."

"That's right. Have you seen the Penelope, the Circe unit's new model? Seems like the Minovsky Craft system has made a mobile suit into an aerial warrior."

"Just don't forget that the Xi Gundam hasn't been tested on Earth yet."

"It's the same for the Penelope. I know what the pilot feels like..."

If Hathaway had any advantage, this was it. A machine's performance always depends on the person controlling it. That was Hathaway's belief.

Raymond's voice crackled into Hathaway and Emeraldalda's helmets. "I've got a lock on cargo Pisa!"

"Which direction?"

"Right rear, thirty degrees."

"Which...? That's it, Hathaway," said Emerelda, drawing a circle onto the display.

"Ah, now I see it," said Hathaway as he caught sight of it.

The contrast could be seen more clearly on the display than in reality, projected in dots. As they looked, they saw something approaching.

"Jettison the booster bed! Three, two, one!"

It felt as if the entire aircraft leaped upward at once, their speed increasing as it took a descent angle.

"Think it'll hold?"

Beats me... No one would do something as stupid as this!"

Hathaway glanced over the display from side to side. "Emerelda, let's do a final perimeter sweep for the enemy."

"Roger that..."

A multi-monitor appeared on top of the visual display in front of Emerelda, showing the Messer's max telephoto zoom screen. The vibrating of the aircraft, though, meant such things were of little use. The computer-controlled CG counteracted this to some extent, but overall, it was not practical outside of a stationary state. Pilot's intuition was all they really had.

"What's that flying over there?" said Emerelda.

Hathaway spotted something off to the right below them, shining under the setting sun.

"I don't like the angle... the direction... is that?"

"Well... maybe."

"They're gaining on us! The cargo Pisa is descending as planned. That gives them an advantage..."

"Raymond, call for support! The enemy is on us!"

"Which one...?"

Before he could confirm, the whole silhouette of the Cargo Pisa loomed into view in the distance.

"I'm going in... Hathaway."

"Do it..."

"I hate that I can't fly free, though. Whoa!"

Emerelda switched the computer off auto-pilot. As the Messer separated from the deck of the Galcezon, they approached the cargo Pisa immediately, but the vibrations were extremely intense.

"Uh, this is not good!"

Trying to bring the mobile suit, which was not really equipped for high-speed flight in the atmosphere, into contact with Cargo Pisa, which was descending at such high speed, had proven impossible.

"Damn, we're losing our bearings!"

Suddenly, Emerelda screamed. "Attack from behind! Don't worry about the aircraft! Shoot!"

"I'm trying, I'm trying!"

The tremors of the aircraft naturally caused the Messer's course to wobble from side to side, but before that happened, it seemed more likely that the

aircraft would break apart. If the course were set by computer, there would be just one chance. No do-overs.

The cargo Pisa had planned to land on the water, but with the Penelope approaching, landing there would mean that the Xi Gundam would either be destroyed or stolen.

"Incoming! Apply reverse thrust and hit the accelerator! Don't just leave it to the machine!"

"I've got it!"

Emerelda latched onto the nose of the cargo, as Hathaway had said to, then dropped all at once behind the approaching cargo Pisa.

Vroom!

The Messer's manipulator blasted the heat-resistant tiles off the cargo Pisa, attaching herself to the nose of the cargo as it fell in one fluid stroke.

Bam!

Just as the Messer came in contact with the top of the cargo, the nose crumpled, throwing it off balance.

"Are you okay there?"

"I don't know. I haven't run any further simulations. There's a hatch. Link it with the cockpit hatch!"

Hathaway grabbed hold of Emerelda's ankle and pulled her body forward as she undid her seatbelt.

"I know, but we're wobbling from side to side."

"We can't hold on... forever..."

That's when it happened.

Bishuuu!

A line of fire from a beam rifle streaked across in front of them, menacingly.

"...!?"

"He's here!"

"Link the hatch!"

"I'm trying, but if the cargo is dead, I'll die too if I get on."

"It's not that simple."

"Hatch open!"

Hathaway entered a tube that extended out of Messer's hatch and slipped into the nose of the cargo. There was a control block, but there were only a few pieces of equipment left over from the manned tests; everything was dead except for the glow of the half-dead console panel. The fierce atmospheric pressure ripped through cracks in the torn outer armor, sending parts flying. If this continued, the pilot suit might have its air compression destroyed or its limbs ripped off. Hathaway crawled along the floor to the hatch in the rear cabin, using the emergency tube to shield himself.

He opened the hatch. Unlike the control block, there was a silent cargo deck below, so he climbed down and slammed the hatch behind him to guard against flying debris from the control panel.

"Emerelda, you can pull back. I've got Xi Gundam."

Only this, it was wireless.

"I'm out of here! The Circe unit mobile suits are here!"

Boom! The entire cargo vessel lifted into the air, but Hathaway clung to the wall as tightly as he could. The cargo flew upward again. Hathaway's body was pressed down so hard, and he felt like he might be thrown to the floor.

Emerelda and the Messer had disconnected from the cargo.

"Oof!" Hathaway steadied himself and clambered to his feet. He touched the head of his new mobile suit, the Xi Gundam.

"Ahh!"

Climbing across the face and up the chest, he made for the cockpit hatch. He knew every detail of this suit since he loaded it with his own two hands. Supporting himself with the joint that held the aircraft in place, Hathaway pressed the code into the keypad that opened the Xi Gundam's hatch.

"Here we go..."

As he slid into the cockpit, Hathaway realized what this meant. Even if the cargo Pisa slammed into the surface of the sea now, his body should be protected by the body armor of the Xi Gundam.

"But I wonder if I can get out or not..."

He turned on the power, started the main power, and while waiting for the display to open, he examined the console panel and its display. As far as he could tell, there didn't seem to be anything wrong with them.

"I'm surprised you made it all the way from Luna by yourself..."

Hathaway attached his pilot suit to the seat after inspecting the suit for abnormalities, then checked over the aircraft with the system monitoring panel.

In the meantime, the main engine began to warm up. But it would be a close call with the altitude nearing sea level.

"...!"

Hathaway set the real-vision display to normal and increased the main engine all the way to its critical threshold.

Vroom!

A near-direct vibration and one of the displays flashed.

"They got me...!"

Hathaway had just finished setting up the computer's combat database for Earth.

"...!"

As long I'm not conscious, he told himself, then I know I'm not dead. But if his aircraft was thrown out of the cargo hatch when it was destroyed, there was no way to know what might happen. He might end up dead. Hathaway had no desire to attempt something so ridiculous. But he knew that for a human being in battle, death sometimes came that way. The grim reaper won't come when you're ready for him. Such are the fortunes of war.

Chapter.22

Showdown

Bam!

Hathaway couldn't help but blink after hearing sounds from outside of the Xi Gundam through the headphones in his helmet. The next thing he saw was the night sky spreading out far and wide before him.

The hatch for the cargo deck had blown out.

"..."

As Hathaway clicked his tongue at his own weakness in being unable to keep up with the speed of the battle, he saw a flash beneath his feet, and the cockpit shook violently.

The flow of blood to his brain suddenly stopped, and he lost his sight. He faded out of consciousness.

"...!?"

The spherical cockpit core of this unit rolled on a linear system, the joints between the core and the seat supported by three layers of shock absorbers. Such an impact despite this design suggests that the chemical fuel onboard the Cargo Pisa must have exploded.

As he was regaining consciousness, he let the anger welling up inside of him get the better of him.

"My heads a mess! Is this because of Gigi?!"

This anger was directed at himself.

The darkness of Hathaway's vision, which seemed to be stationary even though it was running, was as real as his anger, which was just a jumble of different things, pressing hard into him.

"...!?"

A violent streak of light appeared from the top right of Hathaway's vision and reflected on the surface of darkness to become two streaks of light.

Hathaway was facing the surface of the sea.

"Damn!"

He realized that the Xi Gundam, the mobile suit he is piloting, was subject to gravity. However, the computer controlling the unit was still functioning, trying to rotate the Cargo Pisa unit to elevate.

Hathaway saw a faint stream of light after the darkness and then was able to perceive starlight as a stream.

"...!?"

Despite seeing on the lower right multi-panel that the unit was resisting gravity to assume a standing position, Hathaway felt that the faint force of gravity was terribly heavy. Even after thinking back to the feeling of outer space during the test flight on Luna, this flight was like a battle against gravity.

"Is that a bomber?"

Hathaway zoomed in on a shadow in the sky to the left and was mortified. However, a ray of light emanated from this shadow as if to blow away Hathaway's thoughts and grazed him.

The flash from the beam of a mega particle cannon glanced near him, and for a moment, the huge flash of light lit up the cockpit, shaking the air and jolting the entire cargo with its impact. Through the tremors, he could hear an even sharper, high-pitched sound. The particles from the main body of the beam were scattering as they collided with the body of the cargo and the Xi Gundam. The damage caused by the impact was a small pinhole, but something like that could sometimes be fatal. Fortunately for him, since he was in the atmosphere, the particles decelerated significantly and didn't make pinholes in the Gundam's armor.

"...!"

Hathaway checked the full loadout of the Xi Gundam, despite his apprehension about its weight, and decided to leave the docking bay of the Cargo Pisa.

"Let's go!"

Hathaway could see the light from the tail nozzle approaching right for him, clearly gaining strength. He increased the thrust of the Gundam, aware that his mind was being drawn towards the streak of light, a last-minute acceleration of the nuclear fusion reactor.

Then bam!

A momentary flash enveloped the entire Cargo Pisa unit, and it looked as if even the shadowy parts had melted.

Whoosh!

This flash that shook the air caused the Gundam to detach from the Cargo Pisa, while the vibration intensified.

"I should be able to manage somehow!"

As Hathaway shouted this to himself, he zigzagged a couple of times to dodge the attacks from this shadow that were coming straight for him. His Gundam soared upwards as if to go against this stream of mega particle cannon beams. Its flight was so nimble, like a light airplane, that it felt as if he was flying a remote-controlled model plane.

"He dodged it!? He really dodged it!?"

Lane Aim's moaning was delightful to Gawman.

"This means that Mafty was also able to get his hands on a new model."

"A Minovsky Craft!?"

Gawman's sardonic smile helped Lane regain his composure, but his voice clearly expressed anger.

"You can see for yourself, but I don't know. This suit is the first time I have seen Minovsky Craft in flight."

"You guys in Mafty must have delivered it, but you say you don't know!"

"And I already told you. There's no way each of us can know everything if we want to maintain confidentiality."

"Don't get smart with me!"

While rotating the Penelope, his mobile suit, Lane quickly ascended. The ability of the Xi Gundam, which left the falling Cargo Pisa, to ascend was so fast that it took Lane's breath.

"Don't rush to follow him! He'll only target us!"

Now Gawman was panicked.

Pursuit like this would be akin to standing up just to be sniped, unless your opponent was extremely stupid.

"Don't make a fool of me!"

"Your pursuit is weak. I have no intention of dying with you!"

"We won't die!"

"If we keep up like this, we will end up dead."

"Don't belittle me!"

"I'm not belittling you. I am stating facts."

Bash! A finer mega particle cannon beam than the Penelope's fell very close by.

"Ugh.....!"

Lane Aim tried to avoid the beam by veering.

"At this altitude?!"

Gawman was disappointed in these words. This youngster named Lane thought he had avoided the attack, but he was wrong. This attack was a diversion by Hathaway.

"Look carefully. The next one will come from the right or the left!"

Since Gawman was sitting on a seat that was added to the arm supporting Lane's seat, the impact was particularly harsh. He did everything he could to protect his body.

"Fly to the right!"

It looked as though Lane responded to Gawman's furious command, but this was not intentional.

A moment later, a mega particle cannon beam landed right where the Penelope was. There was a cascade of searing hot iron chunks.

The cockpit turned red from the reflection.

"Keep climbing!"

"I know that!"

The Penelope gave a final burst of acceleration, and the backrest of Gawman's seat creaked loudly.

In response to this battle at an altitude of about 8,000 meters, 6 Gustav Karls left the 3 Kessarias that approached by flying up before heading straight toward the Xi Gundam above. To them, the flashes produced by the Gundam's smoldering mega particle cannon served as a good landmark. However, they were also like a light for bugs.

Since the Gustav Karl has no Minovsky Craft, like the Gundam and Penelope have, it can only take flight as if it is falling. In other words, it can only make one or two strikes.

"!?"

Although Hathaway was subject to crossfire from the Gustav Karls just as he was regaining the senses that he had during the Gundam test flight, he did not panic.

"I am Mafty Erin! I have no intention of allowing all of you to die in vain! I warn you not to touch this unit!"

Hathaway repeatedly ascended and descended the Gundam as he made this declaration on the radio frequency of the Earth Federation Forces. There is no way that they did not hear this, as messages could still be received from close range despite Minovsky particles. Although several beams were shot near the Gundam even during this declaration, Hathaway had locked on to a Gustav Karl by the time he had completed his declaration.

"I am sorry, but this is punishment for failing to heed my warning!"

Hathaway ignored the gunfire passing from left to right and put that unit's deck in his crosshairs before firing a blast from the beam rifle equipped on the Gundam's right manipulator. This round ray of light from the Gundam had an initial velocity that was nearly double that of old beam rifles. Bagoom! A fireball blossomed for a moment, and Hathaway easily destroyed one of the Federation Forces' mobile suits.

"!?"

Then, Hathaway descended at a velocity faster than falling and rushed through a cloud.

Lane's Penelope, which had locked onto Hathaway first, would go on to take an evasive stance against Hathaway after what happened to their Gustav Karl.

Hathaway took advantage of this to put the Base Jabber's Kessaria in his crosshairs and pull the trigger, having calculated the fluctuation caused by the effect of the atmospheric pressure on the blast of the beam.

A fireball lit up again from below.

The clouds nearby also lit up from the reflection of this fireball.

The motion of a falling Gustav Karl was severely limited unless there is a Kessaria or other Base Jabber waiting below. Hathaway had even destroyed the unit that would serve as their legs.

Mobile suits that lack Minovsky Craft cannot access a platform to jump at sea if they do not have a Base Jabber that supplements their flight. Therefore, destroying a Kessaria was akin to downing 3 Gustav Karls.

Several Gustav Karls were clearly shaken, showing signs of withdrawing from the combat airspace in order to find a way for them to flee.

"What's next...?"

A sensation about the battle was opening up inside of Hathaway. He then realized that Lane's Penelope was approaching.

"!?"

Hathaway raised the shield held by the Gundam's left manipulator at the same time as a mega particle cannon beam struck this exact location.

Trash!

The shield was burnt, and molten particles of metal and fibers of reinforced plastic turned into an incandescent string and dispersed all over the air.

Hathaway lowered his unit during this impact.

"They're here!"

Beyond the layer of air that was still hot from the impact of the beam that burned the shield, Hathaway saw the Penelope's shadow. He instinctively pulled the beam saber out from the wrist of the manipulator from the shadow of the shield.

"It's you!"

Lane's angry voice caught Hathaway's ear.

"You'd go so far as bringing out a copy of the Penelope?!"

This was a contact conversation that is possible when the units are in contact. In other words, this means that the opponent's mobile suit has made contact with the Gundam somewhere. However, since this was right after a direct hit, this impact could not be felt.

"This is not a joke!"

Hathaway shouted back reflexively and swung the Gundam's left manipulator.

At the same time, the Gundam retreated.

The trend curve of the beam saber was portrayed on the left monitor, indicating that it made contact with something. However, this was not a critical hit.

Amid the shaking air, the shadow of the Penelope, the mobile suit that is a heap of thorns, could be seen.

"Fall back, or he'll take us out!"

"Shut up, pi-!"

Hathaway's headphones couldn't pick up the end of that word, but the voice before that was unmistakable to him.

"Gawman!?"

Hathaway was driven by the impulse to capture the shadow of the opponent's mobile suit. Instead, he moved the unit from left to right and above while intermittently firing the beam rifle and swinging the beam saber. He sent a radio transmission.

"Gawman! Are you a traitor, or are you being used as a shield?! Answer me!"

He wanted to believe that the voice he had just heard was an auditory hallucination. It didn't seem as if Gawman is disrupting Lane's piloting. With that said, his betrayal was unthinkable, but Hathaway said this to bait the opponent's pilot. The clouds parted for a moment. Beyond them, the Penelope, in pursuit, could be seen at a distance with all of its details becoming clear.

"He's a shield! Yes, I'm a man who would use your comrades as shields!"

This was an unbelievable response. Hathaway was disgusted by this harsh comment.

"Then release him. How can I trust you otherwise!? Bastard!"

Hathaway swung the Gundam's beam saber as a threat.

Paching!

Penelope responded with its beam saber.

"Forget me! Just take out this new model."

Gawman's shout could be heard in the distance during this saber battle.

"Lane, the pilot of the Penelope! You are a despicable bastard if you cannot fight without taking hostages!"

"You know my name!"

"This is the best a carpet knight like you can do anyways!"

"Oh, I'll release him! He's only with be because of orders from the Captain! The Penelope will win without this guy!"

"You'll release him?"

When the beams of the beam sabers collided, the sparks produced by this clash created a supersonic reaction; the vibration similar to a shock wave jolted both units. Then, there were several more beam saber clashes. Before Hathaway could finish his question in response, the Penelope retreated rapidly and fired several rounds out of its beam rifle as a warning. During this movement, the cockpit hatch seemed to have opened.

"Here you go! Take him!"

Lane Aim's voice could be heard on Hathaway's headphones.

"What!?"

Noticing that something changed on the front side of Penelope, Hathaway zoomed in on the live display. It looked as if a small ray of light fell from Penelope's hatch. Did a person jump out?

"Gawman!?"

Although he thought this could be a trap, Hathaway had no choice but to approach this falling light. He turned the suits on its back and matched his descent to the man's falling speed all while keeping his shield fully up and his beam rifle pointed at the Penelope above him.

"Still, I'm sure he's fine..."

He had this belief. That honest youngster who does not know the cunning nature of actual combat should be banking on the words he actually uttered. He is a good kid.

The beam of light was from the flashlight attached to Gawman's hip. He was falling as if he was skydiving, stabilizing his posture with his arms and legs stretched outward. He wasn't handcuffed, showing how the youngster named Lane Aim is.

Hathaway opened his cockpit hatch. Whoosh! He fought the pressure of the wind that pressed his body against his seat, leaning in to maneuver the control levers to the left and right. The faint light from Gawman slid into the air above him. Hathaway widened the Gundam's searchlight and locked on to Gawman with it. This would make him a target for mobile suits to attack from both sides.

"!?"

Sure enough, multiple beams flew in from all sides. It was no surprise that they weren't from the Penelope.

"Enough! Don't attack now!"



Hathaway's ears picked up these words from the young man, but at that moment, Hathaway had cut off the radio he set to the Federation Forces' frequency. The noise from the Minovsky interference irritated him. Beyond Gawman's light, the Penelope was making exaggerated movements to the left and the right. It looked as if he was sending a signal to his allies to stop attacking.

Hathaway appreciated this act of Lane's that was too good to be true but thought that if he was shot down, that wouldn't be a problem. Not because of luck but because this is fine against a worthy opponent. Still, it would have been better had Lane Aim been a bit more mature.

Gawman was straining with his arms and legs extended to maintain his position inside the Gundam's searchlight. There was no time to pull off a stunt that would reduce the relative velocity to near zero. Hathaway controlled the thrust to elevate himself and accelerated further when Gawman came into view in front of him. During this, Gawman was fixed to the center of the hatch.

"..."

Gawman's stiff face suddenly came near before sliding down.

Since the unit came from below, the wind pressure on Gawman was disturbed, making Gawman's body tilt significantly. His body slipped below Hathaway's vision.

"Gawman!?"

Hathaway fired the vernier thrusters on the Gundam's shoulders.

Gawman's body shifted up, sliding into Hathaway's view, and appeared to collide with the display on the cockpit ceiling.

"!?"

Hathaway closed the hatch.

Gawman's body came to his side as if sliding across the surface of the display to the left.

"Agh!"

A voice that was neither a growl or a laugh came out of his mouth.

"It's going to be hell from here on out," Hathaway said, searched for the Penelope while making that statement.

"Sure seems that way..."

Gawman went behind Hathaway's seat and straddled the seat's support bar, but it wasn't something that could support a body properly. If this were to turn into another fight, Gawman could suffer a fatal injury as a result of his body flying around the cockpit.

"I wasn't waiting out of pity! I'm going to teach you a lesson that civilian organizations can only make copies. I'm going to teach you a lesson that this is the mother machine for Minovsky Craft mobile suits!"

Lane muttered to himself as he confirmed his allies' units were retreating to their Kessarias. With this much time, he believed, the unfamiliar mobile suit would have secured Gawman and would be ready to fight again.

There is nothing else to worry about.

At the least, he was a worthy opponent.

He had to assume that its power was the same as or better than the Penelope, and if it is just a copy, he'd also have to assume that its abilities are the same as or better than the Penelope's abilities.

On a magnified monitor, Lane pointed the Penelope's beam rifle in front of him, searching for the enemy as he scanned the airspace where the Gundam's searchlight had disappeared. The missiles on its hip remained untouched. Hathaway let the Gundam descend, causing Gawman to be pressed back against the back of the seat. As he did, Gawman did what he could to stabilize his body against the front of Hathaway's seat's backrest using three belts.

"I want to finish it at once. I wonder if I can..."

"Give it a shot."

Gawman grunted while straddling the arms supporting the seat and preventing his body from being crushed. Hathaway watched the flash from the Penelope's wake with Gawman's voice to his back.

"He's not after us?"

While falling and in retreat, Hathaway accelerated, their altitude dropping to three hundred meters.

"Ugh.....!"

Hathaway had no choice but to ignore Gawman's grunts.

A flash of light seemed to swell for a moment from a part of the Penelope's wake. The Gundam accelerated even further.

Fwoosh! Fwoosh!

The flashes of several missiles raced outward, chasing after the Gundam vertically. The Gundam's elevation continued to drop and fell just under one hundred meters above sea level. The Gundam still remained on its back.

"They're fast!"

Lane noticed that his elevation was dropping rapidly because of the sudden acceleration. He'd crash into the surface of the ocean in several seconds. There is only one chance left to attack. Otherwise, there will be a need to repeat the steps of finding the enemy and attacking.

That would be a hassle.

When the battle drags on, anything could happen. The ironclad rule is that battle should be decided swiftly with few phases.

The pillars of white water that emerge when missiles hit the surface of the ocean looked like streaks. The flash of the tail nozzle of the dashing opponent's mobile suit could be seen a bit in front of them. The white streaks are behind this flash.

Sprays were blowing up from the surface of the ocean because of the opponent's mobile suit's flight.

"What an idiot!"

This made aiming easy. Lane believed that a single shot from his beam rifle would put this battle to an end. Screaming in excitement, Lane pointed the crosshairs slightly in front of these white streaks, obviously aiming for the expected course of flight, and was about to pull the trigger.

Just then, his opponent's mobile suit accelerated even further.

The light that flashed quickly looked as if it was moving forward.

This light reflected on the surface of the ocean while advancing as if separating from the flash of the opponent's mobile suit's tail nozzle.

This looked like a last ditch effort to avoid the attack.

"!?"

Shaken by their further acceleration and confident they wouldn't escape, Lane repeatedly fired his beam rifle. He believed he was putting the nail in the coffin.

The beams from the beam rifle turned into wavy lines, pursued the movement of the opponent's light, and even showed flashes of exploding fireballs. Although these were small rings of light, there was no mistake that they were from explosions.

However, Lane Aim did not know what happened afterward.

Either way, by the time the opponent's mobile suit appeared in a position where the Penelope could see it, it fired a barrage of what appeared to be countless missiles at Penelope for some reason and retreated.

"Huh!?"

He did not know the reason.

Lane was barely able to cover the front of the cockpit with his shield.

There was a roar, a flurry of lights, and violent shuddering.

By the time things settled down, Lane was surrounded by something black, and this time, violent shaking attacked Lane in the dark.

"What the hell!? What is it?"

He did not even know how long it took him to regain consciousness, but Lane thanked himself for being alive when he felt the pain of the bruises all over his body. Yes, he was grateful to himself, not luck or God.

This is who Lane is.

After he realized this, he fumbled for the button on his waist belt and turned on his pilot suit's helmet light.

The surface of the now-dead visual display only had a black glow to it, the console panel display showing no indication that it was rebooting.

"I got hit... Even though I thought I put a nail in their coffin..."

Without even an ounce of frustration, he surrendered himself to the swaying of the Penelope as it floated on the surface of the ocean in an attempt to figure out why all this had happened. Based on his sense of up and down, he figured out that the front cockpit hatch was below.

"What I sniped wasn't the mobile suit... So then what was it? While I was vulnerable, that unfamiliar mobile suit came close and hit me with a barrage of missiles..."

Lane shook his head violently, checked the condition of the cockpit, and checked the life support system of the pilot suit while standing on the hatch.

He pulled out the marine combat survival kit and tried to open the hatch, but it did not open automatically.

"Damn!"

Then, Lane Aim tried and failed to open the hatch manually and eventually escaped from the cockpit by blowing the hatch.

The Penelope floated on the surface of the ocean using its emergency airbag as Lane climbed on top of the unit and waited to be rescued.

This was the result of Lane Aim's second time in actual combat.

* * *

Having escaped the combat airspace, Xi Gundam with Hathaway and Gawman came into contact with the Valiant support ship while flying low, and it took in the unit.

"The beam rifle is missing."

The mechanic Maximilien Nicholai looked at Hathaway dubiously.

"He used it as a dummy. He made the Penelope snipe it instead of the Gundam. I would have died had it not been a single shot. Hathaway's quick wit is amazing."

Gawman explained while stretching his body that was finally free.

"In what way?"

"He simply fired the beam rifle and let it fly. Since it was just above the surface of the ocean, the light of the beam must have looked big. While the opponent was sniping it, he approached it and bombarded it with missiles. Still, I don't think that we finished him off."

"Ah... That was quite an idea."

Emerelda shook her head and gave praise with a smile. She has a habit of pampering Raymond and acting like an older sister toward Hathaway even though she recognized his abilities.

"So long as the body checks out, we'll go scout out Oenbelli right away. Sound good?"

"Of course... The Captain is under that impression. I will have Maximilien do his best."

Although Iram Masam could act like there was nothing to be said now because the Gundam was recovered regardless of anything else, Maximilien could not do the same. This was because he had to hurry to prepare Hathaway's Xi Gundam for their next mission.

"There is a problem with Max's work, right?"

Having just missed Emerelda, who went to her Messer, Keria Dace came down the bridge ladder.

"Ah... Keria, you managed to join us?"

"Yeah, since it's easy to return from Hong Kong when you compare it to coming back from space."

She was supposed to be on assignment in Hong Kong to welcome Hathaway. She was the type of woman who made you think that charming smiles exist for her. She is supposed to be the same age as Hathaway.

She wore her hair terribly short, but even from behind, she couldn't be mistaken for a man.

"We were only able to recover half of the replacement parts onboard the Cargo Pisa before it went down."

"Well... that's because Emerelda broke the nose of the Pisa."

"Hathaway said that's fine, didn't he?"

Keria handed Hathaway the energy drink that she had been holding under the files as if she was hiding it.

"Thanks. You aren't going to tell me that the beam rifle is missing, are you?"

"So, how are you?"

When she has an evil grin, it is a sign that she is in a good mood, but it also happens when she has other emotions hidden behind it.

Hathaway downed the energy drink and wondered what she was thinking about as he muttered, "Keria is always like that..."

"Scouting out Oenbelli is fine, but we can't underestimate Kimberly's military strength."

"What does the General say?"

"Carry on as planned, right? Even if we look at the replacement of cabinet ministers were taken out, the Earth Federation government has shown no desire for reformation."

"Still, I get the sense that a movement that puts pressure on the government will happen soon among all Spacenoids..."

She let her body fall into the handrail as if to bump into Hathaway's shoulder.

"...?"

"Was it Gigi Andalucia? She was an interesting one, wasn't she?"

".....? She was a strange girl....."

Hathaway sensed the scent of a woman at the bottom of Keria's smile and tried to back away. Here, too, was a woman struck by Hathaway's sentiments. This woman cannot entirely be considered a mistake by Hathaway.

"Reminded you of Quess Paraya, didn't she?"

"Stop, don't say that."

Hathaway tried to turn his back on Keria, but Keria's shoulder was pressed firmly against Hathaway's back.

"You have so many romantic interests after all..."

Keria said this with her lips almost closing on Hathaway's earlobe.

"Was Lane all right?"

"Yeah, given the damage on his unit, it is a miracle that he survived. This is also because you were there. My instinct was right. You are the goddess of fortune."

"Is that right? I certainly don't feel like one."

"The fact that you have been able to survive on your own is proof of your good fortune. I will bet on this..."

"Still, I have plans too, you know. I'll be in Hong Kong in a few days."

"That's fine. I'll have this Oenbelli business settled by then."

"I also have to get ready for my move... Otherwise, I would have no way to apologize to the Count, right?"

"I understand. People will forever have these things called obligations, which are cumbersome things."

"Yes, obligations... I suppose."

"To live... Does it feel better to add that bit?"

"I am not that obsessed with living."

Gigi slightly feared that her desire to hear about Hathaway was showing in her face as she looked toward the sunset and narrowed her eyes.