

Prologue

He hated fighter planes.

He especially hated the ones that could transform.

A spacecraft that looks like an airplane from the last century that transforms into a robotic humanoid weapon system was absurd. It was not that he did not understand the way things were, the way that they waged wars as they spread across the galaxy. He really just did not like fighters.

Within a variable fighter, he was dreaming. He did not know how long he had been in that dream, or perhaps even if he was a part of someone else's dream.

"Hey, brother."

Ah, it was this one again.

In the dream, a mixture of his ethereal soul and his physical body was surrounded by a rainbow kaleidoscope of fold space, and the man reached out his hand to the woman with plum-colored hair.

"I'm sorry. But there's something I really have to do. It's something only I can do."

No, she was wrong. That was not true.

The reason I'm alive is because you are. That is all there is to it.

A world without you in it has no meaning.

"I love this planet. I love everyone who lives in this galaxy. I love being in this galaxy where Sheryl Nome, and Ranka Lee, and the Fire Bomber can sing."

But...

But why?

Why do you have to go?

"Because it has to be me. I have the only one left. I'm afraid, but I know it's the only way left for us now. That's why."

The Dimension Eater detonated, ripping a hole in spacetime. The Valkyrie that his sister was piloting vanished amid the expanding dark purple flames. The fold tear disappeared and the Zentraedi mobile fortress that was descending on the planet Sephira along with it.

And then he awoke from the dream again.

At the same time as the Valkyrie defolds into the lagrange point above the planet Ouroboros, the EX-Gear encasing the pilot came to life. The chakra stimulation protocol activated. It sent small syringes jabbing into his wrists. Hormones pumped in to awaken the meridians of Leon Sakaki, pulsing like a tap dancer on his brain.

(That's why I hate fold jumps.)

Leon chuckled to himself as he reached for the throttle. He kicked the pedal wrapped around his foot. In response, the thermonuclear burst engine

awakened from its fold-induced slumber with an arrow of flame. The EX-Gear, a structurally reinforced power suit covering his entire body, protected him from an extreme acceleration in excess of 10Gs.

Ouroboros: a huge blue sphere that stretched out before him. It was an Earth-like planet that was as beautiful to behold as his homeworld of Sephira.

Nearly a hundred years had passed since humanity's home planet, Earth, was destroyed in a war with a giant alien race, the Zentraedi. Calling a planet with oceans and a breathable atmosphere "Earth-like" was a strange kind of nostalgia.

Brünnhilde, the Valkyrie's support AI, informed him that he was correct on the approach vector to Ouroboros as scheduled. The updated display on the HUD showed a 270 minute discrepancy between the onboard clock and galactic actual. That fell within acceptable margins for a fold to such a remote planet, one that was covered with layered fold faults no less.

“That's the L.A.I.'s Super Fold Booster for you.”

There was a time when he doubted that he could be a test pilot while at the same time hating those very fighter jets. He thought he should give it a try anyway, to see how it worked out. After all, he had been flying in his father's

ultra-light plane since before he could write his own name. It had been such a large part of Leon's life. He couldn't see how he could live without it. There are only so many routes that one can take. There was no way that he could handle being the pilot of a passenger liner. They did not do anything besides pushing buttons when the AI told them to. He did not have didn't have the money to make a living as an adventurer nor the patrons to foot the bill. That really left one option: to be hired by S.M.S., the private military contractor, as one of their test pilots.

(That's why I'm flying a fighter plane. This god damned tool for murder.)

He grudgingly had to admit that he loved his YF-25 Prophecy. A variable-winged fighter, it was painted in a flashy sea green with white trim to indicate its status as a test bed. It was a technical evaluation model being given a shakedown by S.M.S. It was not the prototype, however. There were rumors that the original had been involved in a conflict with terrorists, which is not what prototypes should be doing, but Leon did not know the details about that.

The HUD flickered as an incoming communication was received. The status readout on the right side of the display was replaced by the face of a woman. The designation read as a CIC Operator.

“Siegfried 1, you are approaching the Ouroboros atmospheric entry corridor. Please follow the projected course to the spaceport in Breetai City.”

During a time of war, following the guiding beacon from the spaceport through the atmosphere to a designated landing zone was something that everyone had to do, but for a licensed pilot, it was about as exciting as hauling garbage. There was nothing to it. It is widely believed that the modern pilot support AI was so good that it is not allowed to operate autonomously for fear of the overly-sophisticated AI rebelling. Humans are added into the mix to verify the work of the AI.

That aside, the frontier of known space is a paradise for low-intensity conflicts. They are called that, but the reality of the situation is that they are as close to war as one can get without actually declaring it. Once an incident occurs, it is the hand of the pilot that will decide everything. AI simply cannot deal with all the complex and bizarre issues that arise in space, and that is where the experience of the pilot comes into play.

Leon took out his necklace. He hung its rocket-shaped medallion against the chest of his flight suit. It was the usual ritual he performed when entering any atmosphere.

The hit came. It struck more quickly than three-dimensional radar could display and faster than an AI predictive algorithm. It was a hunch, a tingle on the back of the neck, a guardian angel watching over his shoulder, or some other wholly unscientific force that the pilots were fond of crediting, but whatever it was, it was there. Graveyards were full of the names of idiots who have died because they underestimated the power of these unproven intuitions and non-recreatable jinxes.

As soon as Leon switched over to manual control, he shoved the foot pedal all the way down to initiate the complex transformation sequence. The fuselage of the YF-25 gracefully retracted its legs, or the main engines, from their moorings. The nozzles expanded wide and the legs swung down as it switched into a form called the Gerwalk. Flame from the legs flared, kicking off of the debris around the planet Ouroboros and causing the mixed plane/humanoid to leap upward. Brünnhilde, the AI, screamed in protest at having its carefully plotted reentry route ignored. Leon didn't care nor did he pay any mind to its complaints.

Five lines of anti-fighter laser fire stitched across the space where Leon had just been. Had he stayed on that course, the entire cockpit would have been pierced by the bolts. He would have been turned into a roasted chicken and the YF-25 would have become just another satellite forever looking down on the planet below.

Leon craned his neck around to follow the enemy fighter.

"I don't know if you're a terrorist or an anti-unificationist, but ...!"

The Gerwalk's junking of random variations of quick ascent, swift deceleration, and rapid acceleration washed over Leon's entire body. The pressure was not metaphorical. It made his internal organs and bones ache. There was enough force behind it to turn an unprotected human being into tomato paste. The only thing that allowed him to withstand the massive acceleration is the EX-Gear, the combination pressure suit and power armor that he was wearing. This armor, which strengthens the human body to the

level on par with that of a combat cyborg, is a kind of "wing system" that elevates the variable fighter and its pilot to reach heights that were once unattainable by ordinary people.

"Ouroboros! Ouroboros Control, do you copy? Repeat: Ouroboros Control, do you copy? I'm being chewed up by an unidentified aircraft! Request immediate assistance!"

Asteroids, laser beams, the oceans and land mass of the planet Ouroboros below whizzed by in the sky. Fighter pilots never look ahead. They are creatures that are constantly looking up, down, left, right, forward, and backward through darting eyes and spinning heads, taking in the entirety the space surrounding them. In the end, the concept of "ahead" is a value registered by the artificial existence trapped within a plane's computer. Fighter pilots carry no such notion. They are more like birds than people, as they need to be able to perceive the world as it is: you and I, friend and foe. They are just birds, tearing through the void on their thermonuclear burst engines, flying through the vacuum of space, hunters in pursuit of their prey until, eventually, they are turned in ash by the lasers and missiles of ones just like themselves.

An oddly shaped aircraft, reminiscent of an orange fish, jumped into view.

"Is that an AIF-9B!?"

The AIF-9B Ghost was a strategic weapon comparable to the ICBMs of the previous century. It was a completely autonomous weapon, one that did not require a human operator at the helm. The performance of its onboard AI far surpasses that of the AIF-7 series used by the emigration fleets. A restricted device, the -9B was only deployed by the New United Nations Forces under direct authorization of Earth.

(No serious terrorist organization or guerrilla group would be capable of fielding that thing. Some military or mega-corporation, maybe?)

The -9B's top-mounted containment pods opened revealing tightly packed, rounded domes that looked like so many clustered fish eggs. The image departed in an instant as the drone unleashed a storm of ultra-high mobility micro-missiles.

Leon kicked in the foot pedal. The YF-25 shifted again, returning to the fighter configuration. The engines instantly put on a jolt of acceleration. The Valkyrie's active stealth system, under the guidance of Brünnhilde, sent a deception signal toward the incoming missiles. The fluctuating frequencies coupled with false data bursts confused their targeting software, turning them into the equivalent of rocket-powered fireworks.

The HUD counter read out his current velocity. It would have reached supersonic had he been in the atmosphere. With a dry mouth and adrenaline pumping through his brain, Leon's heart pounded in her ears. (I can't actually be loving this.) He tried to deny the thought. When that didn't work, he just stopped thinking about it.

The unmanned Ghost and manned fighter crossed passed each other. Leon's finger squeezed against the firing stud. A short burst of fire from the underslung gunpod ripped through the drone's skin and into the circuitry beneath it, turning the AIF-9B into an expensive bit of debris.

"I'm a firm believer in getting the job done." The cocky line came prematurely. Another craft appeared on the YF-25's scopes, coming up from behind him.

(It doesn't matter who the ghost belongs to right now. If it tries to attack me, I'll drop it.)

The young man had the strength of conviction to make such a declaration. It didn't matter how unrealistic what was happening in front of his eyes was, it was happening and he had to deal with it. What is, is. That was the underlying principle of pragmatism, its most important tenet.

"I'm sorry, but you're going down!"

From the head half buried in the dorsal fuselage of the fighter, the twin laser cannons spewed fire. Two seconds worth of continuous energy pulses speckled the hull of the second AIF-9B with focused radiation. The drone listed to the side, a small explosion ripped a hole in its plating. Unable to right itself due to the damage, the Ghost was claimed by the planet's gravity

well. Soon it was little more than a meteor briefly lighting the sky of Ouroboros.

The variable fighter was blacker than the dark night surrounding it. All of the military identification codes had been removed from its skin. The only light came from the Philosopher's Stone, a series of giant fold quartz built into each part of its frame, shining brilliantly like demon fire against the Valkyrie's obsidian-like hull.

The man sitting in the cockpit was a little different. He lacked the color of any real emotion. Only stagnant resentment filled his eyes.

"What do you think, Baltmer?"

"It looks like one of the 25 designs, the type that S.M.S configured for use against the Vajra and the Galaxy Fleet. The fact that it came to Ouroboros alone would suggest that either S.M.S. or L.A.I., maybe both, have gotten wind of our project and sent it in for reconnaissance."

"I concur."

The voice on the other end of the line had a deep thrum to it. It was the voice of an old man, but there was not a trace of weakness or mental decline in it. It was a voice that combined the strength of mind that only the aged possessed, a rock that had time and experience had chiseled into a perfect circle, one can no longer be worn down.

The hangar lights came on, indicating the launch sequence had been initiated. The young pilot at the Valkyrie's control, Baltmer, was now reminded now of the power that old man possessed, a monster of a man that had fused mind and body with the Macross, itself.

(The process of bonding with a Valkyrie through a cybernetics enhancement necessitates a rare talent, but the mental power needed to control a Macross-class ship is beyond my reach.)

There was a coldness in Baltmer's chest. This fear was the main reason why he followed the old man. Those who have come to rely only on power have no choice but to surrender to a greater power. That was especially true if that power had the potential to become a light amid the darkness of despair.

"Once the aurora occurs, the planet will be closed off. It is pointless to conceal the presence of the Percival now. There is no reason for further unnecessary wear and tear on our supply of Ghosts. Eliminate the S.M.S. infiltrator as quickly as possible."

"Odin 1, copy. Initiating launch sequence."

"Charis 1 to Odin 1, you are cleared for launch. Restricted use of the YF-29B is lifted. Good hunting."

The black Valkyrie known as "Percival" rose, floating above the linear catapult as its systems came to life.

Baltmer looked at the photograph of the girl that he used as a lucky talisman and at the picture of her with her brother. With a devilish fire in his eyes, he shoved the throttle forward. The catapult fired, releasing the Valkyrie into the void.

There is no hidden purpose to death in air combat.

When it hits, it hits, and when you die, you die. There is no meaning, no reason. There are no deaths where the pilot makes a lot of grand theatrics before he dies, and then at the end takes his damaged plane on a suicide mission to destroy the enemy, and everyone is impressed by how he did not die in vain.

Death is just death.

That was what Leon had learned two years ago through the loss of his sister. It was a military truth that could only be learned by the survivors. The only people who can live without that truth are the politicians, who send soldiers to their deaths from a safe distance, and the voters who support them. They glorify the fallen and heap meaning upon their deaths because otherwise they would look like fools for having voted for the war.

The only reason that he could think about such things was because Leon was still alive. When the "Super Pack," an attached weapon unit that served a double purpose as additional thruster engines, on Leon's plane had been hit, the ablative armor had melted only about 30% off of the dorsal surface. Seeing as the Ghost would have melted 100% of the fuselage without it, it was a nice trade.

After shooting that enemy craft down, he had not let his guard drop. Instead, Leon continued to perform evasive maneuvers while he and the AI searched the immediate area. He did not die because he had learned to act through instinct. But Leon believed that it was more than that. He believed that his sister had protected him. Maybe that really had been the case as a flash burned across the space alongside him.

"MDE beam ...? Dimensional Weapon!"

If it was a charged particle beam or a laser, or really any optical weapon, it would only have consisted of thermal energy. A Valkyrie's energy-converting armor and beam-resistant coating could handle the job and neutralize a

substantial part of the damage. However, the MDE (Micro Dimension Eater) used the space-time control technology normally only employed in spacecraft fold navigation, focusing it into the form of a projectile.

The general purpose version of the tech was normally safe. It allowed for easy traversal of interstellar distances with very few mishaps. It was a different story when it came to weapons. In that case, when the projectile pegged a target, it generated a substantial, if localized, gravitational field. The target was bathed in radiation and then torn out of time and space by being pulled into a fold gate that lacked an exit point, forever trapped in fold space. Conventional armor was useless against an MDE. It provided no more protection than a sheet of paper, regardless of how much was there. There was only one known method of defending against dimensional weaponry, and that was to cancel it by using the same brand of fold energy as a barrier.

There was no way that the specs for such a dangerous weapon could have been leaked. It was a highly classified, restricted piece of technology. Only the Earth's home system defense force carried it, or it was provided for a special circumstance such as an attack by a heavily armored lifeform, as was the case with the Frontier fleet and the Vajra command vessel.

(The fact that such a special case happens to be killing me, is not a good thing. ...!)

An enemy plane came swooping in on Leon. A jet-black, forward-swept wing aircraft of unfamiliar design, it was hurtling straight at him. He threw the full power into his thrusters. Even with all of that break-neck speed that supplied,

he only barely managed to skim far enough to the side to avoid being rammed.

The results of Brünnhilde's data analysis scrolled across the screen. They were not encouraging. They were the opposite of that. A YF-29B Percival. That was a custom variant of the YF-29 Durandal, which the Frontier Branch of S.M.S. tested during previous year's special operation -- in other words, it is the latest version of the all-purpose decisive weapon.

The readout continued to roll down the side of the HUD. It stated that scans indicated that the Percival was loaded with multiple MDE armaments, and equipped with powerful inertial compensators for enhanced maneuverability, and fold system defensive shielding. The AI's conclusion was that it rivaled the offensive capabilities of a Macross Class Destroyer and labeled it as a strategic weapon rather than a tactical one.

"I'd really like to pick up my ass and run far, far away, but that is, sadly, not going to happen. I'll do it, General! Right away, Captain! As you wish, Commander! I hate being a salaryman."

(I'm ready, now. I got this. I really don't have a choice. Okay. Think. If I press for a quick atmospheric entry, I'd be sitting duck for that MDE rifle. Maybe I could abandon my fighter and plead for mercy.)

There was also the option of ditching the plane and entering the atmosphere in EX-Gear. He considered it but decided against it as his pride and sense of

professionalism would not allow him to. That did not leave a whole lot of alternatives.

Leon activated the purge protocol. Explosive bolts detonated across the YF-25, jettisoning the remaining portion of the Super Pack. With the extra mass of the damaged Pack blown free, the fighter accelerated. It skipped off of the upper atmosphere, using the repulsive effect to push the plane's heading around in the opposite direction.

The AI, assuming his need, streamed the information on the standard Durandal across the HUD display. Leon could afford it only a brief glance. That was enough.

"The fold quartz won't work without a Song Maiden? ...! I'll show you!"

As the YF-25's nose curved around, the AI-assisted targeting system lined up on the obsidian fighter. The lock chime rang out. Leon's fingers gripped the firing studs, launching a salvo consisting of sputtering beams and all of the missiles remaining at his disposal.

It was a truly artistic shot, elegant and ferocious. No matter how insane the maneuvering capability of the enemy aircraft was, its performance was hindered by the proximity to the planet's gravity well.

Newtonian mechanics says that if a target cannot be avoided by three dimensional movement, it can be destroyed by bombarding it with energy. The jet-black enemy plane's nose lit under the glow of a laser beam. The point of light lanced out, intercepting one of the oncoming missiles. It exploded, taking its siblings along with it.

"Here!"

The YF-25 reconfigured into its humanoid form, a 55mm Gatling gunpod in its hands. The EX-Gear translated the inertial movement of Leon's limbs to the Battroid. Jets from the thrusters steadied it. The combination allowed for predictive fire, a feat that was impossible for a fighter or a Gerwalk. The gunpod split open, a massive, radiant plume of energy burst forth. The tracer-lit round caught the black YF-29B. Flame blossomed around it.

"Bingo!"

But that was all. A jet-black giant emerged from the explosion. With wings on its back like some kind of demon or a monstrous bird, the shadow of the enemy plane wreathed in flame looked ever so much to be the God of Death, himself.

It had cut off its propulsion in anticipation of the impact. Transforming into a Battroid, it diverted the power from its reactor into the energy-conversion armor to ward off the sniper bolt. Whomever he was, he was undoubtedly a bold pilot.

Leon lined the crosshairs up and let fly his last remaining bullet.

It sailed right past the target.

Leon shifted to a fighting stance and drew the energy knife from its hidden sheath. He darted forward, swinging high with the blade. It was a personal move of his, perfected to the point that it had never been dodged in actual combat.

The enemy craft switched to Gerwalk, slipping right underneath his arm and coming up behind him. The difference in mobility of the YF-29 and his own was like the disparity between a chicken and a lark; the difference between one generation of Valkyries and the next was as great as the contrast between a heavyweight boxer and a lightweight.

(This guy ... He knows my technique...!)

The black Valkyrie's counter-slash fluttered as it evaded using a high speed feint. Leon knew that movement. So much like that friend, the one he had flown with many times before.

The wings of the Prophecy were shorn off. The feedback from the fighter through the EX-Gear connection sent a shock coursing through his brain.

The world faded out as he lost consciousness.

It was not out of compassion that the YF-29 pilot spared the Prophecy. Rather it was because he detected the interception squadron of New UN fighters quickly rising through the atmosphere of Ouroboros. Jamming could interfere with communications, but no amount of it was going to block out the heat of laser fire and the light trails of missiles.

The S.M.S. plane would be recognized as having been destroyed. There was nothing that could be done about that. There was still time to launch their full-scale operation, however.

"..... Splashdown. Odin 1 to Charis 1, I'm returning to base."

The black Valkyrie turned its nose and flew away.

"...I thought I recognized something in that pilot, but I guess I was imagining it."

He didn't look back. If he dawdled, the NUNS forces would catch up to him. They could not be allowed to interfere. There was something more important at stake. This was the path he had chosen. He inclined his head just a little bit and looked at the old picture of that girl pinned to his cockpit control board.

It would be easy to die. The thought came to Leon, someone on the periphery of his mind. It would not be so bad. He could just slip away.

A tune tugged against the edges of the blackness.

(A song?)

It sounded like rock music. Or folk music. Pop? Techno, perhaps? It was like a mix of the genres overlapping, or maybe it was none of the above. He could not quite put his finger on it.

The only thing that he was sure about was the message. On that front, it was loud and clear: a song embracing the joys discovered in life, reaching across space and further to bestow the gift of love. His sister would have liked it.

In his fading consciousness, Leon transformed the Battroid into a fighter. The half-destroyed system sparked and flickered. The screens went dark.

After a moment, they lit back up around the cracked and broken display. The controls switched themselves over from manual to automatic thanks to Brünnhilde and the experience that the AI had accumulated over the years. Leon didn't know what kind of person the previous pilot had been, but he was pretty sure that she had been the reckless type.

Dying would be a relief, he thought again. He could just let his eyes close. Dream until the end.

But the clear blue sky of the stratosphere appeared above him as the remains of YF-25 rolled into a reentry corridor. The blue ocean rose up into view. It was so beautiful.

Leon let go of the reaper's hand.

Intro: Planet Cradle

(Lyrics)

I've been hearing you for a long time.

I have been looking for you.

But you keep on wandering the ring of fate
Like a mirage in the distance.

The years, the stars, and everything become entangled.
When our souls link, it will begin.

However far ahead
I want to carry with my memories
The melody that was so close to me.
I'm sure someday the color of the universe will be repainted
With the dreams of tomorrow, we'll sing for someone.

I don't know how many nights
Have passed since this began.
What is your wish for the end of eternity?
The voice that I dedicated to you became entwined in stardust.

I'm going to link you, me, and all the words
And I'm going to fly.

However far away

I want to protect the memories that were scattered in to the future,

With the song that has flown down from you.

Someday I'll surely connect the stars torn

From yesterday to tomorrow, we'll pray for someone.

For the you whom I met and the you who can't see me

I will shoulder the burden of bearing the star of hope

Singing for tomorrow and the days yet to come.

I love you and I think of you still

This ballad that fills my every breath

I will let it overflow.

I can still hear you.

I can hear you all of the time.

However far ahead

I want to carry with my memories

The melody that was so close to me.

I'm sure someday the color of the universe will be repainted

With the dreams of tomorrow, we'll sing for someone.

Chapter 1: Fall Down

Leon's eyes parted. A figure stood nearby. He blinked to clear his sight. It was a woman that looked down on him. Even through the haze that blanketed his mind, he was certain that he did not know her.

Her face had the innocence of the fairies about it, but a strength of will in her eyes told him that was probably not the case.

(Woman... She doesn't look much older than me. Would calling her a girl be more appropriate?)

He considered that as he stared up at her. She had short hair like fire. It was not quite red, more of a rich pink. The woman, for her part, watched him with curiosity.

Leon's mouth worked but no words came out. His whole body was hot, like flame. Like her. The comparison to the flame, not the part about being hot. Maybe that part, too. Damn, he was tired.

He understood the reason why. He had crashed airplanes plenty of times in his life. It always left him feeling the same way. There was always the pain. He felt somewhat disconnected from his body. That accounted for the grogginess. It felt like his soul was trying to escape. He wouldn't allow that ache to keep him from flying, much as he had not in the past. That was the cost of having wings.

"Where am I?"

"Fufu. Finally awake, are you?"

The woman smiled. She looked happy but with a hint of mischievousness about her. It could have been the chuckle.

Leon then noticed that there was a slight almond-shaped point at the tip of her ear.

"... A giantess?"

"What? Like Meltrandi are that unusual?"

"... No. I haven't seen one for a long time. Sort of. Forgive me if I've offended you."

Zentraedi.

Leon felt ashamed for letting his own prejudices spew out. It had been over half a century since the humans from Earth and the race of giant Zentraedi had begun to coexist. Even so, the friction had not yet disappeared. There was still some bad blood between them.

(Even from me, and I'm one-eighth of a Zentran, myself...)

Leon started to sit up, moving gingerly on his sore limbs. Now that he could see better, he took a look around the room. It was a medical suite. There were machines next to the bed. A window was set to one side. He could see the sky. They seemed to be in some kind of ship. He noted the slight vibration, which indicated that it was underway.

"So, where are we? And who are you?"

The therapeutic gel was cold against his skin. It was a side-effect of its healing properties. Leon risked raising himself a bit further in order to test his condition. He did not go up too far. He did not want to disgrace himself in front of the lady by showing her something that he shouldn't.

(No broken bones... Or if there were, they've been treated...)

"I think you should identify yourself before you ask it of other people."

The woman puffed out her shapely lips. It was a mockery of pouting. He let it slide due in no small part to the fact that the look worked for her.

"Oh. ...I guess so, huh? I'm Leon Sakaki, a flight warrant officer for the S.M.S. Sephira branch. I was contracted to deliver a Test Valkyrie, the YF-25, to the S.M.S. stationed here on Ouroboros."

He added that the aircraft was very likely to be almost a total loss. He wanted to accidentally forget to mention that fact, but didn't. A simple delivery should have gone that poorly. As a courier, he was definitely unqualified.

"I see."

The woman flashed him a grin and pinched her chin. Her small, shapely, lovely chin.

"Yeah, well. There's good news and there's bad news. Which would you like to hear first?"

"Give me the good. I make a habit of eating things that I like first."

"The lucky thing is that you survived. No trauma, no permanent damage. You're a tough guy."

"Yeah. I get that a lot."

He did not say it out loud, but in his opinion, a pilot got better with every plane that he destroyed. There was no question as to whether or not he could survive a crash. When it came to going boom, Leon's skill was well above average. It took a special talent to get blown up as often he did.

"And this is the S.M.S. Ouroboros branch office! Congratulations on your successful arrival!"

The woman made a grandiose show of spinning around and striking a pose. If she was expecting the paparazzi, she was going to be let down. Leon did not have a camera on him. He didn't even have his clothing.

"I'm Aisha Blanchette, the branch manager! I'm an engineer by training, but you can think of me as a jack-of-all-trades."

"Really? You're the branch manager?"

As a private military provider, S.M.S.'s business structure had often been pushed to the level of absurdity in the pursuit of heightened results. He had heard that there were many incomprehensible choices of personnel, such as ace pilots who also served as high school students and test pilots who also happened to be pop stars. Even with that in mind, it was astonishing that someone as young as that woman had managed to reach the highest position in her branch.

"I'm also the one who hauled you out of the water after you crashed into the ocean."

"That was you?"

"Of course. I'm a pilot, the ship's captain, the head of maintenance, well, I am known to do everything. But why am I telling you this? I'm sure you've heard of me, even from way out in the sticks."

"You're doing the YF-30 Project, right? Why do that in the middle of nowhere? You can't get a whole lot further from the central shipping lanes..."

"There's the whole confidentiality thing. Also, budgetary concerns, you know. Some things get pretty cheap out here if you keep your standards low."

"...I see."

S.M.S. had nothing to do with the military industrial complex's rather vigorous activity over the past few years. That did not mean that they were immune to its influence when it came to the development of the next major variable fighter. The separate S.M.S. branches in each region were collaborating with the mega-corporations in their endeavors to gain a foothold in the munitions enterprise. That was something that the New United Nations Forces could not do thanks to restrictions that had been placed on them during their restructuring a number of years back. Leon had been told that the Prophecy that he had been transporting was a part of one of those collaborations.

"So, here's the bad news. I disassembled your YF-25."

"What? You're taking my plane, too?!"

The Valkyrie pilots believed that their aircraft was the best aircraft, whether it was involved in a crash landing or not, and that no mechanic or superior officer had the right to confiscate it. The essence of fact remained intact even if Leon did happen to dislike fighters.

"That Prophecy's Brünnhilde is a custom-made AI. It has been in use since the beginning of the YF-25 project, possibly even before that. Our entire goal was to have it delivered to us, so why not?"

"... After delivering the AI, I'm supposed to return to Sephira in the YF-25. I am pretty sure that's what the offer was."

"Yeah, about that... You're not going to be leaving this planet for a while."

"Say what, now?"

"Didn't the Sephira office explain it to you?"

The woman who had introduced herself as Aisha sighed lightly. She dragged a pipe chair over next to me, alongside the bed. Upon sitting down, she crossed those good looking legs of hers. Her very short hot pants had to possess the strength of a well-trained antelope to be able stretch enough to accommodate those thighs. They were mesmerizing in the way that a spider could be in order to catch its prey. It took a concerted effort for Leon to pull his eyes from them.

"This planet, Ouroboros, is covered in particularly dense layers of spatial distortions and fold faults. Around here, the effect is colloquially dubbed the Ouroboros Aurora."

Aisha half turned and pointed out the window. There it was. I could see it now that she had pointed it out. It was the middle of the day, but the aurora-like glow blanketed the sky in soft, shifting colors.

"When the faults are thin, you can make the jump in about a week, but when they're as thick as they are now, it's impossible to form a stable fold gate without something at least as powerful as the engines on a Macross-class battleship. It's suicide to try to fold with a Valkyrie. The distortion would rip you apart."

"Are you serious? And when is this whole thing going to end?"

"There's no way to be sure. Its pattern is irregular. It could be a month, could be a year..."

"God damn this place!"

Leon looked up at the wafting patterns in the sky in disgust. Being a test pilot meant that you had to accept that there were going to be reckless orders that needed to be followed, but that didn't mean he could just obey them like a robot. There had to be a little discretion involved. If he had known that he was going to be stranded out there, he would have declined.

"Yeah, pretty much! Since you are already here and you're not going to be going anywhere for a while, I was wondering if you could help me out with the work at our branch office. Until the Aurora runs its course, I mean. We had a previous test pilot, but he was badly injured in, let's call it an accident. So, we're a little short staffed right now."

"... You are going to pay me, aren't you? If so, then I'd be willing to give you a hand."

"Answering a little quickly there, don't you think?"

Aisha snapped her fingers, rolling the motion through into a point.

"I've heard of your kind. You're a member of one of those squadrons that's signed a special agreement that allows you to exercise your right to refuse an assignment by paying a penalty for the canceled mission, right?"

"... It's a long story. The short version is that I can't do much of anything beyond being a pilot. I guess that what I'm trying to say is that my life is something of disgrace. Just tell me what you want me to do."

He rolled his shoulder. It moved smoothly enough, considering what he had been through. The vitals on the monitor next to him showed that he was not making up a narrative to fix his desires. Internal organs, skeletal structure, muscles, and brain waves were all within normal parameters even if a few were bordering on the edge.

"Okay, follow me to the hangar. You're going to help me with the work that I fell behind on by going out to pick you up."

"Aye. If you hadn't dragged me out the water, I'd be a puffy body littering the Ouroboros Sea by now. I owe you. I'll do what you need me to."

He couldn't say that he didn't have a desire for revenge against the person who had downed him. He did. He wanted a rematch. He did his best to push that from the front of his mind.

(I'm not a fighter pilot. I'm a test pilot.)

"As long as you stuff me full of food first."

"Yeah, yeah. All of you pilots pack it away like a dump truck."

"Any day could be your last. You may as well eat like it is."

He could not help but to feel lighter at the thought of being able to fly again so soon. That was why he boldly rose from the pool of therapeutic gel. Aisha looked down directly at his exposed lower half. Leon proudly took it in stride when she not-entire-unexpectedly hurled a bedpan at him, nailing him squarely in the face.

Leon had known that it was a remote planet, but seeing the sky of Ouroboros for the first time was a wonder. It was blue and wide, seeming to stretch on forever.

"Amazing. I thought islands flying in the sky was only in cartoons, man."

"There is fold material bonded into the ground. It works like a natural anti-gravity engine. Higher concentrations of it cause the landscape to float."

Aisha turned away from the view. The vista was nice and all, but there was something much more beautiful. She made a smug twirl, ending with her arms stretched out to show off the wings of her beloved aircraft. It seemed to Leon that she was overeager to get her Valkyrie out into the field. He figured that she must have been quite the workaholic. If it weren't for that, she wouldn't have bothered to use a high-class machine like the VF-19E Excalibur - a special variant called the AE/MF, which is strictly based on the AE but with an appearance closer to the 19A - as the branch manager's personal ride. Or it could have been arrogance, if one were to judge from the pose.

"The gravity here is nearly at 1G. The atmosphere is breathable. There are oceans and wide open plains, and even the fold matter islands. That's a lot of empty countryside for a Class-A planet."

"It's just because we're so off the beaten path, and on top of that, the Ouroboros Aurora, remember? It would take too many shields and souls to keep something big up and running."

"Even so..."

There were a great many planets in the known galaxy, but Earth-like habitable worlds were extremely rare. If you happened to discover one, all that you would have to do is to sell the development rights to a mega-corp or a fleet of emigration ships, and you could live happily ever after. On more than one occasion, the Earth government had to intervene in armed conflicts that had broken out between different fleets over the right to claim a planet. To find one, even with the drawbacks like those here, he would have expected it to have been jumped on from the get-go.

The Double Plus, a modified VF-1 Valkyrie that had been given over for Leon's use, was a junker. The base design was fifty years old. There were rust spots and areas of chipped paint across the fuselage. The engines at least seemed to have been maintained during its lifetime.

The Valkyrie was in a good mood, moving as though it were riding the wind. He tilted it to the side. As the tips of its wing sliced through the blue waves, rainbow-colored fish jumped in time with the rippling of its wake.

"It seems like a heavenly planet, doesn't it? More people should be willing to settle down here. But..."

"Hmm, well, there it is. There are in fact several large farms, and Breetai City is fairly large. Nevertheless, the circumstances are what they are."

From the other side of the monitor's feed, Aisha threw those shapely legs of hers over the control console. She may or may not have been aware of the effect that her body was having on the man. The smirk that she threw at the camera was a hint as to the answer.

"Circumstances, huh?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Do you see those ruins on that island up ahead? That's our target for today."

Aisha's VF-19 transformed into a Gerwalk. Its engine-legs fired forward to hasten its deceleration. Once it reached an acceptable speed, it took on a spiraling pattern as it began its landing descent.

For a moment, the sheer size of the ancient ruins seemed to bewilder Leon. The passage was large enough for a variable fighter in Battroid form, something that stood more than ten meters tall, to easily walk through.

He had to remind him that it did make sense considering that the Protoculture, great prehistoric civilization that had once unified the galaxy, had bred and utilized a race of giant servants.

"This is amazing."

It was a simple thought, but an accurate one. It opened up even once they passed beneath the surface. The curved walls of the structure gave it the feeling of a massive cathedral, or perhaps an elaborate tomb.

"I thought that intact Protoculture remnants were only in the movies, man."

"What are you talking about? First of all, that's the second time that you've said that. Secondly, the Zentraedi fleet and the Supervision Army aren't in ruins. Macross isn't either."

"Fair point."

"Well, it's rare, of course, to find remnants that weren't designed solely for military use. Because most of that was left over after the fall of the Protoculture was destroyed by my ancestors."

A long time ago, the old Protoculture civilization plunged into war using a race of giants that they had designed dubbed the Zentraedi as battle surrogates. The end result was the master race's extinction. The human on Earth and other races scattered around the galaxy was theorized to be descended from the Protoculture, but whether or not that was the truth was hotly debated by the scientific community.

"Are there structures like this strewn about Ouroboros?"

"Yup."

The image of Aisha on the monitor gave him a thumbs up. The hand of her pink VF-19 mimicked the action.

"Not only can you find untouched weapons and parts just lying around, but you can also find fold coal, fold carbon, and if you really hit the jackpot, even fold quartz. If you find a vein of quartz, you could buy your own starship, and we've exported a lot of fold quartz from this planet for use in the VF-25 project."

"It's a treasure trove, you mean. And I'm supposed to help with the search?"

"Well, duh."

"Look, I'm not a Super Dimensional archaeologist or anything. I'm not sure what good it would do even if I were to try to help..."

"Yeah, no. You don't want to go that way. He's coming."

"Who's coming?"

Aisha smiled on the other end of the comm. Then a sudden flurry of laser bolts and missile trails filled Leon's vision.

The welcoming party from the planet Ouroboros had arrived.

Leon hit the command to transform into the Gerwalk. Pressing down on the pedals, the humanoid-plane hybrid performed a twisting hover evasion. Had he not acted as quickly as he had, he would have surely died in the initial strike. It was that kind of an attack.

A number of machines, the appearance of which was somewhere between insects and beasts, emerged from the darkness. The glossy armour that covered their bodies glinted in the light. The things were roughly the size of the Gerwalk, perhaps slightly larger.

"Yah! What the hell is that!?"

"It's a guardian weapon system that protects the ruins around this planet. It's some sort of a self-propagating metallic lifeform. We call it a Dyaus"

Aisha gave the explanation easily. Being a high-class VF-19 pilot, the smooth matter-of-fact answer did not break her concentration as she evaded the enemy's attacks with fluttering dodges.

"... It's a what, now? And there are a lot of ruins on this planet? So a leisurely sightseeing tour across the globe is out of the question?"

"That's the large and small of it. It's good to see that you're starting to get a grasp on the situation."

"Ah!"

The laser turret extended from the underside of the VF-1's nose cone. Staccato bursts of light flicked out, striking at the swarm of incoming

missile-like projectiles. The Valkyrie slid to the side, slaloming along the passage. As it circled around the metallic creature, it brought its gunpod to bear, its own missiles primed for a counterattack.

"Gotcha! If it's drones that we're dealing with, then there's no reason to be shy. I'm going to introduce myself!"

As long as he was fighting, he could forget about the painful scars that he etched from battle. Leon was aware of the contradiction, but for the moment he just allowed the adrenaline-fueled haze to take over.

The carapace of the guardian weapon crackled with energy. Leon's Valkyrie went wide, putting some distance between it and the drone. A moment later, the guardian exploded in a spray of fire and dust, bringing rubble down from the ceiling.

"This isn't good. ...Did we get separated..?"

The communications link with Aisha flickered in and out. Static coated the image of her face on the monitor. Her voice was distorted, the words unintelligible through the sputtered popping. Leon guessed that perhaps the folded material in the ruins had been activated as the radar's map data was equally unreliable.

At the top of the corridor, the battle seemed to still be going on. He could hear the muffled sound of a chain of explosions. No matter how tough the Valkyrie was, if the chamber started to collapse, nothing was going to stop it. Staying there was not a good idea.

"The passage that we came in was blocked by that thing's explosion. ...If the air flow is anything to go by, I'd say that forward is the way to go. ...I guess I should check it out."

Carefully, he brought up the thermonuclear jet engines. His Valkyrie rose from the floor. Leon kept his guard up as he proceeded deeper into the ruins. Even so, there were no further signs of the guardian weapons. It would seem that they had all been drawn to the commotion. That could have been wishful thinking. Aisha probably would have disagreed since she was still up there.

After some time, he reached the end of the passage. Apart from the thrumming coming from the walls, it was relatively quiet. The portal at the end of the corridor led into a large chamber. An object of some sort was situated in the center of the room. Whatever it was, it did not appear to be the fold quartz that he had been searching for and it was definitely not a pink Excalibur. Leon moved closer to get a better look. Up close, it resembled a crystalline coffin of some sort.

He was beginning his examination when a giant guardian Dyaus revealed itself. It had been set into a nook in the wall in such a way as to blend in with the natural curves of the ruin.

"!!!"

A huge claw, on par with the size of the body of the guardians that he had seen previously, swiped at him from above. Leon pushed down on the pedals while tilting the stick to send the VF-1 into an evasion maneuver but the guardian's arrival had caught him by surprise. The machine's claw ripped through the Valkyrie, severing the left arm. The limb dropped to the ground with a loud double clank.

Leon spun around, lining up a firing solution and pressed the stud. A warning flashed across his HUD. The missile banks were empty. Well, that was not good. It was fortunate that the gunpod had been in his right hand or he would have been in worse trouble.

He redirected his path to avoid a second swipe for the monster. This time, instead of moving away, he went towards it. He ran the Gerwalk up its hide to the top of the artificial creature. Using the heat of the engines, he seared a hole through the armor plate that he thought was the guardian's neck.

"My paycheck thanks you for the overtime!"

Leon jabbed the gunpod into the hole. A torrent of thirty-five millimeter rounds firing at supersonic speed ripped into the exposed circuitry underneath sending spritzes of lubricating fluid flying back out of the hole. The guardian quivered as small, rippling explosions tore hole after hole in its casing. The drone lit the room up like a giant firework.

The final blast destroyed one of the mountings securing the coffin. It swung loose and then dropped to the stone floor. Its side broke open, sending the contents tumbling out.

"What the hell is that ...?"

Leon lowered his Gerwalk back to the ground, killing the jets when it touched down. He zoomed in on the container and its spilt cargo with the Valkyrie's undermounted camera. What was lying sprawled on the stone was a mysterious girl with hair the color of the sky. Whether she was a Zentraedi, a human from Earth, or something else, he did not know. It did not matter.

"Hey, are you okay!?"

She looked weak, frail, as if she were on the verge of death. He was going to have to rescue her. That was what pilots were supposed to do. That was their duty and a point of pride.

He threw away the empty gunpod, allowing it to clatter to the floor alongside the Valkyrie's broken arm and the mechanized corpse of the thing that had severed it. Using the fighter's one remaining hand, he leaned forward to gently scoop the girl's body up in its palm.

She was thin, terribly thin. It was not the sickly look that came from a wasting disease. Her frame was as delicate as she was beautiful. It was as if some god had handcrafted her from twined glass, like a fantasy given form.

"Who are you...?"

She asked the question with her eyes.

(Who am I?)

Was he a fighter pilot? A salaryman? A test pilot?

"That's not important right now."

He shook off his hesitation. Looking into the girl's mirror-clear gaze, it seemed that none of that mattered, not the who nor the why, only the here and the now.

"Come on, let's get out of here!"

Leon fired up the engines. The Gerwalk's legs lifted off of the ground, blowing clouds of dirt and bits of broken carapace as it slowly turned. He stopped when he spotted a hole in the wall. It must have been created by one

of the guardian's secondary explosions. Leon brought the girl in close, using the Valkyrie as a shield as he accelerated from the chamber.

This was his first mission, the first of many, on Ouroboros, a planet named after the ring of fate.

Chapter 2: Ouroboros

Movies have endings. Music has its final note. The end of a life is not so easy to accept.

No matter how much we sink into the sea of despair and resentment, tomorrow will always come and we will have hunger to face. To fill our stomachs, we have to work. Sometimes the work that we do to make ends meet is more precious than the cause or the ideal behind it.

If the repetition of these things is how people live and die, then it is possible that the only true meaning of life is to listen to Ranka Lee on the radio as one lies in a bed and to dream of a better tomorrow. That need most pure is not to be denied.

Leon Sakaki climbs into the variable fighter that he abhors day in and day out in order to earn his daily bread. He does it he has to and because it's the right thing to do.

A steel girder thrown by a drunken Zentraedi worker flew toward the Valkyrie. The fact that the Zentraedi, one of the descendants of the original titan race of the same name, could hurl it with such ease was terrifying. It was a fright to behold. It was worse when it was aimed at you.

It was well known that alcohol was one of the few amusements of the Zentraedi, though whether that had been a part of the prehistoric Protoculture society or if it was a trait unique the Zentraedi's design was unknown. It was believed that the process that removed the human-like culture from them for the purpose of creating beings whose only instinct was to fight resulted in a side-effect of lowered mental acuity. That, in turn, greatly reduced their overall fighting efficiency. It also produced the effect of them not caring about that being the case. That was not all, though. Their ability to reproduce sexually was suppressed. And that too had a side-effect, namely that it gave them the impetus to make peace with Earth after being moved by Lynn Minmei's song of love.

But that is neither here nor there.

"Listen, old man! I'm telling you, you drank too much!"

Leon dodged into the path of the steel beam. It went against his instinct, but there were other issues that took precedence. In this case, he was desperately trying to catch the girder or, failing that, to at least shield the people in the construction site behind him.

(I don't care what happens to me.)

The difference between the two of them was great.

"Shut up! You stupid earthlings only think of us as talking Destroids!"

The Zentraedi swung a sake bottle into the air. It was pretty much the same as the normal kind only that it was roughly the size of a car. In anticipation of the impact, the energy-converting armor of the variable fighter roared as it went into overdrive, switching the output of the reactor to run over the surface of the Battroid in order to increase its physical resistance. It would protect the VF-1 should the bottle hit, preventing it from causing any real damage to the plating. It was not however something that could protect the exposed portions of the Valkyrie, such as the sensor array or the cockpit. Those bits were not shielded by the energy-converting armor and were comparatively fragile.

(And that branch manager is very picky when it comes to a minor thing like destroying Valkyrie.)

"I don't care about Earth! I was born and raised on a migrant planet! Besides, my great-grandmother was..."

"I said shut up!"

Leon leaned to the side as the bottle of liquor came in. He was quick enough that the alcoholic projectile only grazed the top of the Battroid head, missing the camera and bouncing off of the domed skull.

"Mina!"

"The Police say that they've completed evacuation of the surrounding population."

The reply came over the comm. The image of the blue-haired girl fritzed for a second when the sake bottle hit the Valkyrie.

"The use of shock bombs has been authorized."

"Yes!"

Leon initiated a rapid retreat, putting a bit of distance between himself and the giant through the use of the leg thrusters. Some illegally parked cars were blown to the side by the engine wash. The wooden vender stalls were crushed by the force of the thrusters, splattering the kebab sauce over the Valkyrie's legs. He was going to have to apologize to the city administrators about the damage.

In the cockpit, the helmet's retina-tracking sensor unit locked onto the joints of the rampaging Zentraedi. The system read Leon's gaze and chakra movements, setting waypoints for the weapon to follow, locking on to each before he is aware of it happening. The VF-1 may have been outdated tech, but the sensor system had been tweaked to Branch Manager Aisha's pleasure.

"This is going to hurt, but please don't blame me!"

He pulled the trigger. The 35 mm Gatling gunpod in the grip of the giant silvery-white hand spat out bullets in rapid succession. The bullets landed in a wide pattern. The entire body of the drunkard, who stood at nearly 10 meters tall, is covered with Trimochi, a sticky puddy which contained a high-voltage power generator.

The vibration of the firing gunpod caused a few stray bullets to miss their intended target. They traveled on to the construction site behind him. The expanding, electrified goo ruined some of the equipment, but Leon decided to leave that mess to the insurance company. That was not his job, and he was not going to touch that. The bureaucrats could deal with it.

The sound of a second set of engines heralded the arrival of the Bowen sheriff's office's variable police VTOLs on to the scene. It had huge handcuffs hanging from the hardpoint mounts on the underside of the craft. The Zentraedi worker was restrained in short order. With that, Leon figured that he could leave the rest to the authorities.

"Okay, we're pulling out. Hey, Mina, what's for dinner today?"

"Mimir trout in Meunière sauce, sir."

"Awesome! It's a good fish, once you get used to not looking at it."

Speaking of looking, Leon turned his eyes skyward. The sky, which he was about to rise into, was so clear today that it appeared to stretch on forever. It was also enveloped in that damned aurora.

People had to live.

After the happy days and the sad, there was always another day waiting on the horizon. Even after the curtain falls, the story continues.

This was such a story.

And as such, it deserved to be told.

The girl who had been rescued from the ruins called herself Mina. Other than that name, she couldn't remember anything. Whether or not that was a blessing was up for debate.

"Eh. Well, that's fine, isn't it? Why don't you come work for us for a while?"

Leon was shocked that Aisha had suggested that so casually. He knew that he probably should not have been. It did sound like something that she would do. Not the generosity. She probably had another angle that she was working. That was the part that was like her.

"Is that alright? You don't mind?"

It was strange, picking up a girl that could not say if she had been living during the Protoculture War or possibly even earlier than that. She had no

idea who she was, or who her relatives were. Apart from her name, her memories began when she had been knocked from that stasis coffin.

"It's not like you can wander around this planet, you know. Besides, if you're a Miclone from the Protoculture ruins, you really could be a survivor of their Interstellar Republic? Riiight?"

"... Please, don't tell me you're going to experiment on me."

"I would never say that to a new recruit! Do you really think that I would suggest such a thing? Does your Branch Manager look like that kind of a person?"

"There's drool hanging from your chin."

Leon had a pretty good idea what kind of person Aisha was by that time. The way that she had been acting back at the ruins had been a pretty strong indicator. She loved ancient things in the way that a child loves a toy in a shop window. That was showing now. The way that Aisha looked at Mina was more like a cat eyeing a goldfish than an older beautiful woman watching over a lovely maiden.

"... It would be the discovery of the century if you really were one of the Protoculture, though."

Aisha pulled an odd, lacy handkerchief from somewhere between her breasts. She hurriedly wiped the drool from her mouth. She smiled in a not quite friendly manner at a puzzled Mina, and continued.

"You can't be so careless as to announce something like that. If you do, you're going to get a lot of intelligence officers and academics coming into this office, and that's going to be a disaster. A researcher has her own honor, you know."

Honor was one word for it. Leon opted to address a different point than that can of worms.

"Don't you need to report this to the head office?"

"That won't be a problem as long as you keep your mouth shut. If you stay quiet, it'll be fine. How the excavation is handled is decided by me as the manager of the local branch. If there happens to be a problem, I'll just say that I took human rights issues into consideration, that the report must have gotten swept away by the Ouroboros Aurora, and that it disappeared somewhere into foldspace. That it looks like I did my job is all they care about in the head office, anyway."

Leon scratched behind his ear.

"I am having serious doubts about how you run this place."

Even so, he did have to agree with Aisha. He had no idea what would be waiting for him if he threw a girl, who might be a survivor of a prehistoric civilization, into the rough waters of the world. It made the choice rather simple.

"Fortunately, in this day and age of unidentified castaways and surrendered Zentraedi forces, it's not too difficult for an organization with a certain level of social trust to act as an emergency underwriter and grant someone asylum rights."

Mina glanced between the two.

"I, um... what does that mean?"

"It means that you're allowed to stay here until you remember a few more details."

Aisha winked. She draped her arm around a confused Mina's neck. That devilish smile of Aisha's returned.

"Alright. Now that that's settled, let's go!"

"Go where?"

"Shopping, Mina! Shopping! A girl has needs. First, you'll need a new outfit or four. And makeup, can't forget about that! You have to add a bit of spice to those cheeks. Even if you don't need it, girl, you need it."

"... Ah!"

Leon wished that he did not know what she was getting at, but he did. He knew from growing up with an older sister that a woman like this would never stop. The amount of cash that a woman would throw into her pursuit of her own beauty was essentially endless. It was just like a man's pursuit of motorcycles, airplanes, and other toys.

"Okay. You two have fun. Take your time. No need to hurry back."

"What are you talking about?"

Aisha's fine fingers reached out nice and slowly and then struck like a snake, pinching Leon's earlobe as hard as they could. He stumbled as he was dragged up next to her.

"Our bags can't carry themselves. So, you have to come, too."

"What kind of insane logic is that!?"

"It's the kind of totally sane logic that takes the form of a Branch Manager's orders."

There was no sense in disobeying a robber whose gun was in your face. The boss of a small business who abused her position also had its issues. When that boss happened to be the head of a private military provider there was not a whole lot of difference between the two. And since the boss of the private military provider was also in charge of the Valkyries, there was even less point to disobeying. The proverbial gun was as clear as day, as was the threat of the shot if she were to pull that trigger.

This was going to suck.

A steel giant stood tall in the middle of the wilderness. It served as the capital of this planet, called Breetai City.

"Wow! Are there people living in there?"

In the back seat of the VF-1 Double Plus, Mina stared wide-eyed. It was not hard to figure out why. The metal giant stood over a kilometer tall, a Super Dimensional Fortress. That's what the city was. The arms of the colossus were a pair of ARMD space carriers connected to elbow joints. Atop the SDFN, the twin booms that made up its main cannon stared up into the sky. And inside of the fortress, there was a full-fledged bustling city.

This giant was a recreation of the famed one named Macross.

The original had been the first alien spacecraft to reach Earth, the ASS-1 (Alien Starship One). The crash landing of that Meltrandi gun ship brought the realization to the people there that a war between alien civilizations was taking place in the immediate vicinity of Earth. That had brought the world to a collective halt. Suddenly, all of the differences and conflicts that had been rampant between humans since they had taken their first steps lost their importance. They set them all aside and formed a cohesive whole, the United Nations Government.

As they had predicted, the two forces at war, one known as the Zentraedi and the other as the Supervision Army, spread to Earth. A booby trap left within the main computer of the ASS-1 Macross was triggered by a proximity locator, causing the ship, and by extension the people of Earth, to attack the Zentraedi. Thus the human side of the war began.

That First Interstellar War to be experienced by humanity ended with their homeworld being hit by a scorched earth tactic. The Earth's population of 10 billion was reduced to about 100 million within minutes. From that tragedy began an era in which the human species learned to coexist, accepting that they, like their adversaries the Zentraedi, were a form of brothers, branching paths split from the Protoculture.

The realization that they would no longer be able to survive the next time they encountered the Zentraedi war fleet if they lived solely on the planet Earth made them rethink their situation. The people came up with an idea that could spare them from potential extinction. They reverse engineered the Macross, turning its design into a migration vessel with which they could begin a massive emigration to the far reaches of the Milky Way galaxy.

Half a century had passed since then.

"SDFN-8 General Breetai Kridanik. This archaic dump is the mainstay of our colony."

Despite her words, Aisha's inflection was that of loving attachment to the huge ship.

"Is this ... Is that a song?"

Mina craned her neck as she listened to a nostalgic tune coming over the radio.

"Yeah. ...That's Ranka Lee. She made her debut with the Frontier Fleet a year or two ago, I think. ...That's a cover of Ai Obo, by the way."

"Ai Obo?"

Mina tilted her head slightly, clearly puzzled at the phrase.

"It's a hit song by an Oldies singer named Lynn Minmei. 'Ai Oboete Imasu Ka' is the full name. Nobody ever really calls it that, though. It was a popular ditty back in the day. What can I say? That old pop star means more than you would think that she would. During the final battle against the Zentraedi Boddole Zer Fleet and Earth, Minmei's song of peace moved the hearts of a battlefield's worth of non-cultured giants and paved the way for the end of the war. It's said that the song that she sang at that time was 'Ai Oboete Imasu Ka' (Do you remember love?).' Well, some do. Others say it was 'Ai Wa Nagareru (Love Drifts Away).' Truth is, no one's really sure. The records from back then are sparse. It's led to a lot of confusion over the years about who did what when. At any rate, the one thing that's not in doubt is that Minmei changed the course of history and became a bridge between the humans and Zentraedi."

"It's a pretty song."

"Maybe it seems that way to you because it's billed as a modern revival of a song and lyrics from the Protoculture era. Is it poking something loose in that head of yours?"

"I just think that it's a nice song."

There was something sorrowful and heartfelt about someone in Ranka Lee's singing voice. That had been what Mina had been referring to. There had not been any hidden meaning. It had simply touched her.

"Well, you know, I've heard her sing before. Ranka. Live."

Mina turned her attention from Aisha to Leon when he had made the announcement. He sounded like he was trying too hard to sound casual. It held the distinct flavor of a humblebrag.

"You know the girl from the song?"

"Yeah. I heard Ranka and this other chick, Sheryl, singing it last year, back during the final phase of the battle over the Vajra homeworld. Sort of. I heard it over the comms. But I did hear it!"

"You were part of that mission?"

That had come from Aisha.

"...Well, yeah. I mean, I was mostly just messing around in the back, but..."

The Vajra War, as it had been dubbed, had been a series of confrontations between NUNS and a heavily armored lifeform called the Vajra. They were an insectoid species who, thanks to the fold quartz that naturally grew in their bodies, possessed a long-range hive mind. Galaxy, the name of Macross 21 Fleet, had found a way in which they were able to tap into that network and utilize it to control Vajra.

Despite having participated in the final showdown, Leon did not know the details of what had transpired. The reality of it was that he had been too focused on what had been going down around him to give it much thought. War could be like that. Still, it had been beautiful to hear the two girls, Sheryl Nome and Ranka Lee, singing a duet on the foldwave right at the end.

"It reminded me of something."

"What?"

"A song."

Like a butterfly gliding on a current of air, Mina made her body dance in a fluffy, rhythmic fashion. She began to sing to the music coming from the radio. It was a language that neither Leon nor Aisha recognized. The words were probably those of people who had perished in the distant past, but they soared on the wind, riding on the familiar melody of "Ai Oboete Imasu Ka.'

Mina giggled nervously as she drew the song to a close.

"...I've been through something very scary. It made me fall asleep over there. And just then I remembered that I had been singing."

"That song, huh?"

"The song will protect me. The planet told me so."

Leon would have been laughed at and called a childish dreamer if he had said the world had spoken to him. But there was something different in her voice. He felt the same power in Mina's song that he felt in Ranka's and Sheryl's songs back then.

"It'll protect you."

That's what Leon told her.

He believed it.

Two weeks had passed since that day. The aurora showed no signs of clearing up. On the contrary, it was growing brighter. That was ironically not the thing that kept Leon up at night. Trouble after trouble arose, rarely allowing him the time to rest.

It was on one of those rare days, an unusually lazy afternoon, when a visitor came to the frigate ~Gefion~. The modified Northampton was their home, their office, and their living quarters. At the moment, it hung stationed over one of the lush islands of the Yuria archipelago.

"A guest? For me?"

Leon had the Internet on in his private quarters. He had been admiring the image of a trio of identical faced green-haired models who had more skin showing than clothing. He swiped the pad with his finger, erasing the image from the holo-display, before turning a look at Mina.

“What were you doing, Leon?”

The look of disapproving suspicion that hung Mina's face told him that she did not have to ask that question.

(Oh, no... After supping at the military table for so long, I feel really embarrassed to show my crassness in front of Mina).

“Oh, you know. Nothing much.”

“Uh-huh.”

Mina’s gaze shifted to the trash bin which was overflowing with a curiously large amount of junk food wrappers. Her expression changed. It was as if her cries to buy a cleaning robot had taken on physical form. Leon silently promised himself that he would tidy up his room after his business was finished.

"Aisha and I are going to have to have a talk with you later, but right now, you had better hurry up."

"Yes, ma'am!"

He grabbed his jacket with the S.M.S. logo on it from the back of a chair, and threw it on. He quickly combed his hair with his fingers. Following that, he decided that he was fully dressed and presentable. As a fighter pilot, he respected his dignity, but more than that, he was ashamed of being late for a scramble. As long as he had the minimum military gear to show that he was ready for combat, the rest would take care of itself. That was in no way a reflection of him being a slacker, no siree.

"I'll have my Valkyrie moved to standby in case of an emergency."

Leon stopped and looked at Mina following her announcement.

"...Are you serious? That trainer that you've been in?"

"My simulator scores are better than some people's that I know. And I'd like to help."

"I... I see."

Leon thought that it would be best not to say any more. She was earnest in her desire and he did not want to crush her feelings. Besides, there was that talking-to coming later and it would go better if he were on her good side.

"Oh, yeah. Sure. I'd love to have you."

Mina lifted one of the garbage bags that had been laying crumpled near the corner of his bed. She was curious as to what contents it held given the amount of the junk food wrappers were on the floor. Leon tried to will her into not opening it. Having already seen the holo-image when she walked in, she really did not need to see what was in that bag.

"Oh, thank you so much for the Sheryl Nome disc you gave me the other day!"

Will Save failed successfully!

"Haha, yeah. I got it to distract you, but I'm glad you liked it."

He didn't say that it was a favorite of his sister's. That had been one of the reasons why he had picked it up when he had seen it sitting on the display shelf at the shop. He certainly hoped that listening to those songs would ease this girl's loneliness. It wasn't much, but every little bit helped.

The visitor was a purple-haired woman, seemingly younger than Aisha and even Mina. With her petite stature, he would have placed her somewhere between a girl and a child. He internally used the word "woman" because the

atmosphere that she wore around herself could only be described as such. She did not carry herself like a child at all. Hers was an air of a person who was accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed.

(Are you a soldier or a politician...?)

"Good afternoon. I am Ms. Leeron. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

She had a strange accent. Leon could not recall having heard someone who sounded like her before. As he was trying to place it, Aisha continued with the introductions.

"Leeron is the Guildmaster of the Bounty Hunter's Guild."

"Guild... Master...?"

(Hey, you're a big shot!).

It took only a breath for the words to make sense in his brain, and he hurriedly snapped a salute, much to the dismay of Aisha next to him.

(That's right. Mei Leeron. I'm sure I saw her name on the paperwork when I registered with the Hunter's Guild.)

Mercenary Bounty hunters, also known as Hunters for short, were a unique institution on this planet. On Ouroboros, where the land is vast and the limited number of police cannot hope to patrol it all, the Hunter Guild was a semi-private, semi-public military provider. They issued licenses to private citizens to carry out various security activities, and the activities of the S.M.S. Ouroboros branch were contractually authorized by that system. In other words, the Guildmaster, who was the head of the third sector which issued those licenses and permits, could be said to have had a firm grip on the S.M.S.'s balls.

"So, why is the Guildmaster bothering to come out here in person?"

"Because it would be troublesome if the communication were to leak."

Her tone was that of a cheerful girl, but her eyes were deadly serious.

"Is there a large-scale terrorist attack that needs taking care of? Or is this more a band-aid kind of situation?"

He hoped it was not going to be like the other day, when the Ouroboros Inobuta escaped. He really did not want to go through that again. It had been

a long, drawn out affair that had held more than a little amount of embarrassing moments.

(That was a tough one: a single 5 ton wild pig was running around loose on a Leopold City highway...)

"It's the Vajra, yo."

Quite simply, the guild master said something outrageous. The mention of the insectoid race, mainly. The use of yo ranked up there also, but that was less important.

"The Vajra?"

Vajra was a swarm style lifeform that operated on a galactic scale. This fearsome creature had the ability to interfere with Super Dimensional space and could utilize the same ability to navigate by a biological means of generating fold gates. They were dangerous because they could analyze incoming attacks, even fatal ones, and transmit that data instantaneously across their hive mind network. The species could then adapt to it, becoming immune to what had harmed them. Some considered it to be a perfect organism. Some wanted to study them. Others wanted to weaponize them. It was believed that these creatures had left the galaxy because Ranka Lee and Sheryl Nome had managed to successfully communicate through that network using song energy.

"There are Vajra on this planet?"

"Yes, sir, there are. The Aurora's fold fault is expanding all over Ouroboros, and the scientists who were studying it were attacked by Vajra. That's why I would like you to investigate the situation and eliminate it if possible, yo. We don't have the means to communicate peacefully with the swarm right now. And there have already been casualties."

There was no humor in Leeron's tone.

"Investigate and eliminate them if possible, is that correct?"

Aisha, who was responding to her, had no time to spare. Of course, if you're a branch manager, you were probably given more information than a grunt like Leon. It would not have been surprising if she understood the situation better than he did.

"Yes. You're the only hunters who are equipped to deal with the Vajra. No one else has energy-converting armor and the special rounds that can penetrate their exoskeleton.

"Copy that."

Ms. Leeron's underlying intent was clear: humanity and the Vajra will never be able to coexist. If they represented a danger to the colony, then they had to be eliminated. It was an honest thought, one that Leon felt was untrue.

"And then..."

"There's more?"

Leeron's voice dipped an octave.

"It's unconfirmed, but there's also reports of a VF-25 sighting near the Vajra."

"A Messiah?"

The VF-25 Messiah was a variable fighter developed by the Macross Frontier Fleet. It was the completed form of the YF-25 Prophecy testbed that Leon had been using prior to his unfortunate arrival in the star system. Its production had been hastened for use against the Vajra as it had fared much better in the initial confrontations than the older VF-171 had.

"I thought that only the Special Forces of the New United Nations Spacy and a few elite units from S.M.S. were using those."

Ms. Leeron did not address his comment but rather continued to the briefing.

"The footage recovered from the camera is not great, but we do know that the aircraft defeated the NUNS Forces in the area."

"Defeated? Not shot down?"

"Yes. The recording picked up a man's voice telling them to withdraw because if we remained in that airspace, we'd be attacked by the Vajra and killed."

"IFF... Wasn't there a friendly or enemy signal?"

Leon had a good idea in mind as to who was responsible. That YF-29 that had been engaged in orbit, were they using the Vajra for some reason?

"No, sir, the IFF was simply registered to the Frontier Macross Quarter branch."

The Guild Master's revelation stunned Aisha and Leon. Her words were light, but sent a chill running up his spine. If the enemy really was S.M.S., this would be a scandal for sure. Aisha was apparently thinking along those same lines.

"If we don't take care of it ourselves, it'll be a big problem... The IFF shouldn't reach far due to the signal degradation from the Vajra, so we should be fine for a bit."

"... Okay."

That would not last forever. Word was going to get out. It was obvious that the situation could not be left unattended for long. They were going to have to do something about it, and soon.

A short time later, Aisha summoned Leon to the lower hanger of the Gefion, saying that she had something to show him. He stopped outside of the door. He tapped the access code on to the panel. The heavy door slid open in response. As he stepped over the threshold, he looked around the chamber. The hold was not in regular use. It was not exactly empty, but the number of cargo containers was well below that of the other bays.

"This is..."

What was there was an astoundingly beautiful variable fighter. It was instantly recognizable as a prototype. It had a cross-coupled wing with a

slightly broken triangular wing called a clipped delta. There were delta canards at their leading edges. Even the unpainted, silver body with all of its visible rivets was gorgeous.

"It's just as well, or should I say worse, that I'd just finished putting it together yesterday, you know."

"No way. ...Is this the YF-30?"

Leon walked slowly around the aircraft. At first glance, its central shape resembled that of the YF-25, but a closer inspection revealed that the engine had been replaced with the latest model. The seam line suggested that the transformation system was likely to be different as well. The fighter looked like it was designed to be more maneuverable in the atmosphere than the YF-25, which itself was intended to fill a multi-purpose role in both space and planetside. Some of the prototype's component units were inlaid with fold quartz, the intention of which was not clear to even Leon, a trained test pilot.

"Yep! That's my Chronos."

Aisha was a little, no, a lot proud. As well she should be. It was a fine craft. That she had managed to get it up and running so soon after the -24's delivery, that was saying something.

"If it really is the Vajra out there, then it's not something the VF-1 can handle. You should use this instead."

"What? Are you sure?"

Leon could hear the hitch in his voice. There was nothing a pilot desired more than to be the one who gave a plane its maiden flight. Even if the moment after it leaves the ground, the plane should be torn apart by some previously undetected glitch in the control system, there would be no doubt in an airman's mind that he or she would survive to take the next flight.

"Basically, it uses the same control scheme as YF-24 and as the YF-25. So, you shouldn't have any problem adapting to it. The AI is Brünnhilde from your YF-25. She's kind of picky as to who gets to warm the cockpit seat. I think you'll be the best match for her. Besides..."

"Besides?"

"If there happens to be a totally and completely unforeseen accident and you die screaming as a fireball hurtling to the ground, I can always find a replacement. I can't take that kind of risk, myself. I'm the designer. If I die, who'll fix it?"

"Gee, thanks. Really feeling the love here."

“You want me to lie?”

“That would be nice.”

“Everything will be fine. I have the utmost confidence in your skill and intuition. You’re going to do great.”

“I take it back.”

Leon slid his fingers along the titanium alloy skin. It was cool, but he could feel the pulse of the machine’s heart just under the surface. His hand went over its smooth, even sensual, curves. This was the only Valkyrie of its type in the universe.

He had a premonition.

There was a feeling that this machine had been waiting for him. He did not mind that he was going to be used as a guinea pig. Even though it was a fighter, the thought of being inside of it was alluring.

"Okay, I'll use it, but I have one condition."

"What? Do you have a problem with my Chronos?"

"No, no."

Leon shrugged his shoulders a little, realizing that Aisha was more enthusiastic about this aircraft than he was. Maybe the AI was not the only one being touchy.

"Please, don't send Mina out this time. She needs to focus on being an operator."

He didn't want her to have to kill people. It was different from the usual brand of thievery in the ruins. These were other humans. Plus, if the enemy was piloting a VF-25, he couldn't afford to babysit her.

"Fufu... Is that what this is about? Mina's safety? Don't worry. I was already planning to keep her here. I'll be providing the backup in my VF-19, okay?"

"Please, do. I am going to need it. Mina is not experienced enough to handle this."

Having known her for half a month, he knew that this eccentric engineer, who was always either elbow deep in a Valkyrie or digging up whatever dusty relic she could find in the ancient ruins, was a trustworthy woman. And Leon

knew very well that there was no other engineer in the world that he could trust to watch his back.

On the other hand, if he got shot down, that would give her an excuse to play with the busted fighter.

The most stressful time for a pilot is not the dogfight. The aerial battles were all about letting go and allowing the fighting instinct to take over. That kind of flying followed the will of the variable fighter and its AI. In that regard, there was a sense of freedom and ecstasy, not tension.

What was much tenser was traveling to the battlefield.

Are you sure that the flight path the operator was giving you was correct? Will we be taken by surprise? Are the numbers of the enemy waiting for us the size that we expect for them to be? What would happen if the aircraft, flying at a low altitude to stay off the radar, hits something by mistake?

If it was a long operation, it was not unusual to spend half of the day or even the whole day on the move, and only a few minutes in the actual battle. As a fighter pilot, one could make their own judgment on how to handle a confrontation, but if you were a strategic variable bomber pilot who had to

fly in on a specific course, drop bombs, and then immediately withdraw from the battlefield, the tension was even greater.

The only thing that could be done to ease the situation while en route was chatting to one's wing mate, and this was no different for Leon. His stress level was actually worse than most other people in his situation. Since he hated being a combat pilot, he did not even have the fight to look forward to.

He had just finished giving his opinion on an action movie that he had recently seen when the expression on Aisha's face in the monitor suddenly turned serious.

"Hey."

"Hm?"

"Why are you so obsessed with Mina?"

"Say what now?"

Leon was not unfamiliar with women because he had lived with his sister, but did not know how to properly handle women because he had lived most of his life in a male-based society. A question like that one popping up caused

him to look a little troubled. The reason for that was because he was, in fact, troubled by it.

"Is that your type?"

"What? No! It's not like that! She came out of the ruins of a Protoculture structure. She doesn't know anything about this time period. I'm just looking out for her, is all."

He craned his neck, looking up at the sky as he did so.

Combat was undoubtedly dangerous. The anxiety leading up to it was just as bad. A pilot's worst enemy however was stiff shoulders. The body grew exhausted from holding the controls in the same position over long periods of time. There was a massage unit installed in the pilot's suit. That did help to work out some of the strain, but it was also necessary to move the body to avoid what he thought of as Economy Class Syndrome.

He looked through the canopy. The wafting light of the Aurora blanketed the sky above. It was terribly beautiful despite the problems that it has caused for him thus far. So, Leon thought, he might be able to open up a little.

"I became kind of screwed up a long time ago. Something happened, and I couldn't protect my family."

Whether he had been young at the time or not did not matter. His family would never be coming back, no matter what happened now. During the time that they had needed him the most, he had been unable to help them. He had been weak, untrained. What could have been? That was something that he often thought about. How would things have been different if just been able to do something, anything? If he could go back to that point as he was now, he wouldn't be useless. He could have made a difference.

“My sister, my hometown, and my best friend. They're all gone. All that I've got left is this skill: how to use a variable fighter to kill other people. I don't want that to be all that I am. I want to be more, to be better. I want to be the nice guy that isn't going to up and leave. I don't want her to be left all alone. That's something I can do. I can be that guy for her.”

Leon let his voice trail off. That wee bit of an opening had turned into a floodgate. He probably should have kept his mouth shut. He did not know how Aisha was going to take that burst of emotion. The reply that he got from her was surprising.

"I'm like that, too."

"Huh?"

"I lost my family in a terrorist attack a long while back. I'm all alone also."

Aisha's VF-19E lightly waved its wings, dipping them from side to side in a pilot's salute. Perhaps she was embarrassed. He hoped so. At least they could be that together.

"So I want to find out about my race, about the Zentraedi. I want to know who they really are. I want to know where they came from. Maybe that will help me figure out my own origin, who I am, who I should call my family, right?"

"..."

The truth was that neither the humans of Earth nor the Zentraedi understood just what had occurred in the long forgotten era of the Protoculture. Their history was a great haze of speculation and theory. All that was definite was that they had existed and then they had not. It was more mythology than fact at the present with various organizations adding or subtracting to the story to better fit with their personal views.

"Mina's anxiety isn't at the same level. She doesn't know what she is, or who her family are. ...If she really is tens of thousands of years old, even if her memory manages to return, there is no one in this time who knows her anymore."

"We do."

"Yeah."

Aisha smiled. It was a carefree smile. Leon wondered if this woman was younger than he was. There were times when she had that glimmer of youth in her eye. It was one of those moments now.

"Just how many people will our esteemed branch manager like to collect?"

"Not as many as you Earthlings stuffed inside of the Macross."

Aisha's smile faded.

At that moment, her already relaxed body regained its rigid battle state. The engines switched to combat mode, shaking the aircraft violently, and the atmosphere, torn apart by the Valkyrie, howled.

The enemy had arrived.

The Vajra were no mere animals. Leon knew that well from his time in the Vajra War. After seeing them refine missiles from the organs inside of their bodies and fire plasma bursts from their horn-like appendages, he could understand why the Protoculture had hailed them as gods.

He reconfigured into his Gerwalk form and sidestepped the onrushing missiles-type projectiles.

"We can't just let them get away with this...!"

The surrounding area, as had been explained during the briefing, was more than 100 kilometers of uninhabited wilderness. No matter how many missiles you shoot, you don't have to worry about the risk of a stray explosive hitting anyone.

The rectangular mission pod built into the YF-30's tail cone rose. It extended up on a folding arm mechanism, locking into position above and behind the cockpit. The assembly rotated, bringing the longer side lined with micro-missile bays to face forward. According to Aisha's explanation, which had consisted of far more details than he would ever be able to recall, they were planning on having an array of advanced expansion modules, but for the time being, they were only able to install the one unit that they had completed constructing. The one that he had was designed to increase the amount of ordinance that the Valkyrie could carry without having sacrificing space on the wing hardpoints.

Leon's gaze caught sight of the enemy Vajra. Their bodies rolled in waves as though they were swimming through the air at supersonic speed. As he stared at them, a chime sounded over the headset. Multi-lock.

"Siegfried1, Fox One!"

Simultaneous fire. A salvo of more than twenty micro-missiles rocketed from the mission pod. Curved lines of puffed smoke recorded their path as they flew. The missiles encircled the Vajra. Billowing balls of fire enveloped the creatures. Pieces of flesh and chunks of outer carapace blew from explosions, to litter the ground below.

Leon's stomach tightened. Even though the job had been to kill them, it was not a pleasant sensation. He tried to push those feelings away. For now, he should only be happy that the modulated energy-converting armored cases were effective against the Vajra.

(I've heard that if they continue to evolve, reactive rounds and even MDEs will no longer be effective. What if they're after the planet? What if they come in full force? We have to drive them back while we still can!)

"If you mess with us, we'll die!"

He transformed into a fighter and put on a burst of rapid acceleration. He then switched into a Battroid right in front of a large Vajra. His inertial control

system and the EX-Gear held his spine in place and kept the intense negative Gs from ripping his organs from his body. Leon used that second of surprise to fire his gatling gunpod directly into the Vajra's spine. It ripped into the beast's red plating, spritzes of blood dotted the weapon's barrel.

"Tallyho! Next!"

That was when it happened.

"A song...?"

It was, indeed, a singing voice, but it wasn't just any voice. Leon knew that for sure. It had forcibly bypassed the aircraft defenses by running straight through the fold communication system.

"Leon, do you hear that?"

"It's Sheryl Nome!"

There was no doubt about it.

She was currently the galaxy's greatest diva. Her yearly income rivaled the national budget of a small nation. Moreover, she was, along with Ranka Lee,

one of the miraculous songstresses who had managed to successfully communicate with the aliens in order to bring about the end of the Vajra War.

The voice that he heard held power. It was not the sound of a recording. It was clearly a voice that was singing to someone in the here and now.

"Why...? How can that be?"

Confusion on the battlefield can lead to death. Fortunately, as soon as they had heard the song, the Vajra seemed to start moving backward. Leon increased the power to his engines. Who knew what kind of trouble would happen if they were allowed to escape? He had to stop them while he could.

Before he could close in on the next target, a pillar of light from an MDE beam pierced the space directly in front of him. Leon hit the brakes to keep from flying into it. Again, the inertial cancelling system saved him from what would have been a very unpleasant out-of-body experience.

He raised his head to the point where his neck felt like it was about to snap as he searched the sky above him. It took a moment, but he caught sight of the enemy aircraft. It hung near the clouds, almost blending into them as it used them for cover. He had to squint in order to make it out. The craft had the silhouette of a VF-25. An -F model, if he had to guess. It must have been the one mentioned during the briefing. It was the large spikes that were the scary part, though. The enemy Valkyrie was equipped with an atmospheric Tornado Pack! That detail had not been included in the briefing.

"Angel 1, swing around for support. I'm going to drop this thing! ...I don't know what it thinks it's doing, but..."

Numerous icons appeared on the HUD as a storm of micro-missiles spewed from the mission pod. With the added sensor data from Aisha's VF-19, they took on a spread pattern, zeroing in on the VF-25 from multiple angles.

"A great view, isn't it?"

It took Leon a moment to realize that it was the voice of the VF-25 pilot.

"What the...?"

The enemy transformed into a Battroid. It wasn't just a fighter plane changing into a human form. It was like a bird becoming a beautiful illusion of the wind.

"A vision of spring is priceless. Small and delicate."

Then it unleashed a hail of fire. Its gunpod blazed. The twin CIWS upon its head spat pulsing bursts of light. The large cannons from Pack, now draped over its shoulders, sent out thick beams. It was an inescapable web of light

surrounding the Messiah. The squall of more than forty ultra-high mobility missiles were swallowed by the VF-25's spitting fire and vanished within flared conflagrations. The missiles converted into a beautiful light, like a ring of cherry blossoms around VF-25. The lasers and the streaks coming from the gunpod, like petals of a flower, became a halo of colored lights around the VF-25 as it descended.

"What the hell is ...? This pilot's different!"

"Leon!"

If Aisha hadn't warned him, Leon's winter will would have been swallowed up by the all-too-beautiful form of the spring Valkyrie. It was a dream too agonizingly lovely to be true, a mesmerizing illusion created by man.

"The sun is now in the West, and the flowers at dusk were just as beautiful. These eyes of Goemon rate it worth ten thousand gold. What a lovely view!"

Leon knew the words. They were from a masterpiece of Edo kabuki, written by Namiki Gohei I. Now he was a part of it.

The VF-25's pinpoint barrier-covered knife sliced through the air. Its blade licked at the neck of Leon's plane.

"This guy's a trickery bastard."

It was different from any maneuver Leon had ever known.

Of course it was. It was not a killing technique, but a technique to please the gods. It was an art that led all who saw it into the realm of the unseen and collapsed the boundaries between life and death. The mere fact that Leon was able to remain conscious when he saw it was only due to extraordinary capability as pilot.

"S.M.S. or not! I'll protect Sheryl --!"

"!!!"

It was a boy's voice. He was a little younger than Leon. It was a voice so beautiful and full of soul that it sounded as if some celestial being had carved it out of the clouds.

Leon got his arm up as the second strike came in. He only barely managed to parry the blow. Sparks alit as the two blades met.

"From another villain who wants to use the Vajra for war!"

It had been a feint. The gunpod held in VF-25's left hand growled as it threw round after round into Leon's Valkyrie. The barrier shone brightly as it absorbed the hits. The shield held through the onslaught but not without damage to the limb underneath. The damage indicator on his board showed that the functionality of his own left arm was severely diminished, more so than bullets should have caused.

(Stun bombs? I get that you don't mean to kill me, but that's still rude.)

The scary thing about non-lethal warheads was that regular defenses were meaningless. Their bursts were not blocked by the energy-converting armor. Instead, they ran along at and used it to carry their charges directly into the generator. There, they could disrupt the power flow at its source.

(That hypnotizing technique of his allows him to slip in under people's guard at will. This guy is an ace!)

"We're just trying to get rid of the Vajra!"

"That's some kind of arrogance! What do you know about the Vajra?"

"Aha!"

But Leon was no ordinary pilot, either.

He transformed the aircraft into a Gerwalk. He quickly regained his footing and sprinted with his Valkyrie over the surface of the loose earth. The wash of its slaloming engines sent a cloud of dust billowing up, a natural chaff to interfere with the enemy's sensors. To that he added fire from his lasers to discourage the VF-25 from moving out of it.

(I've seen that his maneuver is specific to his aircraft's footwork.)

That observation was correct. Kabuki movement begins with imitating the eight directions, or all of the forms of the gods. If those steps were blocked, then the art would never come to fruition.

However, the pilot of the VF-25 was not just an actor.

"I will not tolerate anyone who upsets Sheryl! Even if it's S.M.S.!"

He took flight. It was such a bold leap that it gave Leon the impression that was riding on wings of light. Breaking free from the hold of gravity, the VF-25 took the upper hand and increased its speed.

The YF-30, which had again taken on its fighter form, attempted to prevent him from taking the lead.

"Sheryl?"

"I can't... I can't watch her cry anymore!"

Flame spewed from the high-mobility thruster pods attached to each wing of the VF-25. The YF-30 followed suit, soaring diagonally upward with almost no regard for the aerodynamics in play.

The adrenaline flowed through Leon as the intense G's pounded his entire body nearly to the point of dismemberment. In the sky, where Sheryl's number echoed, the two Valkyrie continued their tangled dogfight.

(Irony. I'm feeling fulfilled right now. I'm glad that I've been in dogfights with this many pilots and this many planes, even though we're ending lives, even though I hate fighter jets so much.)

He slipped past the fire of the enemy craft, tilting to fly between the twin beams that came from its Tornado Pack. The VF-25 transformed into a Battroid. It added fire with its lasers, allowing its barrier shields to repel the beams sent up by the -30. The backscatter from the deadly lights made the clouds glow around them. The light from the thrusters was akin to a meteor, and its polished armor shone brilliantly in the sunlight from above.

The battle seemed to go on forever.

And then.

"What are you doing, Alto!!"

"Leon! Would you listen to me?!"

With the two girls' booming angry voices, the "boy time" came to an abrupt end.

Aisha was in a bad mood. Leon did not bother to wonder why nor did he ask. He was sure that he would find out soon enough.

"In the old days, the Anti-Unification Alliance would have shot you for that behavior."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm very sorry."

Leon and the pilot of the VF-25, side by side, bowed their heads in unison. It likely had as much to do with the reprimand coming from an S.M.S. branch manager as it had to do with the fact that Sheryl Nome was standing at Aisha's side. There were some things that were more terror inducing than swarms of missiles and flaring laser beams. A woman with that stance rated pretty highly on the list. It was she who spoke next.

"This is Junior Lieutenant Alto Saotome of the S.M.S."

With a somewhat embarrassed expression, the pilot took off his helmet. His hair, the color of a raven's wet feathers, fell from underneath. On the way down, it fluttered in the breeze giving it an ephemeral, bewitching appearance.

(A woman?)

If Leon had not heard his voice, I would have believed it. He would have made for a beautiful woman. His was such an alluring form that it could only have been molded by the gods with all his favoritism.

(It's not that I don't like it, but it's just that I don't like it. Well, maybe. No. Eh..)

"That's Sheryl Nome. Well, I guess she probably doesn't need an introduction."

"Of course I don't. You're the only blind idiot who didn't know I'm the biggest star in the galaxy, Alto."

Sheryl puffed out her cheeks. It was clear that there was some sort of recurrent feud going on there. That was another topic that Leon was not going to broach. It was one that he may never get the details on, but that was fine with him. It was better to go on ignorant than to put a foot into that mess.

"So, why are you guys here?"

"Sorry. Ever since we folded out to this planet, Sheryl and I have been targeted by some peculiar people. They've been wearing the emblems of the NUNS Forces, but we've been a little skeptical, to be honest."

"Folded out?"

Aisha nodded her head.

"That's odd. Ouroboros is supposed to be closed off by the Fold Faults now. You shouldn't have been able to defold..."

"Well, you know. Me and Sheryl... Our memories are fuzzy on what happened before we folded."

"We were in the middle of, um... Well, the next thing I know after that, I'm on this planet with Alto."

Sheryl's hand sought Alto's. A couple of her fingers hooked around his. There was something bold beneath that gesture. If anything, Leon was a little envious. Of which one was the question. That was another question that he was not going to be asking.

"It was on the Frontier Fleet. Maybe, but ... out of nowhere."

Sheryl gave a small shake of her head. The corners of her eyes were tight, a show of the work going on inside of her head. Seeing as how she was stalled for that answer, Aisha redirected her elsewhere.

"Let's put a pin in that. What's with the Vajra? Why are you guarding them?"

"It's hard to say, but... My song can communicate with the Vajra."

In response to the question, Sheryl patted her tummy lightly. It was Alto who provided the words.

"The people who were trying to kidnap Sheryl were also trying to take control of the Vajra. They were tagging them with implant darts. Those let them tap into their hive mind. I thought that you guys were with them."

"It's hard to believe, but..."

The aura around the woman standing in front of Leon felt real to him. He could say without a shadow of doubt that their story held the ring of truth. He had also seen such devices used during the battle over the Vajra homeworld. Aisha seemed to concur with that sentiment.

"I can't help but believe it now that I've seen it. This idiot over here is Leon Sakaki. Now that we are all on the same page, can we call a truce?"

"I don't mind. These seem like people I can talk to. If what Aisha told us is true, they won't attack if the Vajras don't make any major moves on their cities."

"I'll see to that, Sheryl. Just let me put in some calls."

"Thanks. As much fun as I've been having camping with Alto, I'd like to sleep in a proper bed for a while."

(Now that's a statement that would cause a galaxy of flames if it were broadcast on the Internet.)

However, it was a point of honor for a private military provider to interfere as little as possible in other people's affairs and not let them interfere in return. There are countless things that Leon wouldn't like to see the light of day. He could keep this tidbit to himself, juicy as it was, so long as they did not peek into his dark corners. He refocused on the moment as Alto chimed in.

"If it's fine with Sheryl, it's fine with me. But if you try to use Sheryl in any way, I'll fight you as a man."

"I understand."

The boy who called himself Alto seemed to be as determined as he appeared. He had the look of a full-fledged pilot who had been through a lot and understood what he was flying for.

"That's why I'm going to let someone else take over. Hey, Mina. Prepare rooms to receive Sheryl and Alto, will you?"

"Huh?"

Mina's voice was bouncing on the other end of the comm line.

"Are you sure, are you sure it's Sheryl? Like, really truly Sheryl?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. If you don't stop doubting me, I'm going to smack you."

Leon cut the communication channel after his empty threat and looked out at the Aurora-covered sky. He could make out the shapes of Vajra and the others flying off into the distance, out of sight. He wondered what was going on beyond that cursed Aurora that even beings such as those could not manage to get through. In response, he felt a terrible stirring in his heart.

Chapter 3: Relics Point

No matter where you are in the galaxy, there are two things that are inseparable: time and death. Life is not omnipresent, breathable atmosphere is rarer than jewels, and human birth, including the genes that it bestows, varies greatly.

But only time and death are inseparable. If that were to crumble, it would be time for the beautiful music that the giant instrument of the galaxy had been playing to conclude.

Speaking is often thought of as an action, itself. More often than not, its true form escapes notice. It is actually a technique that allows one's breath to shake the air.

But this voice was different.

This voice did not seem to vibrate the air molecules themselves, but rather the quantum layer of reality itself. It seemed to shake the Gefion, completely ignoring the anti-gravity field on which it floated.

"Wow"

"That's amazing."

Leon and Aisha couldn't help but to glance across the small cafeteria table at each other as the coffee cup in front of them trembled.

"You're looking good this morning, aren't you?"

With a tray covered with bowls of natto, rice porridge, dried plums, seaweed, and tea, Alto Saotome sat down next to Leon. The other pilot casually averted his eyes. Every time he was near, Leon couldn't help but feel something stirring inside of him.

(This guy, is he really a man?)

There was no particular style that dominated the "big sister" role. This man projected that feeling in spades. Every single movement was soothing. There was a glamour to each and every action that Alto made. It was the kind of thing that tickled a man at his core. Leon was not going to say it out loud, but he could compete with Mina and even Sheryl in the looks department.

"I don't know if you can tell, Alto, but I think you have a beautiful voice."

"Yes, I can tell. Thanks."

The way he moved his chopstick tips into the bowl of noodles almost without wetting them, the white of his fingers circled the dark night that was his mouth, it was enchanting. So graceful.

(What kind of pilot eats such a healthy breakfast, anyway?)

"It takes about a month to get back into shape if you slide on your training. After I arrived on this planet, I came down with a fever and I couldn't practice for a while. Today, I'm back up to eight minutes, I think."

"Oh... Once you get injured, it takes about that long to get back to normal for a regular pilot, too."

Leon thought back to when he was still a trainee. He had been trying to catch up with his buddy, Rod Baltmer. He disabled the safety limiter and ended up flying too low. Even though the instructor managed to stop him from something worse, he had still been severely injured. That stunt had nearly cost him his life. He spent day after day thinking that he would be stuck flying a hospital bed from that point on. In time, he had managed to recover, but he had come closer to the end than he would like to think.

As Leon reflected on that moment, he listened to the new song being sung across the room. Sheryl had a powerful voice, but it wasn't just hers. It was being accompanied by another one, one that was younger and less developed. When they took a break between sets, Alto spoke up from across the table.

"You're working hard today, Mina."

Leon nodded in agreement.

"I was a little worried when you said you wanted to try to learn from Sheryl."

"You can't polish your art by yourself, you know. Just as a bird cannot fly in the sky without the air to hold it aloft."

Alto made the comment as he gazed at the flock of birds flying in the distance.

"You've been practicing something new too, haven't you?"

"...A little."

Not wanting to delve too deeply into the subject of himself, Alto rather bluntly returned to the topic to the previous subject.

"I heard Sheryl complimenting Mina earlier. Sheryl said that she must have had proper singing lessons before she lost her memory. She also said that Mina had some vocal techniques that she didn't know, and that if she could learn them, she would be able to take her singing to a higher level."

"It's a tough business, isn't it?"

"There's no such thing as an easy art."

Aisha interjected her own opinion into the conversation.

"Well, if she can get better, our company will be able to do a lot more things."

"Things?"

Leon had no idea what difference it made if the Operator/Apprentice Pilot was a good singer or a lousy one. It was not like there was a lot of call for it while they were in that field. What was she going to do, belt out the flight plan?

"Gufufu."

There was a sudden dropping sensation in Leon's gut. He knew that laugh and what he knew was that it heralded nothing good. When the branch manager had that peculiar smile on her face, it was only going to get worse. So, he took the best available option: he kept silent.

"Well, that's just the preparation stage. As soon as it's settled, I'll give you guys a shakedown."

Yep. Whatever it was, she was definitely up to no good.

"Am I included in that?"

"Give it up, lover."

Leon patted the bewildered Alto on the shoulder. He was about to get a crash course in Blanchette 101.

"Until we can get intouch with the Frontier branch, you will, of course, be put to good use as my personal employee, Alto! Employees who are separated from their Chain Of Command will be under the command of the nearest branch office! This is common knowledge in S.M.S.! It's in the contract, and even the Supreme Court of the Galaxy will say that I'm right."

Considering that Alto was a friend of Sheryl Nome's, it was unlikely that Aisha would let go of Alto, regardless of what the S.M.S. contract stated, but whatever.

"Huh."

"But while we are on the subject of your oh so very unfortunate stranding, neither you nor Sheryl can remember how it was that you came to be here?"

"Oh."

The expression on her face, even the way she raised her eyebrows in annoyance, was sexy as hell. Not that Leon intended to tell her that. If she knew, she would only find a way to weaponize it.

"I feel like I was in the cockpit of a Valkyrie, or maybe performing somewhere. Sheryl told me that she only remembers being on stage."

"I'm pretty sure the day that you arrived here was the same day that we picked up Mina. The Aurora has gotten stronger since then, and I think it's safe to say that something significant is going down."

"That fold fault: ... Is it true that it's completely shut down fold communications? Sheryl was upset that she couldn't track her record sales, anymore."

"We've never had an Aurora this severe in all of the time that we've observed the planet. Normally, we're talking about a month's time difference between the two worlds, but this..."

A fold fault, in regards to the boundary of space, is a barrier that stands in the way of hyperspace navigation, or fault navigation, which is also called a

Jump. The principle of fold navigation involves the way space-time distorts in order to transfer matter from one point to another. There was still frighteningly little that was understood about the process -in much the same way that humans in the 20th century did not fully understand cause of gravity- but there are some accepted bits of knowledge.

One of the things that are known is that there are invisible "faults" between the expanses of the galaxy, and it is extremely difficult to fold across them. Folding across a fault is more subjective in the time differential that is caused by the distortion of space-time. For example, a distance that could normally be folded instantaneously could result in the passage a week or even a month to the outside galaxy as a result of crossing through a fault. It could best be explained as a one-way time travel to the future.

In the thickest fold faults, the object that is about to be folded can disappear due to the spatial distortion. The energy required for a fold jump depends on the mass of the object and the distance to be traveled. When temporal travel is factored in that requirement, the energy depletion increases geometrically. It was not unheard of for migrant fleets that attempted to cross a sizable fold fault to cause the jump to fail due to insufficient energy and never reappear in normal space again.

This was exactly the reason why the planet Ouroboros, which is blocked by an unusually thick fault line, continued to be such a remote area.

"Mass-less radio waves are relatively easy to cross the fold fault. That's why galactic networks have been established even between all of the emigrant fleets."

Alto added his own situation to her explanation.

"According to my watch, the year at the time of the transition was 2059. Sheryl's cell phone and my VF-25's chronometer both showed that they had shifted at about the same time, although there was a discrepancy of a few hours."

Leon threw what he knew into the mix, which was limited to his own experience.

"In Galactic Standard Time, the year is 2060. That's a bit extreme for a mere fold dilation. Man, it sucks that the YF-25's Super Fold booster was destroyed. I wish that we had that, then we could get intouch with headquarters and the other branches."

The Super Fold Booster had been developed by L.A.I. of the Macross Frontier Fleet. It was an improvement over the basic drive system. Because it used the fold quartz that were refined within the Vajra's body, it was able to perform jumps without the usual time lag. Before its development that was something that was considered impossible. Now that Vajra had left the galaxy, the folded quartz mined from the ruins was the only source of

substance available, making the S.F.B. an extremely expensive system to produce.

(Speaking of which... Why did they even bother with the Super Fold Booster for a YF-30 project out in the middle of nowhere...? What difference would a couple of weeks have made?)

There was no doubt that Aisha was hiding something, but he wasn't going to bother pursuing it. Pilots were not detectives. There was also the minor issue that people who went peeking into the dark corners looking to uncover military secrets had a tendency not to live for very long.

"Well, anyway, what we need is to work on getting the budget in black tomorrow. Now that the subsidies from headquarters have stopped coming in, we need to make money on our own or we'll end up mortgaging not only the YF-30 project, but the frigate as well!"

Aisha stood up. She had the eyes of a woman who was looking into the reality of the situation directly in front of her, one that held no mystery and brooked no argument. Since there was nothing else that could be done about it, Leon and Alto had to agree with her. Besides, that was better for her to have than the one that she had been wearing a minute ago.

Having no money was a lot like having no head.

Going back to the VF-1 after tasting that slick performance of the YF-30 was not a painful experience exactly, but it did bestow on him the full weight of poverty.

(It's a nice aircraft... It's well maintained... It's just...)

The same can be said for Alto, who was currently stuck riding on a VF-0 Phoenix Replica, an even earlier model with the same basic proportions as the VF-25, but with a different engine, an old-fashioned transformation mechanism, and a horribly outdated control system with no inertial compensator, no EX-Gear interface, and no auxiliary control AI.

(I think a replica flew in the Vanquish Race around the year before last. It had a good reputation, so it was put up on the market. It sold for a decent price. I heard that its internal components were mainly used VF-1C and VF-5000 parts.)

Nevertheless, an airplane was an airplane.

"Okay, I'll lay it out, Skull 4."

"Roger that, Siegfried 1."

In the military, it would have been considered to be ridiculous to use the pilots' call signs from their original squadron because while they were apart, there was no proper platoon formation for them to adhere to. It was however a common practice among private military providers. Some of the more lax companies call each other by the names of movie actors, popular rock stars, or even by their real names.

"The purpose of Mission Codename: 'Battleship Potemkin' is to put down a revolt of Zentraedi workers at Mine 87-C in Northern Breetai City. There was a strike calling for better treatment that for some reason escalated into a fight. Right now, the whole area is basically in a state of a complete siege, with the police force kicking out the Destroids that were trying to suppress it. If the Destroids and the Zentran riot police are allowed to enter the complex tunnel, they could be killed or injured in a cave-in. The client for this assignment is the local authorities of Breetai City. We will enter with as Gerwalks and subdue them as quickly-."

Noticing Alto's suspicious look on the other side of the monitor, Leon cut off his explanation mid-sentence.

"Hey, are you all right?"

"No... Yes. I'm not sure, but I think I've participated in a mission like this in the past."

“You’re not sure? The hell does that mean?”

"Well, my memory is a little foggy, remember? There was a Zentraedi rebellion. And I was sent to... Was that Alcatraz prison or maybe it was on some other planet?"

"You're not getting enough oxygen, are you?"

Breathing the atmosphere directly at high altitudes will make you lightheaded from lack of oxygen. Of course, today's pilot's suits have a built-in oxygen supply system, but in the olden days, when people were still flying with propellers, there were no such devices installed. There were many cases of people being shot down because they had become dazed by the thin air.

"Oh, sorry.. Never mind. I copy you, Siegfried 1. I've already laid out the entry route. Stun rounds are being cycled into the gunpod now."

"All right, cool. Well, we're not here to be heroes this time. Let's get it done and go home, Skull 4!"

The two Valkyrie's deployed their limbs and circled down toward the mine. The mission was about to begin.

The Zentraedi were a giant race created solely to fight. That had changed during the First Interstellar War. The ancestors of the ones living in the present day had their humanity returned to them. Most put aside the violence and chose to live among the people who had freed them from eternal war.

However, not all of Zentraedi had undergone that change to the status quo. The ones without culture and without capitalism were treated as barbarians, even though they were superior to humans in many ways. They suffered from various forms of discrimination and were considered enemies, a fact stemming from the friction that they had nearly destroyed the Earth during that war.

The labor dispute in the mines was the tail end of such an issue. The Zentraedi workers, who had been brought in from other planets under contracts with exploitive clauses, exploded in anger once the nature of those fraudulent contracts had been made known to them. Their initial strike developed into a full-blown riot.

What dominated their minds was:

Anger.

That's it. That's all.

Anger at the people of Earth who thought they were nothing more than talking Destroids who would become docile if they were ever to hear a song.

Anger at the Protoculture for creating them such as they were and then disappearing from the universe.

Anger at themselves for being aware of these things and yet being able to do nothing about it.

The fight-or-flight instinct in the Zentraedi's bodies was growing at an alarming rate. Emotions that could be described as fear or terror were coursing through him. After reveling in the destruction of the mine, they had run down to the bottom of the mountain intent on doing the same to the mining company's office building.

It was then that the idea of taking the power suit and beating it into pretty pulp came to them. Those were stored within the mine's equipment rooms. Many of them re-entered the mountain in order to retrieve the suits.

That's when they heard the music. It wasn't some idol's album that the miners had tried to console themselves by. No, this was different.

"Is that... a song...?"

"Yuck! Miclone!"

"Deculture! Yack, Sheryl! Uck!"

"Sheryl Nome?"

Everyone knew her. Sheryl Nome, the Galactic Fairy. The legendary diva who had saved the galaxy last year.

"Deculturrre!"

A young miner who knew a lot about the entertainment industry shouted the word from amid the cluster of giants.

"What the hell is this!? This isn't a recording!"

"You know it when you hear it!"

The hangar door in the front of the frigate retracted up into the hull. Within the opening a series of lights sprang to life, one after another tracing a line. A large overhead spotlight beam ignited, revealing a makeshift stage with a woman standing in the center.

Sheryl was impressed by the Protoculture-era factory plant that had been stored inside of the vessel, as well as Aisha's skill coupled with Gefion's ability to build such a stage on short notice. Sheryl was impressed by everything in this world, from Alto's breakfast soup to the sunset that she had seen that morning, and even the whirling form of the Valkyrie's turbine blade below. She pulled it all together, centering it in her mind and used it to fuel the spark in her own soul.

She didn't consider that to be a talent; everyone has that capability to some extent. Sheryl did believe, though, that it was the sincerity of how much you could bring out of it, and how true to it that you could be, which separated the artist from the fan, the leader from a follower.

Yes, that was the reason why she was the best.

(I want to take that emotion and make it bigger, make it resonate within my soul, make it sing from the bottom of my being. I don't care if I'm signed to a Galaxy record label. I'm Sheryl Nome! The one. The only. The original. And I will shake this galaxy with my song!)

"Hi! Welcome to my surprise concert! I'm here today to give everyone on Ouroboros a taste of my brand new song, [d Shootin' Star b], at Macross speed!"

Smoke billowed from the craft, filling the sky around it. The effect left Gefion in a dream-like haze. The cheers that rose up from the giants were so loud that they could be felt all of the way up there. The S.M.S. staff and even the surrounding police force were excited.

Naturally.

From here on out, the stage is set for the Galactic Fairy.

(Alto be damned. No one but me should be allowed to attract that kind of attention.)

"I want to introduce you to my partner for today!"

She extended her hand. A hologram flickered to life. It splayed across the artificial fog like a projection on a screen. The stage rose into view, a terrifying image called up from the abyss.

"Mina Forte! This is the girl who has become my best friend on this whole planet!"

It had been Sheryl's decision to use Mina. Needless to say, Aisha had backed the idea, but Sheryl didn't particularly care what the S.M.S. branch manager had to say about it. This was her show. She would play it however, and with whomever, she wanted.

(This girl sings with her heart.)

It's not enough to just sing well or to look cute. There has to be something that resonates with the hearts of the audience to be Sheryl's partner. In other words, if she didn't produce newcomers who had that power and held the capability to resonate with her, she knew that her own power would wane trying to prop them up.

(Otherwise, I'll never be able to defeat Ranka, and I'll become some hasbeen who clings on to the stage names of the past because that's all that she has left.)

"Psst. That's your cue."

"Oh! Right. Ahem. H-hi, I'm Mina! It's nice t-to meet y-you! Here. Today."

"Let's stop this Strike nonsense and LISTEN TO MY SONG!"

Sheryl raised the microphone high above her head. Behind her huge stream of colored sparks erupted. A column of light lit beneath the fog causing it to glow and a holographic rainbow burst from its sides.

"I'm not some cheapskate corporation! I'll take care of all of the illegal contracts that General Galaxy's lawyers forced you to sign! The Galactic Fairy will never tolerate evil in any of its forms!"

Sheryl, who once crawled through the slums of the Galaxy Fleet, sleeping on the street, scrounging for scraps of food in the garbage, devoted a significant portion of her earnings to a myriad of social causes. That was her responsibility as an idol. Her manager, Grace O'Connor, had instilled in her the will and the know-how to do good. Now that she was known across settled space, she could use her face and her reputation to get things done. No one wanted to be outed for an illicit operation, preying upon those who didn't know better. She could threaten to do just that to General Galaxy. They would fold just to avoid having to clean up their smeared reputation. An Emigration Fleet couldn't stand up to her. She was Sheryl Nome!

"Come on, boys! Stop your rioting and listen to my soooooong!"

The enthusiasm of the crowd grew. It was electric. She could feel it, feed off of it, and use it to create something worthy of it.

Alto hovered just inside the entrance to the mine. He could hear Sheryl and Mina singing, their song having been picked up through the fold speakers.

Phenomenal voices. It was not just Sheryl. The younger girl, Mina, also had the skill of an artist that had been trained and honed for many years. An amateur who just liked to sing would not have been able to produce that sound. She had said she possessed no prior memory, but judging by what he was hearing, Alto figured that she must have been the scion of a true artist's family.

He leaped out from the nook. A quick count told him that they were about twenty Zentraedi. Some of them were armed with toughened armor that had been outfitted for heavy drilling. If it came to a fistfight, his VF-0 was going to be in for a rough time. Its plating was not intended to withstand a tool designed for cutting through dense ore veins.

"S.M.S! Put your hands in the air! If you surrender now, Sheryl will get you a good lawyer. But if you resist, I won't show you any mercy!"

The Gerwalk with its wide-spread wings would have been severely hampered by the thinly-carved passage. Using a fighter would have been suicide. Alto reconfigured into a Battroid. While in the enclosed space, it was the better choice. He then pulled his gunpod up to the ready.

One of the titans who had been staring at the monitor feed slowly turned his head to face him. His eyes followed a moment thereafter.

"Ahn? Did you say something, dude?"

"I said put your hands up or else!"

"Wha'? Well, come at me, Bro!"

Beer cans larger in diameter than kettle drums were slapped from the makeshift table and into the air. A food cup the size of motorboat came next, splashing the VF-0 with the soggy noodles that it had been holding. That was followed up by one of Zentraedi's hand-painted signs that print said something about "Beein Throo" but Alto was too busy sidestepping that one to glint more than its poor spelling.

"Whoa! Are you seriously going to resist...? Can't you see what's going on here? Sheryl holding a concert! And it's live! Do you really want to get into a brawl at a time like that?"

"I don't know what city ya're from, but don't ya know that it's only like once in a few decades that a celebrity comes out here into the sticks? So of course I'm going to turn myself in when it's over. I gots my manners."

"Uhhh."

The quick turnaround left Alto speechless.

"Then... Excuse me?"

He slowly put away his gunpod and when nothing else was thrown his way, he bowed with his Battloid. A clump of the noodles slid from the Valkyrie's head to slosh to the ground below.

The giant nodded and pointed over his shoulder to the monitor.

"Cool. I'm gonna go back to watching the show now, Bro."

(I hope Leon, over in Tunnel B, was able to solve the problem there as easily.)

Alto shrugged his shoulders. He felt a little ashamed, wondering if he had underestimated the power of her art. He decided to move on to the next tunnel on his schedule while making as little noise as he could manage.

As it turned out, the audience that Leon had encountered was not as amenable as the one on Alto's side. The left hand of his Battroid gripped the handle of the pickaxe, stopping it from completing its swing. With his other hand, he fired a shock bomb into the belly of the worker's jumpsuit causing the man to stumble backward before collapsing under the electric pulses. At point blank range it might have broken a few bones, but it shouldn't be fatal.

(Damn. ...It's like a zombie movie in here...)

The Zentraedi were clearly in a state of shock. Anger itself was driving them. What had set them off, he did not know. That was a mystery that someone else could clear up later. Right now, he was busy trying not to die.

Five of the giants had been easily subdued, relatively speaking. From the sixth on, it had become a pitched battle. Although they were not armed with guns, they were still dangerous in their own right. They could not use their mobility for hit and run tactics in the narrow tunnels, so they had decided to fight like an old-school phalanx.

"But ...The Valkyrie is a machine that was originally designed for situations exactly like this!"

A fist from the right, outside of the field of view of the Battroid's camera, crashed against the humanoid machine. Leon was knocked to the left. The laser cannon atop his head unit smashed into the mine's steel support frame. Rather than attempting to regain his balance, he rode out the wave, allowing it to drop him to the tunnel's floor. It was there that Leon caught himself in a crouch. His metallic leg swept out in a low kick, catching his attacker in the side of the knee. The Zentran collapsed, a plume of dust being thrown up around his powered suit.

"This is the last... That's the last ...!"

Leon fired a shock bullet round into the man's rivet gun. The burst of energy was not quite effective in disabling it, but the gummy substance that accompanied it was.

The helmet visor of the powered suit flipped open. Inside, the titan's face was a muddled mix of anger with fear as he stared through the broken blast shield partially covering Leon's cockpit to the small pilot within.

"...!"

Giant.

Zentraedi.

Not all of Zentrans chose the path of coexistence with humanity. Plenty of "rogue Zentraedi," as they are called, still roamed the galaxy, slaughtering at the behest of their long-dead masters.

And...

"You guys... You killed my sister... You killed my sister!"

Uncontrollable rage flooded Leon.

The spaceship was burning as it plunged down toward Sephira.

The Valkyrie that his sister was piloting flew toward it.

And then the light spread.

"Rrrrrrraaaahhhh!"

At this distance even a stun bullet could kill someone.

Leon's finger tightened against the firing stud. That movement was echoed by the Valkyrie, causing the Battroid's finger to move to press against the rifle's trigger.

"Stop!"

The sound of a gunshot rang out.

At the same time, his body was slammed into the pilot's seat.

"VF... Zero...? Saotome Alto..."

"What're you doing?! Where is the reason to kill him?! Calm down!"

The voice brought Leon back to his senses. It was a voice that, like Sheryl's and Mina's, came from the bottom of the heart.

"Leon!"

"... Ah."

"I don't know what's going on, but if you let your emotions get the better of you and you pull that trigger, then you're going to make yourself miserable for the rest of your life and you'll hurt everyone who cares about you."

There was a weight to Alto's words. It held the underlying tone of someone who knew from experience.

Leon and Mina were walking along the banks of the suburbs of Breetai City - the downtown area that lay in the shadow of the SDFN Macross vessel. Across the river, they could see the landmasses that had been raised into the air by the natural fold minerals that they possessed. The reflection of the floating islands on the sea, surrounded by the light of the setting sun made for a fantastic sight.

He was not skipping work. Alto had beaten him back to Gefion following that assignment at the mines. When he arrived, he had informed Aisha about what had transpired. He told her that Leon, in a fit of rage, had nearly killed one of the Zentraedi workers in the mining tunnel. She had been furious, and rightfully so, but the lead time that Alto had given him by arriving first had given her a little while to get her own anger under control. She had still thrown him out of the frigate.

"Go get some air! Mina, go with him! I have to take care of the fallout. Alto, you're with me."

Leon realized once again that Saotome Alto, the man who took care of all the troublesome report filing without a single complaint, was a good guy, and he thought Aisha was trustworthy enough to be a respectable boss.

(But me...)

"Um..."

Leon blinked away the thoughts. If he were to dwell on them for too long, they would drag him down. Nothing good would come from that. His eyes shifted to the side to find that Mina was looking at him with an anxious expression.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I mean... That was a whole ordeal. The concert, though... That was a great song."

"Haha. Why, thank you very much. I was so self-conscious. I just did my best to match Ranka Lee's part in the song. I've been listening to it for a long time, trying to memorize the timing and everything, and Sheryl was just so supportive."

"But you did it and that was awesome. I got so nervous that I couldn't even sing karaoke at the last S.M.S. banquet."

"Oh, me too! The nervous part, not the banquet. I don't think I've ever been to a banquet. But, anyway, the song. When the song started, I could feel the emotions of the listeners, right? And I knew that my voice was becoming one with Sheryl's... It felt as if I had been singing like that forever, and ...Oh!"

Mina's face turned red, and she covered her mouth with her hands.

"I'm sorry! I was worried about you too, Leon. I was! ...I was just worried about myself, also. I was afraid that I would mess up, and I'd sound stupid, and that would mess up Sheryl, and that would mess everything else up, and then it would all be all messed up!"

"You did great. It was a good show. I've been meaning to check you out ... for a while now. I've always wanted to listen to you do it."

"Ah. Can I... can I ask you a question? Do you not like piloting the Valkyrie?"

Mina's voice was filled with deep sympathy. It had changed so swiftly, just as the subject had. It made Leon feel as if lead had been poured into the pit of his stomach.

"I used to... I liked it once. It's just... The first time I fought in a real war, both friend and foe... When I saw people I cared about dying, I ...I got scared."

"Of the Valkyrie, sir?"

"What? No. ...No."

He stopped and looked up at the setting sun. A sunset similar to the main sequence star from his homeworld, Sephira. The color was different. The translucent Aurora shifted through it, different shades rolling over wavering glow.

"I'm sure it's hard for you. You must remember that every time you get in the cockpit. Still ... I'm only capable of flying."

In theory, he could've been flipping hamburgers in some burger joint, or struggling with papers from 9 to 5, maybe eking out a life on a pioneer planet. The wasteland and the machines... He knew that he had that option. He had it then. He had it now. But I just couldn't bring myself to leave the sky.

He loved it. He loved that huge human-shaped machine that soars through the air as his alter ego. That's also why he hated it. He hated the machine that stole his family and friends away from him. Two opposing feelings on the same subject: that couldn't be helped.

"Leon!"

Mina squeezed Leon's hand.

It was warm.

"Still, I don't think I'd be here if you hadn't helped me, caught me in the collapsing ruin."

"... It might've been collapsing because we dug the ruins up, you know?"

"Aisha said that the ruins had already gone into an active state for some reason by the time that you got there. So, I think that the chamber that I was in caved in because of that, not because of you."

"I see."

He couldn't get used to the warmth of her hand, but he was glad all the same for it.

That was when it happened.

That was when he heard that song drifting on the air.

That song was different from Sheryl's. It was different from Mina's.

It was difficult to explain what it was that set it apart. That could have been because Leon wasn't as articulate as Alto. He was, however, at least sure that the man wasn't singing to them. They just happened to have been there.

In the man's hand was a badly aged acoustic guitar. There were scratches along its surface and the color was uneven, worn from use.

He had a flashy, travel-stained suit, round glasses, and hair that rose like flame.

The man sat on the rim of the cockpit of a crimson Valkyrie. It was the only one that Leon had seen since his arrival on Ouroboros had been maintained with such care and attention that it was practically unsuitable for use as anything but a show piece.

(VF-19...? Type A? Or maybe Type E? ... No. I've never seen one like that before...)

The man's shout instantly blew away Leon's military-brand confusion.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! LISTEN TO MY SONG!"

It was a cry.

It was a scream that shook the world.

If Sheryl's live performance was an accumulation of precisely calculated logic and high technology, that man's song was like a storm that violently beat down the male ego and ran wild inside of him.

There is no way to decide who was better. It was like comparing the sun and the moon.

The man's song just swept the world up. It was a song with the kind of spirit that would overpower the will of anyone who refused to listen to it.

(I guess that he has much in common with Sheryl.)

The song forcibly connected the sky, the sea, the floating islands, the land, and Leon and Mina, dragging them to the frenzied beat.

"This song..."

The next thing he knew, Mina was singing, too.

It wasn't just Mina. Even Leon was singing along with the man's song, though he wasn't very good at it. The man sang, and sang, and kept on singing. Before he knew it, Leon found that the heavy feelings that had been a stagnant lead in his heart, anger, fear, and such, had disappeared.

By the time the sun had set, the man was gone.

He had been so caught up in what had happened, in that rush of emotion that touched him at his core, that it took Leon a while to realize that he had flown away in that flaming Valkyrie.

Both Leon and Mina, exhausted, laid down in the grass and stared up at the night sky above them. Through the shifting waves of the Aurora, the stars could be seen. Away from the city centers, there was nothing to get in the way of the twinkling lights.

"I wonder what it was... That guy..."

"Very..."

Leon turned his head. Mina was lying right next to him. His eyes drifted down. Her breasts swayed with each breath that she took. He felt a rush of heat course through him, and in a flash of panic, averted his gaze. The look slipped passed, unnoticed by Mina as she continued to speak.

"It made me feel so nostalgic. That man's song..."

"Nostalgic?"

"It's like I heard it somewhere a long time ago... A song like that..."

"I see."

Leon felt refreshed. Not from Mina's chest. Although, that had not been bad, either. His gaze started to drift. He caught himself and refocused on the stars.

(I like that sky and its stupid wavy-wave.)

He felt as if he could finally admit that to himself.

Why is the ceiling of the frigate white? Leon suddenly mused the question to himself as he looked up at it.

The thought made no sense, and yet: there it was.

It was said that man does not live by bread alone.

(What makes this man great is that he knew that he could not live without bread. We can't live by God or ideals alone.)

Leon gulped down his isotonic drink as he sat there bathing in his own philosophical musings.

(In other words... What am I trying to say? I am so sleepy. Yeah. That about sums it up.)

Pilots were often ridiculed by infantrymen for "sitting in a chair and dropping bombs," but sitting in a chair and being subjected to random G's was hard work. Being a Valkyrie pilot who has to go between fisticuffs with giants and then switch to firefights like what the ground pounders had to do was no ordinary job. It took a lot out of the men and women who did it.

"Still alive over there, Alto?"

"Yes. I can handle it... We trained for this back on the Frontier Fleet."

Even as he said that, Alto slumped down on the table across from Leon and his drink. Much like Leon, his whole body felt like a cotton blanket that had absorbed way too much water. He felt as if he weighed a ton. He was dragging. He was tired. He was hungry. And despite that hunger, his stomach was unwilling to accept a deposit.

"I can't ...There's..."

"Yep. I get that feeling."

They were on their second shift. There were four Valkyrie pilots on duty: Leon, Alto, Aisha, and Mina. They had been set up in pairs and rotated out to incoming calls for aid. It was easier to say that than it was to actually do it. There were a lot of requests and they could only stretch themselves so far.

Aisha was pulling an even heavier load, working as both a maintenance tech and the resident salesperson. Mina had become something of a local celebrity ever since that guerrilla concert, and while not as in demand as Sheryl, she was frequently inquired about by local radio stations and shopping malls. This kind of entertainment escort naturally fell on Leon and Alto's shoulders, so there was practically no down time in the rotation at all.

Without access to the outside network, the S.M.S. Ouroboros branch office was already running thin on income. It was starting to show signs of an impending bankruptcy. In addition to that, the Galactic Fairy brought her own personal brand of trouble, such as running out of her makeup, being bored and wanting to fly, and demanding to be included whenever they were sent to a city center.

"...Wasn't there a previous test pilot? ...Did you ever hear what happened to him, Leon?"

"... He submitted his resignation from the hospital... Aisha was pissed, jumping up and down, throwing a fit. ...But we're not an army, so there was nothing keeping him here."

The reality of a small company weighed heavily on their branch. There was always a shortage of manpower, and they are always looking for new employees, but there is no way anyone in their right mind would volunteer to work at such a crazed pace. So the mood of the workplace becomes dark because of the shortage of manpower, and there is shortage of manpower because of the workplace's darkened mood. It was a vicious cycle.

Of course, Aisha, the branch manager, was trying to solve this problem by bringing in more work, which meant working more, which might improve the company's finances in the long run, but it did not improve the working conditions in the short run.

"Branch managers are a hardy bunch, aren't they? That's the Meltrandi in her, I suppose..."

"Sheryl's cheerful today. That's a relief at least..."

The way Alto's long hair fell over his cheeks made him look unkempt. The languidness of his movements were showing his frustrations, but Leon was too tired to try to find the strength to point it out. He instead concentrated his efforts on gaining as much rest as he could for the minute that it was available.

"But... Still, there's been a lot of activity since... that flash concert..."

"Um... Is that what I think it is?"

Leon stopped looking up at the ceiling and took a bite of the synthetic soy burger that had been sitting on his tray. He made a face when it hit his tongue. It may have looked like a hamburger, it tasted like grilled tofu. The food processor that ran from the ship's hydroponics bay and plankton synthesis plants had a lot of variety, but the monotony of flavor was inescapable. It did not matter what came out of it, it always tasted the same. If only he had been in the habit of cooking for himself like Alto, then he might have been able to whisk something decent of the ingredients. Unfortunately, he had always left the housework to his sister, and now he was paying the price.

At least he still had a chocolate bar that he had picked up in town on the way back from the last assignment. That was going to be his reward to himself for getting that soy burger down. He could practically taste it already. Sadly, that applied to both the candy and the burger. He peeled open the end of the wrapper in hopes that the sharp smell of the chocolate would override the tofu flavor from his meal.

"There have been fifteen riots and incidents of violence involving Zentrans... since that day in the mines. ...There must be something more to it... It's not like this planet is all that discriminatory against the Zentraedi..."

"... The rampaging ones seemed to be motivated by... I don't know. Some kind of abrupt anger spikes. You know, when that one guy was arrested, he

told the police that he didn't know what happened. He was protesting and the next thing that he knew he was going off on you?"

"Yeah. ...But, well, that's what anyone would say after a violent incident like that."

"I guess, but... No, that's not it."

"Hmm?"

Alto's voice changed. It switched to the same starkness that he got whenever he talked about his art.

"I was born into a family of actors, so I know how people move when they are acting... but those Zentraedi were really angry, deep down, and yet they forget about it as soon as they come to their senses? It's as if they are possessed. ...Even you, Leon."

"Huh? What about me?"

"You were the same way that day in the mine when you were about to shoot that man. You were possessed by rage, too."

"...Now that you mention it..."

Strange. If you had asked Leon, that was all that he could say about it. And he also has a small amount of Zentraedi blood in him, too.

"Look at this."

Alto pinched the holo-data from his cellphone and mimicked tossing it. In response, the device projected the image above it.

Talking about work seemed to help Alto cope with the pain. Japanese blood, Leon thought to himself, ignoring the plights of his own lineage.

"So, these are the scenes of the incidents."

There was a lot of data and the projection was only so large. Leon leaned forward to get a better look at it. His eyes, squinting, skimmed over the lines.

"...All of these have something in common."

"...They're all underground, aren't they?"

Ah. And Leon, who went underground, was affected, while the branch manager, who hadn't, did not experience the same thing.

"..."

It could have just been his poor character, Leon thought. However, neither he nor Alto were the type to drift into lazy idleness. They were also not the type to leave events that they felt stuck too close to home unspoken simply because it could make them look bad if they were revealed.

(Well... Nah.)

If they didn't clip the problem at the root, these overlong days could go on forever. Or perhaps the branch manager would lash out in anger and the dark mood hanging over the company would be swallowed up in a real black hole of despair.

Leon stared at the bite marks of his half-eaten burger.

There were few options for the two of them if they were to let that happen. There were only so many job opportunities for mercenary pilots and far less when those pilots had let their previous place of employment collapse out from under them.

"Do you want to go?"

"Yeah, let's go."

He dropped the burger onto the tray, then they both stood, leaving the galley behind as they headed to the branch manager's office.

They knew it was probably a lost cause, but they believed that the honor of a pilot demanded that they try, so they had no regrets about doing what they had to.

What happened next moved quickly.

Aisha herself had the same suspicions, as it turned out.

"Well, it's nice of you to want to do the work yourself."

Seeing Aisha's fingers tapping away at the keyboard at such a tremendous pace, processing a tidal wave of data in combination with eye-tracking input, Leon was now reminded that this girl, not much older than himself, truly was

a genius. She could be a fully functioning branch manager, a pilot, and an engineer all at the same time.

(With talent like that, she should've gone to Earth, Eden, or some other more lucrative department. She could've made a killing in the private sector.)

"Here it comes."

A hologram burst into life. The projection came up in the center of her not-very-large office. It resolved itself into a map of a floating island not far from where the Gefion was currently stationed.

"According to my calculations, I'd say eighty percent of the phenomenon is localized within the vicinity of these underground ruins. I'm observing the same resonant waveforms as the fold waves observed in the recent Zentraedi outbreaks."

"Observed Fold Waves... When did that happen?"

"Since the first incident. A weak fold wave was picked up within the mine. We tried to cancel it out by using a song with an active fold reaction, oscillating it, and hitting the ambient fold wave in the opposite phase. We couldn't completely neutralize it because we couldn't get a read on the exact wavelength, but it was still pretty effective, right?"

"Wait... Aisha? Did you just use us as test subjects?"

"Yup."

Just like that, Aisha snatched the chocolate bar from Leon's breast pocket. He exclaimed in surprise at the brazen theft of his precious candy. Aisha responded by staring him dead in the eye as she took a hefty bite. She ignored the crestfallen look that crossed his features and instead continued with her assessment. She was not a genius. She was a monster.

"I wasn't sure if it would work, and I figured that even if it didn't, you guys would be able to suppress the uprising on your own. You could have handled it without Sheryl and Mina's support, right?"

"Uh..."

The kind of people who would say, "Of course we couldn't," would never be able to become Valkyrie pilots. Every successful pilot believed that even if the whole galaxy turned against them, they alone would not be shot down. Absolutely every single one of them. Never mind the minor issue that Leon had been shot down plenty of times over the course of his career. Nor the fact that the only reason that he was standing there in front of that projection, watching the fate of that poor chocolate bar as it was so heartlessly devoured by that pink-haired devil-woman was because he had been shot down over that very planet.

"Hey, no problem, right?"

"Well..."

Alto cleared his throat.

"Have those ruins been excavated yet?"

"No way! In fact, we just located them. Ya see, the ruins on this planet are covered with a complex active stealth field to avoid their detection and exploration by the Zentraedi and the Inspection Army, so it's really hard to pinpoint one except by digging and hoping that you get lucky. In this case, I'm mainly guessing by measuring the slight change of the strata density that we picked up while in the process of tracing the resonant fold waves."

"Does that mean that those golem things are going to be swarming all over the place again?"

"The Dyaus? Yeah. Troublesome, ain't they?"

In spite of her words, Aisha's eyes were shining like a child's when she spied a present on Christmas morning. Or a vile beast with someone else's sweets.

"Besides, if we have found an unexcavated site, and we have detected unusual fold waves emanating from it, then we've hit the bullseye. Fufufu."

"Would you stop laughing like that? It's creeping me --I mean, Alto out."

"Huh?"

A look of confusion washed over her and then away again. Aisha made a desperate bid to maintain her dignity by wiping from her face the line of drool that had appeared at the thought of what the untapped ruins could hold.

(Oh dear, she's really beautiful if she keeps her mouth shut, but...)

"Anyway!"

(And there it goes.)

"The S.M.S Ouroboros branch office will be investigating these ruins to solve the riot case! I'm going to sell that to the governor's office now. So, yeah. ...We'll be deploying in three hours! Until then, get all the rest you can!"

Unlike the previous one that he had been in, the interior of these ruins was large enough to accommodate for flight. Thanks to Leon's steady hand and the stability of the YF-30, it was possible to fly through them in fighter configuration.

The new helmet, which was designed to block a certain amount of the effects of the fold wave by having bits of fold quartz embedded into it, was not too uncomfortable to wear. It was a tad heavier than the normal model, but not enough to cause a distraction or to put strain on his neck.

"Hey, come on, you need to lighten up, manager."

"I know."

Leon risked looking over to the VF-19. It was flying almost side by side with his own jet. Through the cockpit canopy he could see Aisha. Her expression reminded him of the face of a Buddha statue.

It was no wonder as to why she was down. They were a step behind. They had arrived to find that the entrance to the ruins had been blown wide open. Another of the bounty hunter teams had gotten wind of what was going on.

They had rushed in ahead of Aisha and he, trying to get a first crack at the goodies hidden within. A notice issued by the Hunter's Guild had left outside saying that the team had been granted first access rights. Even Leon had been disappointed when he had seen the brainless smiley face on the contract. It was the logo of a pathetic, low skilled hunter team made up of two Valkyrie units who called themselves Team Ray of Truth.

"Well, if we can detect it, that means someone else can detect it, too..."

"Government bureaucrats! If you're also giving excavation permits to other teams, then tell me so that I don't have to waste my time coming all of the way out here for nothing!"

Aisha's voice had a hint of anger in it.

(That's rough, but not surprising.)

Alto's VF-25 and Mina's VF-11 Thunderbolt had been left behind to escort the frigate. It was a good idea to keep your eyes on the prize, because depending on the movements of the ruin's guardian mechanisms, their mothership may be attacked. No one wanted to return just to find that their home was a smoldering wreck.

Leon tried to put a positive spin on things. It was not much, but it was all that he could do.

"We still have the right to investigate this site itself. Let's just solve the main mystery and go home."

"And you'll be satisfied with that? These ruins are untouched. They've been that way since the Protoculture left them! Right now, it's at the mercy of a bunch of money-grubbing bastards from who knows where!"

"...Why do you care so much about these ruins? S.M.S. is not an academic organization."

He wondered if he should not have asked the question, but Aisha wasn't just the manager of a small business. She was also a military commander. If that commander loses her cool, then the pilots serving under her won't be able to have the peace of mind that comes from the trust that they get from a rational leader.

"If you don't want to talk, that's fine, but as a soldier you need to keep a level head, right?"

"..."

An awfully long, but objectively not very long at all, time passed.

"... This is the only way."

Aisha's tone was different from her usual bossy demeanor. The one that came then was more appropriate for someone of her age. It was as though she was trying to let out something she had kept bottled up.

"What's the only way?"

"We Zentraedi don't have a past to believe in or a culture to hold on to like you Earthlings do. All that we have is the fight. But for those of us who have chosen a different way of life..."

Aisha's words stopped there, trailing off into silence. Leon understood the reason.

"Hey..."

They had travelled fairly deep into the ruins, navigating the wide, smoothly carved passage and had only just come across one of the internal doors. This one was open, but that was not what caught Leon's eye.

In front of the huge open door, the two VF-11Cs of the Ray of Truth were laying on the tunnel floor. Their wings were smashed, one had been sheared off completely. The Valkyrie on the left was halfway between a Gerwalk and

a Battroid, having been hit struck down mid-transformation. It was missing the front of its torso, which was not encouraging for the pilot. The Gerwalk on the right had the flickering of live wires coming from the missing arm assembly. Not too far away, a body was sprawled on the iridescent floor. He had bailed out of his damaged machine. It looked as if he had been trying to make a run for it. There were bullet holes in his back.

"That wasn't a Guardian! Look out!"

Leon shouted the warning even as he began reconfiguring the aircraft into a Gerwalk. He shoved the flight stick to the side, and the Valkyrie jerked along with it. A few tenths of a second into the maneuver, a beam blast shot through the space where he had been, with a trio of missiles following in its wake.

An enemy plane emerged from behind the gate. It was a black VF-171 "Nightmare Plus" with its nationality markings removed. It was an updated version of the standard VF-171 called an EX. It was equipped with fold quartz-laced armament. Its strength was comparable to that of Alto's VF-25 in terms of its system specs.

"Who are...!?"

It didn't matter who they were. If he didn't want to be killed, he had to kill them first, and since he didn't want to die, he had no choice but to pull the trigger as soon as he caught the enemy plane in his sights.

"Siegfried 1, engaging! Angel 1, assist me!"

"Angel 1, copy!"

Compared to the VF-171 EX, the VF-19E was an older model, but with Aisha's skill, it shouldn't be chewed up so easily. And the enemy had no data on the YF-30.

The lines of fire from the -171 were concentrated on the weaker Excalibur. It was accurate but blind fire, the type that came from a human mashing buttons and hoping that the AI and the sensors would do the rest of the work for him.

While Leon abhorred the deadly potential of the variable fighter, his answering shot was not as crude as that. The gunpod bursts into fire on the first VF-171. He aimed low, stitching a line across its leg joints. They were ripped apart, essentially turning the Gerwalk back into a fighter without an engine. It slammed into the floor, sending up a fierce wave of sparks as it hit the ground.

The sensors' lock-on warning buzzed. A solid barrage of micro-missiles came from the enemy's partner. There were, Leon guessed, roughly a hundred of the projectiles. They had launched so many in the hopes that he would not be able to intercept them all with his CIWS laser.

"A gift for me? That's so sweet!"

He transformed into a Battroid, fully opening its leg thrusters before the shift had completed.

"But I'm not going to let them eat me!"

Once it had finished reconfiguring, he gave the engines one quick boost forward and then cut them. He dove headfirst into the hail of missiles unpowered for one major reason: energy-converting armor.

That system maximized its output in Battroid. That was due to the fact that the humanoid form was not designed for flight. The power that would normally be spent running the thermonuclear engines could instead be diverted to charging the Valkyrie's plating in a way that deflected energy and resisted kinetic impacts. When combined with the latest type of spatially curved projection armor, aka the pinpoint barrier, it formed a multilayered defense that could not be breached by any single blow. The exception to that being a MDE weapon, as those were capable of cracking a planet by shattering the fabric of space-time, itself.

Explosions blossomed around the falling YF-30 like a trail of fireworks. As the soaring Chronos Valkyrie was moving toward the missiles, their speeds were effectively added together. The majority of missiles' focused detonations missed because in the instant that it took for the proximity fuses to trigger the warheads, their target had already passed beyond the conal

splash zone. Those that did manage to go off in time found that the force of the explosion was deflected as the pinpoint barriers were reangled by the -30's AI Brünnhilde. The shrapnel that made it through the shield found that its force had been sufficiently weakened to the point where the energy-converting armor could easily shrug them off.

"These guys are military! They're definitely professionals!"

There was no way an amateur bandit could have that kind of equipment. It was simply outside of their price range as the only way that they could get their hands on something of that caliber was through less than legal means such as black market smugglers.

That black paint scheme and modern weaponry struck a chord with Leon. He had seen that before. These men were from the same unit as that YF-29 that he had met up in lagrange orbit.

"Shall we do what we do, Aisha?"

"Naturally!"

The image of Aisha on the monitor gave him a thumbs-up, and then she rotated her hand into a thumb down.

The boosters on the back on the VF-19 flared. With Leon clearing the way, it shot through the steaming wake of what had once been those missiles. The pink Excalibur burst from the orbs of smoke. Its pinpoint barrier, unneeded for defense, writhed over its metal fist. The energized punch ripped into the fuselage of the remaining VF-171 EX, crushing the gears and severing the conduits within.

"It doesn't matter what army you're with, if they try to attack you, you have to fight back! They killed a fellow hunter, took us by surprise, and if we run away now, then there'll be no one left in S.M.S. Ouroboros branch for the survivors to ask for help! Either they back down or we'll step up!"

It occurred to Leon that he may have been watching too many old yakuza movies of late. It was still a logical notion, simple and reasonable. At least that was what he told himself. No matter what, the reason why people relied on them was because they kept winning. The strong preyed upon the weak. It was the law of the jungle. Someone had to stand up for those that could not stand up for themselves. Regardless of how much Leon tried to avoid the act of fighting, or perhaps because he avoided it, he could not just stand by and let himself be killed. If they lost, then there would be no one else to take up the cause.

Well, maybe Alto and Mina. But they were not there. They were still on the ship. They didn't count.

(Besides, those who shoot a bailed out pilot have no honor.)

"I'll protect the branch manager, and Mina, and everyone else!"

As he fired the micro-missile into the air, Leon realized that he had been saying the strangest things lately. For the longest time, he had believed he was not capable of defending anyone, that he had only ever been able to look out for himself. It would seem that his days on Ouroboros had begun to change him.

(Mia, I don't need you to protect me anymore.)

Through Gefion's sensors, the crew onboard knew that there was a battle going on inside of the ruins. However, the strong jamming and the stealth field that covered the buildings themselves prevented any further information from being conveyed. Sheryl and the others waiting in the frigate were reaching their limit of frustration with the bursts that flickered sporadically across the display.

"Hey, Alto! What are we doing? Shouldn't we go help them too?"

"..."

Alto Saotome stroked his shapely chin. His fingers traced his jawline until they touched his good luck charm. The fold quartz earring tinkled when his fingertip brushed the bottom edge.

(The intermittent sounds of battle meant that this was no accidental encounter. If they're engaging more than one platoon of enemies, then two Valkyries might not be able to hold their own...)

An aircraft carrier without any aircraft on board was a sitting duck. Alto knew that he should not abandon it to join the fray. That would leave only Sheryl, who had only barely managed to pass her pilot's exam, and Mina, who was a beginner with only simulated combat experience, to keep watch. They could not be counted on to defend the ship.

On the other hand, if he didn't sortie, then Leon and Aisha could get overwhelmed. Sheryl and the rest of the crew might be put into danger as well because he would be the only tested combatant left.

(I don't know what to do. What would Major Ozma want me to do at a time like this ...?)

Not that long ago, he had been a wide-eyed boy. His seniors and friends taught him how to be a soldier, but they were not there. The only one who could make the decision was himself. He recalled those days of training when he was worked to the point of vomiting blood.

(What would you do if you were playing the role of the captain? Remember. Remember the captain's way of thinking. His habits. What an officer should look like.)

"Alto, do you know why we pilots are given the rank of officer?"

He fondly remembered Ozma Lee's voice, so crass and sketchy that he couldn't believe that man was the brother of the beautiful Ranka Lee.

"It's because we need that authority to personally handle a Valkyrie, so that we can carry and deploy cruiser class weaponry!"

That had been the reply that he had given. Back then he had been a rookie, desperately trying to be a soldier. It felt like a long time ago. In those days they had still believed that the Vajra were just monsters, mindlessly killing people because they were there.

"You're right. But that's not enough to get you points! Listen, Alto."

A pair of sincere eyes looked at him. That was him, the one reflected in Ozma's eyes. Ozma had been reflected in Alto's own eyes. He merged the two together.

"On the battlefield of the stars, you cannot always get orders from your superiors. We are given discretion over our actions and the authority required to meet the conditions for victory. In order to make these decisions, we are given the rank of an officer."

(That's right. Fly the sky that you believe in, Alto Saotome. If you don't, you won't be able to save Sheryl or the Vajra that Sheryl is trying to protect.)

The earring glimmered in response to his determination.

"Mina, evacuate the Gefion from this airspace! Fallback to Breetai City. I'm going to support the others."

"Hey, Alto! You can't leave me behind. I'm coming, too."

He held up a finger, pressing it to Sheryl's lips to stop her from ranting. That did not actually work, so he just spoke over her complaints.

"No. Sheryl, you wouldn't want an amateur to run onto your stage, would you? This is our stage, the stage of professional pilots. I'll handle it."

"Fine."

The strawberry-blond girl glowered as she bit out the word. She had the air of a queen, one who ruled over all that she saw. She would not let anyone point out that she was merely a guest on that bridge.

"But you had better make sure that you come back."

"Aye. Prepare Skull 4 for launch!"

The maintenance crew dashed away from the aircraft. Their checks completed, they opened the hangar bay doors. The VF-25 rumbled as its turbines spun up.

"Mr. Alto."

Mina's anxious face appeared onto the sub-monitor.

"Please, take care of Leon and Miss Aisha!"

"You have my word. Skull 4, launch!"

They gave it a good go, but there were a lot of enemy planes.

The performance and skill of each and every pilot was notably below that of Leon and Aisha, but the trouble was that the VF-171 EX's main weapon, the MDE beam cannon, was not something that they had any means of stopping. That meant they had to fight defensively.

"Aisha! Doesn't the thirty have some kind of secret weapon that can deal with that thing?"

Leon pressed his back against the wall, using it as a shield like a gangster cornered by a trigger-happy police force. The strange alien material that the ruins were built out of was apparently resistant even to the dimensional weapon. It was not impervious, however. Each blast from the VF-171's cannon ripped a chunk out of its surface. That was still significantly better than having it drill completely through the Valkyrie.

"No! I didn't think that we'd need one!"

The branch manager shouted back her answer while she stuck her gunpod out around the edge of the wall and let loose a stream of bullets to hold off the latest -171. The enemy ducked back into the doorway. None of the rounds were able to penetrate its barrier, but it did get them a bit of breathing room.

"The Chronos prototype isn't built for that! Combat is a secondary purpose. It's primary --."

(Isn't this thing a... It's not a war machine?)

The question was cut off in his throat.

"!!"

There was a flash of light followed by an explosion. The black VF-171 EX squadron was knocked into one another as the wall alongside them was blown inward. Chunks of multicolored stone were joined by a storm of plasma fire, lasers, and conventional rounds. Having nowhere to go, a flurry of explosions was soon added on top of the cacophony as the VF-171 EXs began to fall to the onslaught.

It didn't look like Alto had come to their rescue. Even with his Tornado Pack, he could not throw that much firepower at the enemy. It had to be something else, a lot of something else.

(A battalion of the army's troops, maybe more?)

What shocked Leon and Aisha was what that something was.

"Hey, this..."

"Oh...!"

Music.

A hot melody streamed over the sound of combat. The burning riffs echoed through the air as they made their way down the subterranean passage. Moreover, that sound interrupted the communications system, disrupting the image on Leon's HUD as it forced its way through via fold amplification.

(It's that guy's song.)

It was the same song that the rocker boy with the round glasses had been singing in the evening sun. Leon could feel something in it, more than a mere voice. Its effect was just like that of Sheryl's and Mina's.

The flames of the explosion began to clear. The smoke thinned thanks to the new hole that had been blown into the wall.

A group of bipedal Zentraedi battle pods and power suits entered, crushing the wreckage of the jet-black Valkyries underfoot. Behind them, in the

background, there was a large tank class mobile weapon called a Gjagravan-Va. Leon was getting the impression that these were not the everyday hunters. It was clearly a heavily armed group.

"Is that a Valkyrie in the lead?"

There was only one Valkyrie in the strike force. It was painted with a flashy red livery. It was a VF-1J, produced in limited numbers back during the First Interstellar War. The Battroid was carrying fold wave amplifiers mounted on the hardpoints under its spread wings, suggesting that the current song was being sung from that aircraft.

(Ah... So, her song is shielding the Zentraedi from the effects of the ruins' waves).

This presented a new problem. That being the risk of going toe-to-toe with Zentraedi marines. They were known for packing frontal firepower and thick fore armor. In the confined space of the tunnel, the threat was very real.

Aisha seemed to be thinking along the same line. Leon, not sure what to do, hung back with the intention of leaving it to her.

"Attention: Unknown Unit! |We are the S.M.S Ouroboros branch! We have priority authorization involving these ruins!"

It was a beautiful, fluent rendition of the Zentraedi language. It was easy to tell that they were the words of a young woman who was proud of her heritage.

(Although, it also sounded like a last minute jab at the Ray of Truth.)

But the reply she got was not nearly what they had been hoping for. Rather than a polite apology, they were offered a hefty barrage of shells.

"You've got to be kidding me!"

Leon and Aisha dropped back behind the outcropping again. That cover was not going to last much longer. The walls of the structure may have been thick, but they had been being chipped away at for a while now, thanks first to the VF-171 EXs and now by these new interlopers.

(This's not good.)

The nice thing about the Zentraedi's weaponry was that they do not run out of ammunition, they do not break down easily, and they have excellent heat dissipation. In short, they could fire without interruption until the opponent was dead.

If the wall gave out, then Leon and Aisha would be left relying on their energy-converting armor and pinpoint barriers, and those would not last forever. If the Zentraedi kept the saturation fire up, then their defenses would eventually stop functioning. It would happen sooner rather than later if that Gjagravan-Va decided to open up with its heavy particle cannon, which Leon was pretty sure was what had been responsible for that flashy entrance of theirs.

He looked back down the corridor in the direction that they had first come from. While the passage had been wide enough for them to have flown through it, it was too narrow to allow the Valkyries to take advantage of their mobility. That meant that making a break for it was unlikely to work out in their favor. To make matters worse, that all-purpose magic wand that could fix any situation, aka: their missiles, were running on empty.

(Should I have brought Alto along?)

The VF-25's Tornado Pack had those two heavy quantum beam cannons. Those could have made a difference. That was a weapon with a wide tracking angle and could continue to fire as long as it had energy (and if the barrel was not destroyed by overheating), and it could lay down suppressive fire.

There was one fairly sizable issue with that plan. That being that with the lines of communication having been cut, the chances of Alto coming to the rescue ranged from slim to none. It would be a mistake to get their hopes up.

"Calm down! We don't want to fight you!"

"Shut up!"

A storm of plasma and cannon shells served as punctuation to the heavily accented Galactic Standard reply.

"We, the Quamzin Clan, claim this Protoculture Facility! With its power, we'll be able to crush those weak, traitorous Zentraedi and their human allies, and we'll run wild throughout the galaxy as we please!"

It was micro-missiles and railgun fire this time. They were at least taking turns. Not any one member of the Clan was hogging all of the fun. Good for them. The jerks.

Things were not looking good for the S.M.S. pair. This was not a tenable situation for them. If they did not do something soon, they were going to lose.

(There's no choice. I'm going to have to act as bait so that Aisha can bolt...)

But she would need more than just a distraction and luck. The tunnel was pretty long. There was not much else in the way of cover. She would have to travel in more or less a straight line. That was not the best way to avoid getting shot.

It was at that exact moment that the most unexpected person made his move.

"Hey! Quamzin, that's not what you told me!"

(Is that...?)

It was a girl's voice. It sounded like she was younger than Aisha, and possibly even Mina, by a year or more. It was a voice of someone in their middle to lower teens. And most important of all, that voice belonged to the owner of that song. That meant that she was probably the pilot of the VF-1.

"I joined you because you said that you could use this facility to help the Zentraedi. You didn't say that you were going to kill anyone."

"What are you being so naive about, girl?"

The giant, Quamzin, grabbed the VF-1 by the head.

"A Zentraedi kills because he wants to. They fight because they want to fight. Once we get control over this base, we can return the Zentraedi to their proper way of life. That's the only way to help them."

"You tricked me? Well, if that's the case, I won't be helping you anymore..."

"Damn it..! That's what happens when you get some half-breed to do a Zentraedi's job...! You guys! Kill her so that we can get on with it!"

(Not good!)

The surrounding giants were hesitant to fire. The battle pods shifted, facing their monitor eyes to each other in turn before they looked back at their power armored leader.

"But, but, Captain Quamzin... I can't believe you'd raise your hand to little Mylene..."

"Yeah, that's right. We should be gentler..."

Out of all of the troops, it seemed like the master was the only one who considered the girl to be just an item to be used. Wanting to discard her appeared to be a point of contention among the group.

"Get your hands off me!"

With Aisha bound out from behind the stone cover. She rolled across the floor, coming out prone in the center of the tunnel, and let loose a burst of concentrated fire to the stomach of the man holding the VF-1. The thick armor of the power suit prevented the shot from being fatal, but the force of the impact was enough to make him double over.

"Thanks, S.M.S people!"

The girl, named Lenie or something like that, transformed into a Gerwalk. Fire sprayed from the engine legs. As she was blown upward, she arched over, performing a somersault, and snatched one of the VF-171 EXs' gunpod mid-tumble. It was an amazing display of acrobatic skill. Most veteran pilots with more than 10,000 hours of logged flight time could not have pulled that off. She was clearly a force to be reckoned with, rather than a liability.

"It's Leon Sakaki! I'll cover you, little girl!"

"It's Mylene! Mylene Jenius!"

She shot the gunpod into the armored Zentran's lower back and then transformed into a fighter, flying into his blindspot before he could recover.

"Come on! I'm not going to let this jerk get whatever's in here!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Quamzin Kravshera was furious as he lifted his wobbly head. His stomach hurt, but it was not as bad as the wound to his warrior's pride.

(Are you kidding me...?! Goddamn it. I should've known better. You're Milia's daughter, spawned from her bedding an Earthling. I enjoyed that stuff when I was taking advantage of Lap Lamiz, but she's little more than useless trash.)

He grabbed his rifle from where it had fallen. He fired it down the hall, not really expecting the shaky shots to connect.

He wanted to give into his fighting instincts and relish in battle that arose purely from anger and spite. In his opinion, Mylene, who wanted to keep the Zentraedi out of the fight, and Aisha, who wanted to play at being human, were both idiots. They did not understand what it meant to be Zentraedi.

"It's the Protoculture's will that we ended up on this planet! This is the best place for the Quamzin Clan to plant our flag and run wild in the galaxy! Oigul! Fire at will! Lap Lamiz, can you get that thing free?"

"I'm working on it."

"I don't care if it damages the temple! A few scratches aren't going to hurt it. Protoculture buildings are tough. Let's move already!"

Quamzin had ordered his mistress, Lap Lamiz, to activate the giant multi-legged tank, Gjagravan-Va. The firepower it could wield should be able to easily overwhelm the three measly Valkyries. They did not have anti-armor weapons, and posed little danger to the massive war machine.

A huge thud echoed down the passage as the steel machine smashed through the wall, ripping the already sizable hole larger still. It made a wide turn, so that it could bring the overwhelming majesty of its heavy weapons to bare on the dwindling image of the retreating humans.

This man was rough, short-tempered, and crude, but he was not incompetent or stupid. He was a soldier with a reputation for fighting difficult battles and could be counted on to win them without fail. He was Quamzin The Ally Killer, the commander of the 7th Armored Space Division of the 109th Adoclas Fleet.

But unfortunately, luck, as it was prone to do, had deserted him this time.

The Gjagravan-Va squeaked loudly as its armored plating was struck by fire from an unexpected direction.

"From behind?"

That's right.

This is the first time I've ever seen such a delicate maneuver.

"There's a hazy moon and the fisherman's lamps are misty under the spring sky. Here I am tripping along, a little merry in cold wind, like a solitary wandering crow, off home along the riverbank to roost when, just as easy as picking up a millet with wet hands or drops water with an oar, I've got a hundred ryo, right out of the blue."

"Who is that?"

Behind them was a beautiful variable fighter painted in silver, black, and red. It carried a gunpod like an umbrella and two heavy quantum beam cannons that stretched out around it like the sash of a kimono.

Leon, who had been pondering how to get rid of the heavy tank, almost jumped at the unexpected reinforcement.

"Alto! Were you waiting to make a grand appearance?"

"Leave the big one to me, Leon!"

Alto's Battroid landed with a flourish. The fancy move brought all of its weapons to bear on the Gjagran-Va with such grace that could almost slip by without notice.

He continued to recite lines from the opening scene of a Kabuki entitled "Sannin Kichisa Kuruwa no Hatsugai" by Kawatake Mokuami, a talented playwright from the end of the Edo period. It was about a beautiful boy, Ojo Kichisa, who had disguised himself as a woman, robbed of a prostitute of a hundred gold pieces.

Alto's VF-25 threw out a storm of coherent light and missiles as if spreading sanctified beans to exorcize the evil that contaminated the ancient ruins.

A battle is not won by numbers, but by superiority of position and firepower. Victory goes to whichever side demoralizes the other first. That was what happened. It wasn't long before the Quamzin Clan retreated, leaving behind a rather classic throwaway line.

"I will remember this!"

"Time travel!"

"Yeah."

The words of the VF-1 girl, Mylene, stunned everyone present.

"Before I was caught up in the Fold and was pulled to this planet, it was the year 2047, and with Quamzin and the others, it was 2011 when they folded from Earth. No matter how hard I try, I can't imagine the time difference between the two folds being that big."

Neither could Leon. That was not his area of expertise, but it did not make sense to him for two folds separated by as many years, and as great of a distance as theirs had been, to defold at almost the same location and time.

"What do you think, Branch Manager?"

"Hmmm..."

Aisha draped her large breasts over her arms and pondered for a long moment. She swayed slightly. Leon assumed that she was stirring her VF-19 with her knee.

"Since the fold itself utilizes space-time distortions, it's conceivable that it could leap forward, but not backward, in time. ...But I don't know what the effect would be if someone from an earlier point in the timestream leapt into the future."

"Uhh... Can you say that again in a way I can understand, please?"

Leon did not want to brag, but he had managed not to pass any of the natural sciences courses in school, except for aerospace theory. If he were being truthful with himself, he did not do so hot in that one, either. Alto seemed to be equally confused, and the two men shared a look over the monitor.

"This has already happened, hasn't it? Whatever is, was. Honestly, I can't help you at this point."

The young teen, who was currently flying at the head of the retreating formation of Valkyries, glanced between the faces of the adults that lined her HUD. She opted to press on, leaving the temporal mechanics for another time. So to speak.

"I appeared on this world with my mom's Valkyrie... Quamzin saw it and said that they were all old acquaintances of Momma's, and then he wanted me to help him, so I did. But then they just started acting all crazy! I'm sorry. Did we hurt you?"

Leon shrugged into the camera feed.

"Yeah, a little, but I'll be fine. But, um... Do you know where you're going?"

"No!"

"Of course, she doesn't. She just got here. But that's nothing to worry about. I got this."

Leon and Alto glanced at Aisha. The unspoken understanding was, naturally, that they should protect Mylene from not only the enemies roaming the planet but also from a certain branch manager as well. She was a borderline child. Granted, she was a child with exceptional piloting skills and an intensive singing voice, but she still needed tending to keep anything untoward from befalling her.

"Why're you all looking at me like that?"

A reticent stare was the only answer that Aisha received.

"Hey! That hurts. This's me that we're talking about here! There's no way that I could turn my back on someone who is lost, and frightened, and who may very well be the first human time traveler! For the sake of scientific progress, and my wallet, you can count on me!"

Before she could continue to extolling on her good, kind-hearted nature, the newest arrival interjected herself back into the conversation.

"...? I don't understand what's going on."

"Well, if you don't have any place to go in this strange, foreboding, alien world, then you can stay with me at my company."

"Oh, that's...!"

Mylene's face broke into a smile. The hairy space creature perched on her shoulder chirped happily.

"Yes! Thank you for your help! I'm so hungry. So very, very hungry!!"

(But still...)

As they left through hole that Ray Of Truth had put in the outer wall, Leon craned his neck to look up at the tombstone-like structure glowing at the far end of the ruins. Its pulsing resembled the light that enveloped the planet, as well as the light from the chamber where Mina had been encased.

(There's something... Mina... Vajra... Time Slipping... There's something strange happening on this planet. I'm not sure what it is, but I've got a bad feeling...)

Chapter 4: Isamu Dyson

What does it mean to fly?

Time passed without him understanding just what it was.

Leon had believed that flying a variable fighter was a curse. That machine was nothing more than a tool for taking lives.

He would soon learn that this was a one-sided point of view. He would come to learn the true meaning of flying, to find the cure for the curse.

He would learn it through an encounter with a man: Isamu Dyson.

"It is hot."

"It's so hot."

In the Southern desert lay the city of Cleef Town. It was on a street in that town where Leon and Alto found themselves. They had not spoken much since they had arrived. It took too much energy to talk. Thus far they had gotten by using as few words as possible. When they did elect to speak, the sparse conversation fell along a rather specific list of topics.

It was hot.

That was it.

Leon had been to many different planets throughout his career. He had learned that one must deal with the glaring sun beating down upon him. Alto,

on the other hand, had grown up in a nice, temperature-controlled Emigration vessel. He was taking the experience pretty hard. His tongue hung out of his mouth like a dog. Even in a state such as his, he had an elegant mystique about him, which could only mean that he was a very strange boy. Yes, a strange boy. That was the phrase that Leon had very consciously applied to him.

"I'm sure of that Ms. Leeron's information is reliable."

"...I don't know about that, but there's enough rumors going around about a Vanquish racer from the past being in this town that I am pretty sure that much is true."

They pushed through the swinging doors of the saloon. The small doors had shutter paneling, which looked like something out of a Western movie from the previous century. Stepping inside, they were greeted by a thick, fragrant, purple smoke. On a planet with an inexhaustible supply of air, it seemed that the bad habit of pioneers smoking cigarettes to relieve stress was still in common use.

"Geez... What the...? What the hell is this?"

"Hey, pull yourself together, Alto."

Alto rubbed his face with the back of his hand and somehow managed to stop coughing. That was another thing that felt out of place for someone from a Fleet. The pollution, much like the temperature, was closely regulated onboard a ship. It had to be. If it was left unchecked, it would not take long to ruin the limited environment. Then the place would become uninhabitable.

"The precious... air... Do they know what... they're doing?"

"Maybe."

The Frontier Fleet had taken such a beating during the Vajra War that at one point they were even considering scrubbing the voyage entirely. That, he could understand. But this? As someone who had pledged his life to protecting his starfaring home, to see people so callously ruining their environment struck a chord that he could not reconcile within himself.

Politely ignoring the snickers that came their way from the saloon's patrons, Leon's eyes traced the long counter from one end to other. If Ms. Leeron was right, the man could always be found drinking there during that time of the day.

At the far end of the well-polished bar, through the purple haze, he caught sight of a man tipping back a glass of bourbon.

(That's him.)

He recognized him instantly. The well-developed muscles peeking out from his roughly cut jacket, and the thick neck muscles that had been developed to withstand the heavy G's, showed that this man was a pilot, and a fighter pilot at that. Leon could tell by the way that he unconsciously craned his neck to look at his surroundings, even while drinking. It was the habit of a pilot who had grown accustomed to keeping a watchful eye, and the look he threw at Leon and Alto as they approached was different than that of a mere drunk.

It was the gaze of a hawk. That man was a hunter in the wild, relying only on his wings and talons, the reigning master of the azure sky.

"Are you Lieutenant Isamu Dyson?"

Leon could not help but feel nervous at the mention of that name.

If you're a member of the New United Nations Forces, then you were sure to have heard the tale. It was of a man who had been tossed around between numerous settled planets and Emigration Fleets, one who had been tossed out of unit after unit for all manner of crazy stunts, and who had always returned alive from whatever hellish battlefield he had been sent off to.

Supposedly, he was some kind superhuman pilot who, in anger over the cancellation of a new Valkyrie development project, had once charged into the UN Capital of Macross City and single-handedly destroyed the central control suite of the battleship stationed there.

According to one variation of the story, he had crushed the enemy forces found within the Capital using only a single ultra-high-performance Valkyrie. That had supposedly led to the drafting of the so-called "Hikaru Ichijo Doctrine" and the creation of strategic class variable fighters, such as the YF-29. Of course, that probably wasn't true, but the rumor had made the rounds.

Scuttlebutt was that he was still working as a test pilot for the New United Nations Forces as of the year 2060, or that he had been recruited by the S.M.S. Eden Branch and was currently working on a new strategic weapon system. How much truth there was to that wasn't known either. It was hidden behind a veil of secrecy.

"Yeah, that's right."

The man turned around. There was a smile on his lip and a laugh on his voice, but there was an intensity lying deep within his eyes.

(If this was an aerial battle, I'd be doomed.)

For Alto's part, he was entranced by the man's ki.

Some may call it unscientific, but every pilot knew that such power existed out in the universe. His was the brand of ki of an ace who could take hold of a battlefield as though it were his own and could control friend and foe alike.

"Excuse me, but... Are you the one that they call The Man From The Past?"

"Yeah."

The man shrugged his shoulders. He did not seem at all concerned about the title nor the notion behind it.

Earlier:

The story of the girl that Leon had met at the ruins, Mylene Jenius -the daughter of Maximilian Jenuis and Milia Fallyna Jenius, the first human-alien marriage - and the wreckage of the group lying in the ruins had taught him one simple fact:

-There was an organization that hunts and collects time travelers.-

The modified design of the VF-171 that he had encountered there were the same as those that had tried to eliminate Sheryl and the Vajra.

"There has only been one recorded case of a VF-171 EX type fighter being smuggled onto this planet. It was brought over by the Loschier Syndicate out of the Macross 1 fleet."

"...There."

Leon chewed bitterly in his chair as he listened to the report. The branch manager stood at the head of the conference room. The large screen built into the wall showed several images overlaid on top of a view of the galaxy and an orbital shot of Ouroboros.

"You know about that?"

"That arms dealer, Loschier, the one who's making all the fuss stuff with the New United Nations Army out in the frontier systems? Yes. I only know of him, though. The branch office I worked at before coming here had made a deal with him to buy a VF-16. It was a defective piece of crap. As soon as it transformed, its head popped off and the pilot almost died in the ensuing crash."

Mina gasped, her hand going to her mouth.

"Oh no!"

"Do you think that they're working with him?"

"No, no, no. It seems that Loschier didn't have a lot of machines with heavy quantum beam cannons in stock. He was planning to sell the spare parts stolen from the Macross 1 Fleet to other colonies or, failing that, to anarchists groups at a high mark up. Our customs is notoriously lax, so smuggling through Ouroboros is a common practice."

"But you found out about it?"

Before Leon knew it, Mylene, who was now acting as a member of the squadron with the certification of Civilian Observer, raised her hand. She said that her parents, who were ace pilots, had used their Valkyries as a baby carriage since she was an infant. She had more time in the cockpit than most pilots did. Just what kind of parents were these?

"Yeah. I don't know where this hunter-bandit named Guinness Mordler got the idea from, but he raided the Syndicate's warehouse and made off with a VF-171 EX. That's how the smuggling ring was discovered. Guinness is still on the run, by the way."

"So, the Syndicate's agent was forced to go hungry for a while, and that put an end to the matter?"

"Just about, yeah."

"Hm... There was talk back on Sephira that even MDE equipped weapon Packs were going missing... But if these people have that kind of reach then there's no way that these are run of the mill bandits."

"What do you mean, Leon?"

"Think of it this way: even bank robbers and ranchers have their own Valkyries. That's not a big deal. Bringing in a -171 EX, on the other hand, is. That's not the sort of thing that an amateur would have on hand. It's something that came from an interstellar smuggler."

"Indeed."

Alto nodded his head sagely, like he knew more than he was letting on. Leon was not sure what was up with that. Sometimes, in moments of suspicion, he would wonder if this guy was doing it on purpose, just to appear wiser than he was.

"But the ones we encountered at the ruins had at least a full squadron of them. If it's the same as the ones you encountered with that Guinness guy, they'd have to have had twenty planes in reserve to pull off a stunt like that. Besides, those pilots were obviously trained military personnel."

"What about a private military provider like us?"

"Mmm."

Aisha dropped backward, falling in her chair causing it to roll back until it hit the wall. She threw her shapely legs over one of its arms and crossed them at the ankle. Alto, next to her, blushed and looked away slightly. Leon wondered why. He should have been used to this brand of behavior from his time with Sheryl.

"Well, probably not. The -171 EX is a rarity, it's barely even deployed by S.M.S. groups. And the MDE weapons, as you'd imagine, aren't sold to civilians. Even in special cases like with the Frontier Branch, it would have to have the support of the New United Nations military. If it's a covert operation, no one would be stupid enough to use such an easy-to-spot aircraft."

Aisha looked at the ceiling. She folded her arms. The act emphasized her already ample bosom by pushing them together and hiking them up. Leon did not notice. At least, that was his story if anyone asked.

"Maybe not if it's the Galaxy Corporate Army that supplies it."

Mild shock colored Mylene's features at the phrase.

"Corporate army? Since when the hell was that a thing?"

"Oh, ten years ago. So, um, yeah. It's not a big deal."

It was hard to talk to time trippers. Their information was always out of date. That was due in no small part to the fact they, themselves, were out of date. Aisha pulled some holograms above her out of the air with her hand and replaced them with the historical images.

"About a decade ago, the Unification Charter was amended, and the power and autonomy of the Emigration Fleets was greatly increased. You know about how in the past, Earth controlled all the United Nations forces, not the fleets or the migrant planets directly, right?"

"Yeah. My mom used to fight with my dad about it all the time. Momma's the mayor of City 7 and Papa is the Fleet Admiral."

Leon shivered inwardly with fear at the thought of the Jenius family having such hidden power in the military, but he didn't think to say anything about it. It seemed to him that the Jenius family is not only well known in the Fleet Command and Space Navy, but also in the intelligence community. He had no desire to make enemies with them.

"So, after the Macross 7 fleet got into a bunch of trouble, what with the Protodeviln fiasco and all, the Emigration Fleets are now all able to have full authority over their own armed forces."

"Oh, cool!"

"They are a 'country' before they are a part of the united government. I guess it's a bit more nuanced than all that, but I'm going with broad strokes here. There is still the New United Nations force directly under the authority of the central government, but a military organization at the municipal level has been added to this."

"But how did a corporation end up with a military?"

"Organizing a fleet of Emigration ships requires a lot of money. Of course, if you seize a planet, you can monopolize the rights to it. It'd be more profitable than conquering the Earth a hundred years ago. So, the Emigration Fleet organized by the General Galaxy took advantage of this and privatized the military itself. I heard that they bought up most of the New United Nations forces' deployment contracts at the time, too."

"What? How can they do that?"

Mylene bound to feet in astonishment. From Leon's point of view, this was common knowledge, but when he thought about it, she was from a time when

he was still an infant. It was only natural that she didn't understand it the way that he did. A lot had changed over the years and she had leapt right over most of it.

"That's capitalism. The Galaxy Fleet has always been the private property of General Galaxy. As long as the government is owned by corporations, it's hardly surprising that their military would be privatized as well. It doesn't really matter if you label it as a private military provider or as a security firm, in effect it's still the military protecting Galaxy's interests."

Alto added his opinion on top of Aisha's.

"And the S.M.S. of the Frontier Fleet is the same way."

The Frontier Fleet was not the private property of corporations, but the risk of death or injury to the democratically elected military personnel was so great that none of them wanted to put themselves out there. That led to virtually all of the defense operations, or to put it bluntly: the bloodletting, was being paid for by the private sector through the city's taxes.

"...But there are only a few of those big players. Officially, S.M.S. is an interstellar transportation security company."

As far back as Roman times, and even before that, the biggest Achilles' heel of huge empires had been distribution. The ability to protect all of the

shipping routes of an ever-expanding human society was not something that the New United Nations government could ever hope to accomplish. It was only natural that the Birler Group, an interstellar transportation company, would voluntarily organize the S.M.S. to defend their cargo.

"Do you think it's those big players?"

"Probably not."

Satisfied with Alto's words, Aisha relaxed her legs and then recrossed them. For a moment, the crotch of her hot pants reached up into the moral danger zone, and right on cue Sheryl's hand clapped against the back of Alto's head. The smack went by unnoticed, or at least uncommented upon, by the other women.

"That leaves the terrorists ...and the military."

"That'd be my guess. However, in the latter case, it's standard practice to make a bid for a political solution first. Less loss of face that way if things go sideways."

Leon nodded thoughtfully.

"Well, yes. But terrorism... That's a tricky one..."

Across the table from him, the sky-haired girl shifted in her seat.

"Um? Why would it be hard for it to be a terrorist, Leon?"

"Oh."

Since Mina's question was justified, Leon struggled to recall the contents of a classroom lecture from so long ago.

"The trouble with politically motivated terrorists and anarchists is that, unlike criminal organizations, they are not driven by logic. They act without regard for the cost, and often have sympathizers who are willing to pay any amount of money to achieve their aligned political goals."

"Okay, but what I don't understand is why they would target Sheryl and Mylene for the purpose of terrorism. Out here, on a remote planet? Who is going to hear about it? They only just got here, anyway."

Alto picked up on the statement, although his head remained lowered. It seemed that he had taken to heart the lesson that Professor Sheryl's hand had tried to impart upon him.

"The survivors have been given implants -computers embedded into their brain stem. Those shield not only their memories of the mission, but also block their memories of who they were."

"That's terrible..."

There were many fleets and planets that have legalized cybernetic implant technology. There were very few star systems where it was illegal, except for medical purposes. The Frontier Fleet was one such place. A system that directly connected a computer to the brain had its benefits, but when he had been shown the dark side of it, his heart had gone cold from the utter horror.

"It wouldn't be easy for a terrorist organization to be able to pull off something like this. But if Sheryl and Mylene were targeted at about the same time that you found her in the ruins, then they must have some knowledge about Ouroboros that we've missed."

"And since we have Sheryl and the others with us, we can't avoid running into them, can we?"

Maybe they shouldn't have let Sheryl do the live performance if this was the case, but Alto didn't think that trying to stop her would have been a good idea. Taking her song away from her would be like taking it away from a canary. It was easy to see that Mylene was probably in that same boat.

"But what will you have us do about it? Are we going to go on a killing spree? Take out the terrorists before they can regroup for another strike against us?"

"No way."

Aisha shrugged her shoulders in an exaggerated manner.

"Offensive defense, defensive offense! We're going to set things in motion to lure the other side out, confirm their intentions, and destroy them!"

"Bait them, huh?"

"Yep! That's the plan. We'll be at a disadvantage if it comes to a drawn out confrontation. We've made a decent amount of money through Leeron from the initial reconnaissance mission, but if the Aurora doesn't wane soon, we're going to be left out to dry. We have to solve this case before that happens. Then we'll be able to finagle a huge reward out of the Ouroboros government!"

Leon had an idea where this was headed.

"Let me guess, you want to excavate the ruins while we're at it?"

"Damn skippy!"

Aisha clenched her fists in excitement.

It was at that moment when Leon thought that he was starting to get a grasp on that branch manager's personality, for better or worse.

That had gone down about a week earlier.

(And after tons of searching, we've finally tracked down the Vanquish Racer that's supposedly from the past.)

"I get the idea."

Isamu chugged the entire bottle of bourbon. As he blew out a hefty, burning breath, he looked back over at Leon and Alto once again. His gaze fixed on the latter. His eyes were lidded as though it were too much trouble even to focus on him. That could have been the alcohol, but really it could have gone either way.

"You know, it's true. I got caught up in the Fold wake and ended up out here on this planet. According to my Cutie's records, my departure date was the year 2040. I guess that means I'm from your past. I also know that there's a bunch of assholes following me around."

"Then..."

When Alto looked pleased, Isamu coldly stuck out his palm, pushing an invisible wall of rejection their way.

"But I'm not crazy enough to follow a pair of humpers like you. I have my hobbies and they aren't chasing after men, if you get what I'm saying."

"Humpers...?"

Alto coughed again, thanks to the thick smoke in the saloon. Once the current fit ended and he regained his composure, he took a step toward the man.

"What's that supposed to mean!?"

"It's just as I see it. It's right there in your eyes. You think that you're fighter jockeys, but you're really just a pair of cockpit humpers with no desire to touch the stars. I'd have to be an idiot to leave the games for you. It's ridiculous."

"You're out of your mind."

Leon and Alto exchanged a look. They both knew that backing down from a guy like this would gain them nothing. Plus, they were feeling a little bit insulted. That made sense given that he had repeatedly insulted them.

"You don't really expect us to just take that, do you?"

Alto gracefully but willfully closed the gap between himself and the man. The stranger shook his head, his eyes going back to the now empty bottle still sitting on the bar.

"I see... This's just like before, isn't it?"

"?"

Alto had no idea what Isamu was talking about. The time difference had been 20 years. There was no way that they had known each other. Alto had not even been born when that man had gotten swept through time.

The man rose from his stool.

"I'm done talking. Let's step outside so that I can hand you your asses."

"We're going to have a shootout? Two against one?"

"What?"

Despite the question, Isamu stepped forward with such confidence that he reminded Alto of Captain Ozma back in the Frontier Fleet. He had gotten his butt kicked during their first fight.

(This guy... Do you know anything about martial arts ...?)

A hawk's eyes stared at Alto, and then flicked to Leon beside him. At that distance they could smell his breath. That it could top the scent of the smoke was impressive.

"You know what I do for a living, don't you? Vanquish. We'll settle this like men."

Vanquish.

It was a competitive air race using variable fighters. There were professional league competitions on such a large scale that they had teams from all across both the colonial planets and fleets. The smaller, grass-roots type were also a popular sport - really, those were more about the gambling- and were played spontaneously on many worlds.

There are many local variations on the rules, but the basic rule set was simple: fly the Valkyrie over a predetermined course and capture the flag. That's it.

"I want to know why! Why am I the stupid judge? I want to race, too!"

Mylene stood there, dressed in a race queen outfit, and clearly did not have any problem telling the world about her opinion on the matter. She had been doing so for the last several minutes.

"Aisha has to stay on the ship in case of an emergency, and you're the only one who can keep up with us."

The sad fact was that if Aisha were to remain in the ship, then they only had one pilot left who would be able to handle the VF-19E and act as a referee at the same time. That was Mylene. She was none too happy about it. It required a lot of effort to calm her down once she got going. Leon turned his back to her, which didn't help much.

"Are you really going to do this with that old thing, Isamu? That junker is pretty outdated."

"Don't listen to them. They don't mean it."

Isamu lovingly stroked the Valkyrie beside him, which made it clear that it was not the teenager that he was soothing.

It was a beautiful aircraft, the boys had to secretly admit. A slender body like a sword, the sleek curves, and the distinctive forward-swept wings. The YF-19.

It was the prototype of the VF-19 Excalibur series, a Valkyrie whose performance had reached the limits of the human race. It was still at the forefront of combat twenty years later. But this one was only a prototype. There was no way that a machine that had been abused for racing out in the desert of Ouroboros, without any proper replacement parts, could ever hope to compete with the likes of Leon's YF-30 and Alto's VF-25.

"My -19 is different from the high-tech toys that you boys play with. You can search the galaxy over and never find anyone else who can fly her."

Leon knew that this was no legend, no boast.

Every other test pilot had crashed attempting to fly it. Only Isamu Dyson, who had been on the verge of being discharged from the military as a roughneck, had been able to handle the prototype. Since then, all mass-produced versions of the aircraft have had some sort of limiter or safeguarded to varying degrees. None have the same level of instability -or, to put it another way, the mobility- as the prototype that Isamu flew.

(But that's only part of the story. In terms of engine power, flight stability, and aerodynamics, for example, the updated VF-19E of Aisha's is superior. It can compete with our Valkyries.)

As if he could see this sentiment written across Leon's features, Isamu deliberately shook his head and made a show of doing it. His melodrama rivaled Mylene's.

"It's okay, kiddo. I'd be too embarrassed to walk down the street if my new toy was beaten by an old, outdated model, too. Now, I'm a bro. So, when this is over, I'll let you pretend to your company's pretty girls that I didn't just mop the floor with you."

"You're joking..."

"No joke."

Next to Leon, Alto was staring at Isamu, anger simmering in his eyes.

"You called my commitment to flying a cockpit humper. Do you think that I'm going to let you get away with that? Not with the honor of Skull Squadron on the line."

"Skull Squadron, huh? Personally, I like to use my Roy Fokker Medals as poker chips, but okay. You go ahead and play for honor. If you lose, I'll be grateful for the set of -19 spare parts that you guys have."

It wasn't arrogance or stupidity.

Isamu Dyson really was out to win.

And they would both soon learn that he meant what he had said.

No matter how much the world changed, the scent of a cockpit and the feel of the wind never will.

(I am who I am).

For Isamu Dyson, that's all that there was to it. It really was that simple. Smart people make the world unnecessarily complicated, but that doesn't change the basic facts.

Fly when you want to fly, fight who you want to fight, hold the woman you want to hold, and you will never regret it. That was the only way of life that Isamu was interested in living. That was why when he saw the kids squirming around like that, he could not help but to laugh at them. It reminded him of the petty problems that he'd had back in high school. It made him feel like being unapologetically mean to them, even if it didn't serve his original purpose.

(They're more alike than I thought. Interesting to know that he's the kid of Ranzo and Miyo. The color of the aura is similar to that of the kid, but...)

He activated the special fold communication unit that was added to the YF-19's AI. It was a modified version of the one that had been installed by a certain super hacker friend of his.

"...This is Eagle 1, do you copy, G? I have made contact with Skull 4 and Siegfried 1. ...Ahh. ...A-OK. Take care of Myung and, while you're at it, take care of that asshole Guld, could you? And then..."

He shrugged his shoulders. He surprised himself a little with own words.

"Give my love to Sharon, too."

(What the --? This is --?)

Saotome Alto was taken aback.

The course was located within the desert region of Ouroboros, set far to the West of Cleef Town. The track ran through a canyon that had been carved from the rock by a great river that had flowed there at some point in the distant past. With the low overhangs and the jutting rock formations, it was not the kind of place where you can compete only by topping out your thrust. Mastery of control and no small amount of skill were required not to slam into the numerous obstacles.

Isamu's familiarity with the land and the course would give him an edge.

"Isn't this guy afraid of dying?"

Isamu's YF-19 roared on ahead of them.

"Eeee-yahoOoOoo!"

The beige Valkyrie that was flying through the tight passages like a nomadic wind tribe and making it look so easy. Alto's line of sight was cut as the YF-19 rolled on to its wing tip and dipped through a narrow opening. That was a display of raw talent; it was not the sort of maneuver that could be plotted by a Control AI.

Isamu continued to hold a decisive lead over Alto and Leon, spinning to avoid a spike of stone. Pushing the throttle past the safety margins, he transformed to Battroid just in time to slip through a gap too small for a fighter clear and then back again once he was on the other side. He allowed the drift to push him into a new direction, parallel to the wall, somehow reading the random winds that ran deep in the realm of fractals and chaos that even a computer would have had a hard time predicting.

"Only the VF-25 should be able to...! How can h--?"

The lateral G's of the turn were made bearable through the use of the EX-Gear, but the angle of the turn of the YF-19, which was not equipped with the power suit nor an inertia canceller, was much sharper. Isamu's acceleration was also considerably faster. How was that possible? Who the hell is that guy?

Alto could see that he was trembling from the strain, as was Leon's image on the display.

"Ha! I knew it. You don't understand at all."

"... Isamu."

That man's fearless smile appeared, splitting the view of the communication monitor between Alto and he.

How long had he been listening in? Did he have some kind of security cracking system installed on the YF-19? Maybe he was more than just some crazy pilot.

"I'll tell you what you're missing, Saotome Alto, my boy."

"...What are you talking about? Missing what?"

"Oh, once upon a time, I met a man who looked a lot like you."

".....?"

"What was his name? Saotome Ranzo? That was it, wasn't it?"

(Dad...?)

Alto had left home because he had not wanted to continue to follow in the footsteps of the Saotome family, a dynasty of Kabuki actors. He had met a lot of people since then and had a lot of experiences. He had traveled the stars as a pilot. But he never thought that he'd hear his father's name in such a remote corner of the galaxy.

"How do you... how do you know about my father!?"

Alto increased his speed. He chipped away at the distance between himself and the YF-19 in front of him. He did not get very far as he had to cut back on his acceleration after only a few seconds. He couldn't keep up with the other jet. There was more at play than an overwhelming difference in just engine thrust. He couldn't fly the course as boldly as Isamu did. With each corner, the gap between them grew a little wider, and they only caught back up with each other again as they powered down the straightaways.

"He told me that his kid had gone off to join the Frontier fleet. As soon as I saw your face, I knew you were the one. You're my friend's boy."

"My dad's... Friend..."

It was a strange feeling. In Alto's mind his father was a stern adult. The man in front of him, Isamu Dyson, was a little older than Alto, like a brother at most. To him, perhaps, his father was a confidant. Isamu would definitely be the carefree one of the two.

"You're not a kabuki actor, are you? Alto."

"...I stopped being a female impersonator. I don't even go on stage anymore. Now, I'm a professional S.M.S. pilot, flying in the sky."

Alto spun his fighter into nearly a ninety degree hairpin turn. His left wingtip almost touched the rock wall, only barely managing to miss it. It had been a close call. If it had touched, it would have been bad. The energy-converting armor would have activated, keeping the plane's fuselage from being destroyed, but the impact would have definitely shorn the wing off. And then he never would have been able to catch up again.

"I have to if I'm going to protect Sheryl and the people I care about. If Ranka and the rest of S.M.S. are folded out on this planet like we were, then I will protect them, too. That's what these wings are for."

"Aww. That's sweet."

"!!"

The YF-19's engines flared. As it increased its speed even more, it pulled further ahead.

"What the...? What...!?"

Alto gaped at the sight. That was ridiculous. According to his computer's calculations, the YF-19 should have already been at maximum power. If it was accelerating faster than that, it meant that the engine's limiter had been removed. One misstep, or even half of one, and the entire reactor could explode. The thermonuclear fireball would burn so bright that not even bones would be left behind.

The VF-25 could keep up, but he can't outrun it. Alto swayed to the side and then back again. The YF-19 was too cleverly positioned. As if he had eyes in the back of his head, Isamu was able to block each attempt that the S.M.S. pair made to get around him.

"You and Leon aren't crazy, like me and your old man. I'm out here flying with my whole heart. You're focused on someone else. That's a handicap."

"I...! I'm not like my father! My wings dance...!"

(My father's madness.)

He raised his young son as a woman. He had even ignored his wife's death for the sake of his art. The art of kabuki that had been lost on the shattered Earth. He had revived it in order to leave its mark on the galaxy.

His image seemed to appear over the back of Isamu's plane.

(Humpers, huh?)

The reason why Leon, who happened to also be trailing behind Isamu, did not refute that claim was because he felt that Isamu had actually managed to land a hit on a sensitive location.

Isamu was no longer a fighter pilot in the New United Nations Forces, and yet he refused to become a run-of-the-mill civilian pilot. He was stuck in an intermediate state of limbo: being a test pilot for a variable fighter. He was probably even more of a half-wit than Alto, who was trying to be a pilot while still being an actor.

But that's why he couldn't back down. If he were to pull out there, drop out of the challenge that had been laid down, he would lose what little he had left.

That's why neither Leon nor Alto wanted to stop chasing the YF-19, the Valkyrie that shone like a phantom image in the desert.

Meanwhile.

A group of variable fighters flew over the dunes of the desert.

At the head of the formation was an exotic Valkyrie. It possessed no visible canopy. It could be easily mistaken for an unmanned drone if not for the thought waves coming from its pilot.

"Antares 1 to Omega 1, target confirmed. Target identified as Mylene Jenius."

"Omega 1, copy."

A large Valkyrie, flying close by, sent back the reply.

It wasn't a conversation, not in the usual sense. Their brains were connected to their Valkyries, and they sent their consciousnesses out as radio waves in

order to communicate with each other. The only reason that they used language as an interface was because of its superior speed in communication.

"Two S.M.S. aircraft are accompanying it. One is registered to Frontier pilot Alto Saotome. The other is Unknown. There is also an old-fashioned VF-19 type Vanquish Racer."

"Old-fashioned, huh?"

There was a hint of a wry smile at the thought from the pilot known as Omega 1.

"Do you find my situation report flawed, Omega 1?"

"No. Antares 1, there is nothing wrong with your perception. It's just that you don't know the pilot of the YF-19 well enough to gauge him."

A mixture of emotions, nostalgia and hostility, respect and disgust, flowed through the link and into Antares 1. While he was capable of shutting out his own emotions due to the majority of his brain having been digitized, they still accompanied the thoughts of Omega 1. He knew that was due to the fact that his wingman still possessed a body that was entirely flesh and blood.

"If that pilot is who I think he is, he's more dangerous than a reaction round. It's best to assume that all predictions don't apply."

"...That's illogical. You're not behaving like your usual self, Omega 1."

"I am being logical, Antares 1... You're too young to understand, but there are enemies in the universe that cannot be measured on the human scale. That man is one of them."

"Sentimentality. The S.M.S. frigate holding station near Cleef Town is protected by the Vajra swarm, making it difficult to approach due to Sheryl's presence. We will have to seize Mylene Jenius here."

"Understood. Enemy Tallyho. Commencing approach. Engage in two seconds."

"Copy. All weapons free. Antares 1, engage."

The strange Valkyrie rolled over and went into a dive toward the canyon. The larger Valkyrie, and the group of unmanned fighters accompanying them, followed its lead.

The time for the hunt was about to begin.

"Look out!"

Isamu's YF-19 was the first one to break free from the competition over the flag.

"Hey! Where are you...!?"

"There's nowhere to maneuver in here! Just because you didn't notice it doesn't mean that I'm chickening out!"

"!!!"

Leon and Alto understood what he was saying after a moment, no, half a moment, of delay.

A squadron of drone fighters with their nationality markings erased were descending upon them. Two Valkyries were flying at their head.

A message from the AI scrolled across the HUD.

"Model Verification Running... VF-27y Lucifer. YF-21 Prototype."

"Galaxy's Special Forces!"

Information on the VF-27y was sparse. Macross Galaxy had never submitted accurate records about it to the New United Nations government. It was an illusory Valkyrie. It had supposedly taken part in various black ops. So powerful were they that no normal human was capable of flying one. Its pilots were all said to be powerful cyborgs, dubbed as Armor-Enhanced Fuso Soldiers.

(But then why'd they bring such an insane craft as the YF-21?)

Twenty years ago, the YF-21 competed with Isamu's YF-19 to become the next main fighter. By the end, it was rejected. The YF-21 was later redesigned as the basis for VF-22 and introduced into the Special Forces. The prototype was equipped with an advanced Brainwave Direct-Control Interface (BDI) and its chief designer, Guld Goa Bowman, was said to have participated as the test pilot as well.

(Does that mean it's a time tripper, too? If that's the case, they're gathering people like that just like S.M.S. ...? It isn't just Mylene and Sheryl?)

"Hey! Leon, Alto! Can you hear me?"

Isamu's voice slammed Leon back to reality.

"You guys take that little girl and get out of the A.O.! If you go full throttle, you ought to be able to escape. Get to your ship!"

"Are you serious? We're not leaving you alone here!"

A hint of anger colored Alto's voice.

"You idiot! You guys left your weapons at home! If they're after a certain time-traveling diva, what are you going to do? Die at them?"

"...That's...!"

Both Leon and Alto had to admit that he was right: the VF-25 was only equipped with a gunpod for the Vanquish and its permanently mounted laser. Leon's YF-30 did have a small number of missiles, but they were probably not going to be enough to change the outcome.

"...Fine."

They were out of time. There was no point in continuing to argue about it if that meant that they would all die and Mylene taken captive. There was really no other choice than to trust in the skills of Isamu Dyson.

"Don't worry! I'm not planning to Kamikaze them! I'm just going to buy you a little time by screwing with Guld's ass!"

"Guld?"

The name sounded familiar to Alto. He knew that he had heard it before but he could not place where that had been.

"That's my friend! He's a hard-headed know-it-all who's always chasing my ass around! I'll tell you about it later. Just get out of here. Oh and, try to be a better pilot by the next time I see you, because it's embarrassing beating someone that badly."

A salvo of missiles launched from the incoming squadron. The YF-19 roared like a dragon as flame spewed from its engines. It shot upward toward the endlessly heavens, overtaking the onrushing missiles. They detonated in its wake, too late to do any notable damage to the craft as it closed in on the YF-21 and VF-27.

With the dreamlike beauty of the aerial battle going on behind them, Leon and Alto simply sped away with Mylene in-between them to protect her from the oncoming squadron of unmanned fighters.

When he had been told that the pilot was more dangerous than reactive rounds, Brera had honestly assumed that the declaration was merely Guld Goa Bowman's sentimentality influencing his opinion. However, the way in which the YF-19 fought against the attacking forces that filled the sky around it was nothing short of divine. Even after expending all of its missiles, the YF-19 was still able to perform inhuman maneuvers.

It flew toward the Ghost fighters. It switched to Battroid. A stream of vector thrust poured from it, causing it to tumble on its side as if it were rolling on the ground. The -19 spun through a salvo of missiles and then whirled in the opposite direction to avoid the next batch. Leveling out, its rifle sprayed bullets into the air. He effortlessly shot down his foes' munitions and left them with only their lasers to continue the assault. His maneuvers were so far beyond the theoretical limits associated with his plane that the VF-27's tactical support AI was left dumbfounded. According to the calculations, the pilot, Isamu Dyson, should have already crashed fifteen times and torn the aircraft apart eight.

Rather, Brera thought, he should reevaluate the skills of Guld, the pilot of the YF-21. That masterpiece of tragedy was now holding Isamu in place, keeping him caged in a small portion of the sky with focused barrages of laser fire.

(But I no longer have a use for sentimentality. Unnecessary sentimentality will kill Ranka. Ranka is the only meaning left to my life, now.)

The reticule slid across the sky chasing after the fighter-configured YF-19 as it jinked over the barren stone of the hills. The virtual landscape was a projection. Images from the network of cameras along the exterior of the VF-27 was transmitted directly into Brera's brain. It provided him with a full view of his surroundings. Unlike a normal plane, his held no blind spots.

The targeting computer acquired a lock as the YF-19 passed through the reticule. The fighter's high-mobility thrusters had run dry of propellant and the energy-converting armor was no longer functioning at acceptable strength. With Guld's rain of coherent light continuing to stream down, there was nowhere for it to go.

The heavy beam cannon mounted underneath the VF-27 split open. Forks of energy crackled between the twin spires and it charged up. It looked very much like a scaled down version of the Macross's main gun because that was precisely what it was.

"Scatter! To the ends of the galaxy!"

A beam of crimson colored quantum reaction energy leaped forth. It crossed the distance between fighters in an instant. The bolt pierced straight through

the center of the YF-19. The Valkyrie dipped toward the crevasse. As it began to roll on to its side it erupted into a ball of light and flaming debris.

Even though night had fallen and the signs of the distant battle had long since vanished, that beige Valkyrie did not show up at the rendezvous point.

"Yo. You're gonna catch a cold, Alto."

"...I know."

Alto had been staring at the stars from the flight deck of the Gefion. The frigate was currently skimming just above the sand dunes. It was a stealth vessel and remaining close to the ground further lowered its detectable profile. That had seemed like a wise precaution after they had been jumped during the race.

Alto walked over to join Leon at the entrance to the hangar.

"It's okay. That dude's not the type to die that easily. Right?"

"Yeah... Yes, I guess so."

Alto's words hung heavily in the air. They were being pulled down by the same weight that Leon felt.

Death was like that in air combat: one day, out of the blue, it strikes and you never come back.

(I hate fighter jets).

Leon repeated the phrase in his heart once again. He did not know how many times he had said them. They rang within him every day. At times, they practically ran on repeat. They were his mantra, whether he wanted them to be or not. He hated to fly a fighter, but what other choice was there?

The green-haired girl looked out at the stars through the window of the private quarters assigned to her. The only way to see the stars on an Emigration Ship was to peer at them through the massive dome that covered the vessel. Looking at the stars in a real sky with a real atmosphere was strange. They were different than they appeared through the canopy of the ship. The atmospheric refraction caused the stars to shine brighter than they would in space but not as clearly.

(You're crying, aren't you, Alto?)

"What's wrong, Ranka?"

Her roommate must have sensed the pain within her. She had stopped reading and was now looking at her. The woman, as beautiful as an apple blossom, was an entertainment producer by the name of Myung Fang Lone.

(She's a nice lady.)

That was the way that Ranka felt about her. She was a kind person, but there was a shadow that hung over her.

(She's a bit like Alto. I think she's someone who can use her past to give her strength.)

It was this person who had first protected Ranka when she and her Vajra escort had been caught after arriving on that planet. The army that had captured Ranka seemed to have some use for her and Myung, so they hadn't rough them up. Not too badly, anyway.

"No, I'm just a little nervous. That's all.

"It's all right. Everything's going to be okay."

Myung's hand was trembling as she stroked Ranka's back. It was easy to tell that she was trying to act brave for this younger girl. Ranka could only offer her a reassuring grin in return.

There was a short, very precise knock at the door. There were only a few people at that base who would give them, and the others who were under house arrest, such consideration.

"Ranka."

With a small push, the door opened. A young man in a pilot's suit stepped in. His was an artificial beauty, polished from plastic and chrome. It was the opposite of Alto's own natural beauty. Brera Sterne, a person whose name meant an "expanse of stars" and whose presence always put Ranka at ease.

"Mr. Brera!"

Beside him was a half-Zentraedi man. The way that he stood, tall and still, gave him the appearance that he had been carved from granite. Chief Guld Goa Bowman. He may have given the impression that he was stoic and scary, but he was an old friend of Ms. Myung's. He was a pilot who had taken good care of Ranka in the time that she had been imprisoned there.

(Mr. Guld... He looks kind of lonely.)

The reason for that was unclear to Ranka. She did know that his best friend, Isamu Dyson, who had fought so hard against him, had been shot down. The plane had crashed into the bottom of the cliff, right in front of his eyes.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes!"

Ranka cheerfully exclaimed the reply. Then her expression wavered. She didn't know why, but she felt as though she had forgotten something that had been very important. Her memory was hazy. She was certain that she could trust this Brera person, but the reason why as yet eluded her.

"Ms. Myung and Ms. Grace are being kind to me. I'll be fine!"

"I see."

She saw Brera chuckle a little, but just a little. She used to think he was an expressionless person because he so rarely showed any emotion. Lately, however, she was starting to understand him a little better.

"Hey... I wonder if Alto and Sheryl are also on this planet. If so, do you think that I can meet up with them?"

"...You will."

Why was there a slight time lag in his response?

It wasn't that Ranka couldn't guess, but she tried not to think about it. She knew that if she were to worry any more than she already had then she would be causing trouble for Brera, the others, and the people who cared about her. She had to be strong, for all of their sakes.

The small green-colored animal that had been sleeping on the girl's shoulder, Ai-kun, made a short cry. It was his way of saying that he was worried about its master.

He was having a dream.

In the dream, he was chasing a fighter.

He pushed hard, but he couldn't catch up to it. Eventually, enemy planes surrounded it and engulfed him in flames.

The flames overlapped with the heat of that day.

He stretched out his arm. No matter how hard he tried, his hand couldn't reach it.

He strained to make the last bit of distance. He was almost there, so close. The flames covered his arm. They flared brightly, enveloping Leon. His body burned but he did not die.

No matter how fast he pushed the Valkyrie on, he could not manage to escape those flames.

It was a dream that he had all the time.

He was paralyzed, tormented, and the terror eventually forced him awake.

But this time it was different.

There was a song.

The song draped softly across Leon's consciousness.

A song, as gentle as the rocking of a cradle, made him feel as though he were not alone.

It nudged him from his dream and back into the real world. It was the most peaceful awakening that he had experienced in years.

"...Are you okay, sir?"

"...Mina ...?"

A hand touched Leon's forehead. It was cool against his brow.

His eyes opened to see Mina's worried face next to him. Her soft lips. Her pale skin.

"I was dreaming ...I saw him."

"A dream? Of who?"

"It was a while back. ...There was a fleet of Zentraedi ships that appeared near Sephira. My homeworld. They were renegade Zentraedi... the kind who still follow the last orders that the Protoculture gave them."

He didn't know why he decided to talk about it. He had never spoken to anyone about what had happened that day. Perhaps it was because Isamu had been shot down or maybe it was because of Mina's song. Whatever the cause, he finally felt ready to open up about it.

"They saw the Zentraedi weapons and the other stuff from the giants down there. They attacked us. I don't know if they knew that there were miclones there, too."

The Zentraedi military had a protocol that forbade them from attacking a planet inhabited by miclones. It was a rule, but not a very binding one. It could be overridden at the discretion of the field commander. In the case of the enigmatic Inspection army, it was unclear if they even had that protocol. This was the primary reason as to why humanity was trying to spread across the galaxy and mitigate the risk of extinction.

"I was in the New United Nations Army back then, and I fought like hell. My best friend... Rod Baltmer, my sister's boyfriend, was with me. The enemy fleet was pretty small. It was a reconnaissance detachment unit, I think. I'd hoped that we'd be able to beat them before they informed their main fleet of Sephira's position, but... At the end, in the last few minutes, the enemy flagship set a collision course for Sephira."

It had only been a short few years ago, but it felt an awful lot longer. It seemed like it had happened before he had been born. That battle had changed everything.

"Its mass was just too big. And... That's when... My sister, she had a Valkyrie loaded with MDE bombs. She drove straight into the upper atmosphere, into the enemy ship and... There was this purple light and... And then it was gone. It was all gone."

His eyes burned. His cheeks felt hot. He was crying. He hadn't realized it until that moment.

"Rod and I were really close. All of us, the three of us. I thought they were going to get married. I thought we'd be together forever."

It was the first time he had really put the memories into words. Now that they had begun to flow, he couldn't stop them.

"There was this farm. When we were kids, we used to play there. They had this old agriculture Valkyrie we used to mess with. We were such idiots... But after Mia... He's gone. He's not coming back. They gave him a bucket full of medals... and a certificate of appreciation, but... he never came back."

A warm feeling enveloped Leon. It wrapped around him, soothing and comfortable. He could smell the sweet fruity scent of shampoo, and he knew it was Mina. She held him against her.

After a moment, she began to sing. It felt distant, yet hopeful. He was not sure how he knew that as it was not in any language that he was familiar with. Before he knew it, he slipped into sleep.

For the first time in many years, it was dreamless and peaceful, the nightmares having been driven away by love and melody.

Aisha slept like a caterpillar in her bed, almost buried under the cocoon of books, papers, and various artifacts that she had unearthed during her explorations.

She usually slept in her underwear, but not that day. With only a pair of tiny panties on, she was almost completely nude. According to her, such a manner of undress was more functional for when she woke up, but Mina, who had volunteered to be her caretaker, said that if function were an issue then she should do something about the state of the room. There was also the implication that she would really die, entombed beneath a mountain of books should the frigate tip over.

Anyway.

The terminal on her bedside table, which had long since been lost under a pile of junk, chimed for her attention. Aisha had barely slept in the past week due to hard work after hard work that her understaffed agency had to contend with. As such, it took ten full rings of the terminal to rouse the crustacean from her shell.

"Hello? Aisha, we've got-- What the hell...?"

Aisha answered the call with a blanket wrapped around her naked body. Or what she had believed was wrapped around her body. In truth, it covered her shoulders and pretty much nothing else. There was not even a hint of modesty to the image projected to the bridge crew, which made Sheryl furious at "that shameless skank."

The view of those luscious mounds caused Mylene, on the other hand, to weigh just how much she wished to maintain her maidenhood.

"... Oh! It's on, it's on! Hey, Sister, look! Look! I'm on it! It's amazing! I wonder if the TV over there can see us, too!"

"Mao! It is not the place of a Mayan Priestess to take pleasure in touching such an evil machine. That Kadun will suck out your soul!"

"But that woman over there, she's moving! Hey! Can you see her? Hey!"

"?"

There was a woman not much older than the now-fully-clad Aisha on the monitor. She was garbed in traditional tribal clothing, and she looked to be very uncomfortable. A second girl in a similar costume, her sister perhaps, was onscreen as well. That one was perhaps around the same age as Mylene.

The outfits were familiar to her. It was the same type of costume that was used in "Bird Human," a movie that had premiered a year earlier. They were a traditional getup of the inhabitants of Mayan Island, an isolated isle on Earth that held ruins preserved from the Protoculture era. She had done her homework on that film. The lead actress, Miranda Merin, didn't look at all like Mayan. Aisha had mocked the whole ordeal. Her only compliment had been for the excellent work of the costume department.

(But their costumes look the same as the ones I've seen in Dr. Mao Nome's research materials... There's no way...)

The image on the screen was of poor quality. That was likely due to being under heavy levels of encryption. Even with fold communications systems,

which worked through distorting space-time, there were technologies capable of intercepting the transmissions. It seemed that someone in the Intelligence field was involved in this. No one else would bother to employ that much cryptography.

"I can hear you. This is the S.M.S. Ouroboros Branch Office. Who am I speaking with?"

"I am Sarah Nome. This is my sister, Mao."

Not content to allow the elder sister to do all of the talking, the smaller one chimed in with her own greeting.

"Hi, there!"

"!? Sarah and Mao Nome?"

The word "impossible" escaped Aisha's lips.

This was the legendary Sarah Nome. She had been the scion of a prehistoric civilization, and had served as a Priestess of the "Bird Human," some kind of Protoculture-created human monitoring system. She, and the ancient relic, had been the harbingers of the First Interstellar War.

Her sister, Dr. Mao Nome, had been an expeditionary pioneer and a genius in the field of Xenoarchaeology. She was also apparently Sheryl's grandmother.

"We do seem to be quite famous, don't we? Hmph. Everyone looks at us as if we're rare butterflies or fish. Just like Hasford..."

"Ugh! Come on, sister! We should talk to them!"

"...Fine."

Aisha was a cultural anthropologist. This was an unprecedented opportunity. Surely this would be a great basis for a scientific paper, provided that she could manage to keep everything on point. To that end, Aisha desperately tried to keep her remarks, and her drool, in check. The latter of which she lapped up with a flick of her tongue. It was arguably ineffective as that caused it more to spread across her chin than to wipe it away.

"We were given shelter by a man named Isamu Dyson."

Before Sara could expand upon that, her sister took over.

"Isamu told me that if anything were to happen to him, I should call this S.M.S. place with this Fold Looking Glass."

"We know the location of the Priestess of the Great Star Gods. Her name is Ranka Lee. If you can rescue her, I am sure that she will be of great help to you."

Aisha swallowed her saliva in a gulp. Various excuses and hesitations flashed through her mind. However, there was only one conclusion that she could draw. That was that in order to reach the truth of the Protoculture Ruins that she had been pursuing, she really did not have a choice. She needed to collect all of the pieces if the puzzle were to be completed.

"Yes, ma'am! We'll send a rescue party to pick you up, right away! Don't you worry your pretty little heads over it. You just leave this to us!"

Before asking himself who he was, Brera Sterne always asked himself if he were even human. He had lost most of his body in a childhood accident. It had to be rebuilt with metal plates and piping. Even his brain had since been fused with a computer.

But he knew what was important. Ranka Lee. To protect the well-being of that green-haired girl who lived in the most important parts of his memory: that was what made him feel like he were still alive.

A burst of a compressed fold wave transmission shook his implant receptor. This was not the normal brand of comms. It was a special system utilized solely by the Black Ops Division of the General Galaxy. Not even the people holding them were aware that this black box tech existed. Colonel Grace had made it look like she had disclosed all of their technology, but what they didn't realize was that even the vast amount of dangerous knowledge that the Galaxy has deemed "to be allowed to be revealed in an emergency" consisted of little nothing more than worthless secrets.

"This is Maris Stella. Antares 1, come in."

It was the voice of a young girl. Like him, she was a machine enhanced cyber soldier under the command of Colonel Grace. He considered her to be more akinto a marionette. She was always linked to the Colonel's implants, always able to receive her orders directly from above. However, unlike himself and the Colonel, who had been taken captive along with Ranka, Maris continued to act independently, serving as the Colonel's eyes and ears on the outside.

"Status."

"Bird 1 and Bird 2 have contacted the Gefion via Eagle 1. Location information has been relayed to S.M.S."

Bird 1 and 2 meant Sara and Mao, the two priestesses. Excellent. By pretending that what those two wanted was right in front of them, they had been able to manipulate the girls, flush them out, and achieve their own goal. It's an old trick of Colonel Grace Godunwa's, but in intelligence warfare, using old tricks rarely caused an issue. They got the job done. This was not like in a sports competition. There were no calls for rematches, and the loser would never be seen again.

"The Colonel's involvement has continued to go unnoticed?"

"Gefion's comm network is under constant surveillance. They may realize that Eagle 1's transmission has interference, but they will not be able to identify the source. "

"Understood."

The base resounded with the blare of a klaxon. That had been expected. They had anticipated that, following that message, S.M.S. and/or Saotome Alto would be on the move.

(As much as I dislike leaving the fates of Ranka and Ms. Sheryl in the hands of a man blinded to the big picture, it's time to play the hand that has been dealt.)

"Is there a problem? It's time to sortie."

Brera's eyes flicked to the green hand that tapped his shoulder. They shifted to the grim smile of Guld Goa Bowman.

"Trust in me."

Whatever he had picked up on, Guld said only that. With the Zentran lacking a mental implant, Brera was not privy to his thoughts. They remained locked within his fleshy brain.

"An odd thing to say, Chief Bowman."

"... My apologies. I'm not very good at opening myself. Sometimes, you have to trust someone other than yourself, without a reason. You'll bring sadness to those that you care about if you can't believe in them."

His words were strangely persuasive, but they were not particularly logical.

"I shall keep that in mind."

Brera turned following his reply, and walked away. No matter what, as long as Ranka and Myung were being held hostage, they had no choice but to fight. If they refused, the women were as good as dead.

He climbed the ladder, slipping into Lucifer's cockpit. The armored canopy descended, momentarily bathing him in darkness. Then the purple VF-27y's systems linked to his cybernetics. The world lit up around him. It saw it all through the cameras mounted across the Valkyrie. It was as if his body were floating suspended in the hangar.

"And now, about Isamu, don't worry about him."

Brera frowned at Guld's words.

(Why would I care about him? Do you?)

"He's not the kind of guy who would die from something like that. If he were, then he wouldn't be able to cause us any more trouble. He once fell from orbit to Macross City while somehow avoiding all of the YF-21 missiles, and he did it unpowered."

(How much of this do you remember?)

Brera knew the fate of Guld Goa Bowman, the chief of the YF-21 development program, following that battle. It sounded as though the man himself knew. He must have pieced it together. After all, the VF-27 development team was named Guld Works in his honor.

Whether that knowledge made a difference had yet to be seen. Could one still fight even after knowing one's fate?

(Do I have a similar destiny waiting for me?)

Brera didn't know the answer to that question, yet. Until he did, he would continue to fight to protect Ranka as though that was his predetermined future.

In the corner of a desert ridge was the rear entrance to the hidden facility. It had been surprisingly easy for the YF-30 to sneak into.

There was no way that he could have managed to get in undetected using only the information gleaned from the Nome sisters. That was where Alto, Aisha, and the others came in handy. While Leon was sneaking in through the back door, they were making a spectacular frontal assault. That had held the attention of that cyborg Valkyrie pilot and his cohorts.

Things were never quite that easy. There were still the reserve units inside of the base that needed to be taken care of. Of course, it was not all bad news. When he had noticed that most of the Ghost drones never launched, and the manned Destroid units that rushed over to greet him as he entered the secondary hangar could not aim their missiles worth a damn, it became apparent that there was some kind of powerful hacking support going on.

(Sarah Nome said that she and Isamu have an ally, or at least someone with a common enemy. She'd said something about a cursed woman who had been corrupted by an electronic kadun, that she was more like a tainted spirit than a person...)

The base's communication system and central control unit were being repeatedly attacked. Disruption codes were hitting the vulnerable spots with pinpoint accuracy. The location where Ranka was being held captive inside the building had been transmitted to S.M.S. With that information, there was no chance that she would become collateral damage during the breach.

"This is the last one. The base's defenses should be almost completely down."

As Leon mumbled his declaration victory, a crack split the wall right next to him. It grew in a second burst and then shattered, raining small chunks of stone and pebbles against the side of his Valkyrie.

His gut turned to ice. He would never forget that jet-black YF-29B, the aircraft that had stranded him on that planet.

"It's you!"

(You better be prepared. I'm a fighter, now!)

In the midst of his fear, Isamu's words came back to him.

(I don't want to end up as a hapless airplane pilot. The reason I lost the last battle was because I wasn't ready to take on a warrior. I was just fighting for myself. Now, I have something worth fighting for: someone to protect.)

Leon's Valkyrie pulled its knife from its storage compartment. A pinpoint barrier shimmered to life across its edge, honing it as well as protecting it from damage. He flung himself at his opponent, slicing the glowing blade toward the Battroid's throat.

The YF-29B flipped in midair. It transformed mid-summersault into a fighter, sprayed micro missiles from its bays before it had even finished reconfiguring. It was a brilliant tactic, a perfect combination of evasion and counterattack.

(Shrike Riposte! This maneuver is...!)

Leon knew that move.

That was a Super Grade-A maneuver that had humiliated him many times in the simulators.

Leon threw full power into his shield system. He half closed his eyes in fear and blasted through the hail of missiles as the fighter flew past him. Although, that was exactly what the enemy had anticipated that he would do. He spun around as -29B came in for another pass. Its undermounted MDE beam cannon splayed into firing mode before him. That bright light of condensing energy got his eyes open again.

"Oh, fu--!"

He stomped on the right pedal. The Chronos's corresponding leg engine flared and the Battroid threw itself in the opposite direction. Chaff ejected from the sides of the Valkyrie, blowing out a cloud of reflective materials into the air. Coupled with the ECM, it confused the weapon's targeting assistance. He transformed into a Gerwalk, ducking lower still as the bolt shot over the top of his fuselage.

"Right on!"

It felt like slow-motion as Leon curved past the barrel of the cannon and around the side of the YF-29B to bring him outside of its firing arc. As it flew by he caught the profile of the pilot in the other cockpit. He recognized that face. It was obvious who it was. There was only one man who would have known to use that maneuver against his signature blade strike.

(Doesn't matter. I can't lose here! Mina. Aisha. Everyone's future depends on me. And if I die, then Isamu's ghost is going to roast me for all of eternity.)

With hardened resolve, the YF-30 unleashed a storm of gunpod rounds at the side of the fighter. The mission pod popped up, and whirled to track the YF-29B as the fighter began to make its turn for a third pass. A dozen and a half micro missiles tore loose. At such a close range, there was no time for the fighter to get out of the way. They engulfed it in a series of rippling explosions. The black fuselage crinkled under the withering barrage. They were cut off when it suddenly was enveloped in the light of an omni-directional barrier. The -29B's engines glowed even brighter than the shield. It peeled away for a quick retreat.

"Hmph. Got away. ...Or he's circling around for another pass."

Leon glanced out the canopy. The smoldering mess that lined the floor spoke to just how much of its armament and armor had been blown off. The possibility of a counterattack was negligible.

"Catch you next time."

"Well done, Siegfried 1."

The voice came over the YF-30's communication system. It had enough reverb to it that Leon had difficulty discerning the sex of the speaker.

"I take it that you're the collaborator."

"Indeed. This is Colonel Grace Godunwa, Galaxy New United Nations Forces, Intelligence Division. With the assistance of your S.M.S. soldiers, we have successfully liberated the prisoner, Ranka Lee, and the former Macross trustee, Myung Fang Lone. This also freed our staff, as they had been coerced into obeying the hostages' abductor."

When image appeared on his monitor, Leon was a little surprised at what he saw. She looked like a proper lady with glasses, and dressed in a neat business suit. She did not look like someone who would be a Colonel, but he supposed that was a byproduct of the Galaxy's integration system, one which valued chrome over meat.

But it didn't matter.

In the background, he saw a green-haired girl, the Super Dimensional Cinderella, Ranka Lee, who had probably just then been rescued from the room in which she had been held under house arrest. She rushed over to be hugged by Alto, who had gone to meet her. Leon could see that there were tears in her eyes.

That alone made it all worth it.

Chapter 5: No Return Point

Leon always believed that the world never changed. It was only the shifting seasons that gave the impression that did, but the world itself remained the same.

But that was the illusion.

His days on Ouroboros had become his life. His private quarters aboard the frigate, the familiar mini-mart in Breetai City, they had become his living memory.

Mina's songs were often heard over the radio, as were Sheryl's and Mylene's. He pursued criminals with Alto and Aisha. Sometimes they would go diving into the dungeon-like ruins, or would go shopping with Mao, or listen to Sara teach Sheryl some Mayan song.

Every day was like that, an unchanging familiar groove that had become his life.

While fiddling with a computer at an open air café in Breetai City, Grace O'Connor was toying with the planet's financial markets to secure funds for her activities. When she noticed that Brera Sterne was standing beside her, she closed her personal terminal.

"What's the matter? Have you detected an anomaly?"

"No."

"Then sit over there and order something. This isn't the Galaxy or the Frontier. Don't stand out unnecessarily. It draws undesired attention."

"Yes, ma'am."

Brera sat down at the table. He placed an order, one which arrived shortly. It was a red bean tapioca milk tea with a disproportionate amount of whipped cream topping.

She had said to get something, but Grace had meant something a bit less conspicuous. She was about to criticize his choice, but stopped herself before the words came out. She went with something else instead.

"Why don't you tell me what is on your mind?"

"... Ms. Grace, I think that you have mellowed somewhat since we arrived."

"When you're cut off from your implant network, you're inevitably forced to confront who you are."

It was strange that she could not recall why she had been cut off from the network. It seemed to have been of her own volition, so she had decided not to worry about it for the time being. There was no doubt in her mind that the cybernobles who ruled Galaxy did not care about her absence.

"Well, besides."

Brera took a sip of his second order, a mint julep. His olfactory senses, with their mechanized, enhanced receptors, were not bad. They allowed him to taste food, and to taste it deeply.

"It's strange to see my mentor, Mao Nome, like that."

For Grace O'Connor, Mao Nome was a lifelong hero. She was the only teacher that she had ever truly respected. She and Brera and Ranka's late mother had been rivals vying for the title of Dr. Nome's Successor.

"Hey, hey! Are you sure there's a computer in your head? Oh! How does it feel to be a robot-lady and be able to see ultraviolet and infrared light? Are there really big cities floating on the sea of stars?"

The inquisitive eyes of the girl who followed Grace around asking rapidfire questions were indeed the same eyes that Grace had longed to see again for so many years.

(Most of the theory that we are working from is something that you, of all people, will unearth from ruins and analyze a decade from where you are now...)

It was impossible to say.

"Ms. Sheryl was also surprised by Ms. Mao's appearance."

"That is her grandmother. She was an old woman the last time that they had met."

It was a strange feeling for Grace. She had spent more than a decade as a pseudo-family member of Sheryl's, a decade longing for a family to which she could belong. She had taken so much from them. She had lost so much in the process. She didn't feel any remorse. She had been an officer. She had to think about what was in the best interest of the Galaxy fleet and adapt to fulfill that need. It was the stupidity of that dogmatic belief, the one that favored the end results over all else, that she hated the most.

She pushed that thought aside, and switched topics.

"How is Chief Bowman's mental biorhythm?"

"Maris Stella is monitoring it. It's surprisingly good. I believe that headquarters had more data on people with greater susceptibility to the Zentraedi combat instinct that she could draw from."

"Hm. Perhaps... Or people may just change if they are given an opportunity to correct their course."

Grace chuckled wryly at her own sentimentality as she said it. Recent events had made her feel nostalgic. She thought back to that modified SDFN class ship, Global, where she had spent her youth. She wondered if there would have been a different future for her, and Brera, if they could have stayed there forever. If she had the opportunity, maybe she would have done things differently, chosen a different path.

"This is also from Maris Stella. From Delta 1."

"Ngh."

Brera slid the chip over to her. The data that it held had been embedded within the hardware. Installing information directly into hardware was about as impervious to cracking as print on paper. The more that she developed her network, the greater the risk that it would be discovered.

"Project Sharon. I see that it's finally up and running."

"Will it work without the Myung Fang Lone? From the data we've siphoned off from the Macross trustee, it looks like that system is a puppet composed of Ms. Myung's song energy."

"Sharon received a bio-neural chip in the latter stages of her development, one that turned it into a sentient entity. That system also proved that a machine could acquire the ability to create song energy independently from a

human and utilize it to resonate fold space. It wasn't just the fear of Frankenstein's rebellion that led the fledgling United Nations government to ban Sharon. It was because they feared that Sharon would become a new Protodeviln and usurp control of both the Zentraedi and humanity."

Myung Fang Lone was an exceptional singer, despite her own self-doubt. In the short time prior to her trauma that had caused her inability to sing, she had won some of the galaxy's most coveted newcomer awards. In terms of album sales numbers, she had surpassed even Sheryl Nome's debut run, only to disappear from music history because she couldn't keep it up.

(Sharon Apple's primary system, the one capable of copying and amplifying the song energy of the genius that was Myung, was destroyed by Isamu Dyson and, ironically, Myung Fang Lone, herself. However, since Sharon had been brought to this planet - and since I was forced to help resurrect her - I won't be able to survive the chaos of Ouroboros without eventually confronting her.)

"Plan continues with C Minor."

"We're going forward, after all?"

Brera put his mirror shades back on as she answered.

"Yes."

Putting back on her manager's face, Grace smirked as she reopened her terminal.

"In any case, we're going to have to find Lynn Minmei."

(Peace.)

Leon turned a rocking chair and then slumped into it. He stared through the pub window down toward the sandy beach that was just outside of Breetai City.

"Why does whiskey have to be the color of whiskey?"

The question caused his mind to go blank, as if it had been forced to reboot.

"Probably because it's made from whiskey."

He nodded, satisfied with his very logical answer even though no one else had been close enough to be able to hear it.

...Outside the window...

"Ahh, my leg! Something grabbed my leg!"

"Mylene! I told you that if you don't stretch before you go into the sea, you'll be hobbled by Kadun, the spirit of death that lives among the waves!"

"No, sweetie, I don't think that's what she meant."

"Oh! Sheryl, wait! Bury me!"

"Oh, my God, Alto. Don't even think about it."

"What did I do?"

"Nothing. Which is exactly what I told you to do. I'll cover you, Ranka."

"I think that Alto should be buried in the sand for a while and reflect on what he's done."

"Hey, Mina, look here. At me!"

"Aisha... What are you going to use this picture for?"

"I'm going to sell it. Duh! As long as we're fighting in Ouroboros, we need to be ingrained in the public's mind!"

"Wait. That's why you wanted me to wear this tiny swimsuit?"

"Don't argue with me! Just blow a little kiss to the camera."

"Do you want anything? I could get you a drink from the bar."

"Thank you, Mr. Guld! I'll have a coconut juice."

"Ah... I'll have pineapple juice."

"Oh! I'll have a Coke! Can you get me a Coke?"

"What? No, Mao. Those outsider drinks are corrupting you."

"If I don't drink something, I'm going to collapse! Coooooke!"

"They are already burying people. You are going to be next."

(Peace...)

Human beings can't be tense all the time. Whether it's London under the bombing of V2 rockets or the Macross under the repeated assaults of the Breetai's Adoclass fleet, there is always a routine. Without a chance to calm the nerves, there was no way to continue the fight. A soldier with a frown on his face, thinking only of the war is the kind of thing that only happens in the movies.

"Excuse me. May I sit with you?"

The voice brought Leon back to reality.

"I'd rather that you didn't."

Leon did not see why the man would even ask. The bar was empty. There were plenty of seats, especially on the far side of the pub.

Having him sit right there was risky. It would practically be inviting trouble and that was one thing that he did not need any more of in his life.

And it would not be just any kind of trouble. Leon could feel the weight of the eyes of the old man standing across from him. It gave him the impression that this man had been responsible for the deaths of numerous people. It felt like if he wanted to, he could kill Mina, Aisha, and the others playing on the other side of the window.

(This man...)

The old man took the seat despite Leon's answer. He had the air of someone who had survived his share of galactic warfare. His body was old and had quite a few mechanized components. Those bits of metal were his service records. He had the smell of poison and stone, nothing like that of a human.

That was not all.

The person standing beside the old man, who seemed to be his bodyguard, was more problematic.

An extremely handsome young man with silvery-white hair.

A man that Leon would never forget, but who didn't bring even a shred of a smile to his memory.

"Rod Baltmer...!"

He was a pilot who, unlike Leon himself, had never retired from military service. The fiancé of his beloved sister, and a master of the Shrike Riposte. And he was the man responsible for stranding Leon on this planet.

"Sit back down, Leon."

Rod's gaze pierced Leon with the chill of absolute zero.

"This establishment is surrounded. You may not be able to see them, but they are out there. If we wanted to, we could annihilate everyone here, including the ones on that beach. Do try to keep that in mind, lad."

"...!"

Leon cursed his own carelessness, as if this had been his fault. It was stupid to think that just because his side had an air force, that they were the only ones that did.

(What can I do? Whether I call Brera Sterne or not, there won't be time to escape before these guys can hit us.)

The old man in front of him stepped back from the threat by way of a thin smile.

"You shouldn't swear. It's really just a sign of poor creativity."

He sat restraining hand on Rod. The younger man relaxed his posture but the tightened jaw muscles remained.

"Mm..."

"You shouldn't be worried. You see, we came out here today to do you a favor."

(A favor? Like what?)

"Forgive my rudeness. I haven't properly introduced myself yet, Mr. Sakaki. I'm Todo Ushio, Commander, VF-X Special Operations Group, New United Nations Forces, Havamal."

(VF-X!? They really exist?)

Anarchists, separatists, terrorists, stray Zentraedi, and widespread criminals all threaten humanity as they spread across the galaxy. There was, supposedly, a semi-legal independent task force operating under the Macross 13 banner. Word had it that they intervened in all of those conflicts, including the rebellion against the original United Nations government, utilizing a fleet of stealth carriers. He had heard rumors that the codename for their super elite unit was VF-X, but...!

(I see... That explains why they were able to break out that custom version of the YF-29. There's no way that the colonies have the cutting edge equipment that the Emigrant fleets do.)

"As you may have guessed, we at Havamal have been at odds with you in the past as we were on a clandestine mission to secure the songstresses that have been appearing on this planet. I am saddened by the unfortunate misunderstanding that led to a bit of violence between us."

"That's why the Valkyrie full of fold quartz was deployed. That makes sense... So, now that the misunderstanding has been cleared up, you'll stop with the whole guns blazing thing?"

"Not exactly. We still require the songstresses. Their power is needed to activate the remainder of the artifact that still lies dormant."

"Artifact?"

"The ruins that you have been exploring are only a small portion of a grander design. This planet, Ouroboros, is itself a singular artifact. It contains energy on a universal scale. It's an egg, Mr. Sakaki. It was created by former Protoculture researchers to draw energy from the multiverse using an Evil Series-based system."

"Multi--? What, now?"

"Fold space is a distortion of space-time. We travel through time on a daily basis. Every human being lives in a world corresponding to the timeline that they perceive, and through mutual recognition, they unconsciously perceive the multiverse. From a quantum mechanical standpoint, your world and my world are completely different. ...In one world, you may be flying a VF-25, in another world, it may be a VF-11."

"But that's all hypothetical."

Leon threw water on the conversation because he wanted to get as much information out of it as possible. He thought that they were delusional, but it would still be wise to know what it was that they were thinking. If you don't know what game your opponent is playing, you can't move your pieces.

"Not at all. This can be achieved with a zero-point time fold, which apparently ignores relativity. That's exactly what the Protoculture were

attempting to learn when they began to worship the Vajra as gods. They collected their fold quartz and then used them to develop the Evil Series."

"...I'm not sure what you're saying."

This Todo was being serious. He actually believed this.

There was something about the old man in front of him that made him different from the fools who believed in cults, or the intellectuals who fell for a ton of bullshit. Of course, there are plenty of examples of competent soldiers and politicians who have been tricked by frauds. There was something different about this guy.

The sensation of tingling on his skin had kept Leon alive more than once, so he listened when it began to do it now.

"What it boils down to is that there is a means through which the universe can be rebuilt."

Leon bit back on the urge to call the old guy a madman.

Neither this Todo nor Rod beside him were laughing. They were not even smiling. This is no joke to them. These guys really believe what they were saying.

Leon could feel sweat droplets beginning to take form.

"A portion of the power cycling through those ruins is responsible for calling forth the songstresses, and those who are related to them, to this planet. -No, that is not exactly correct."

"What do you mean, Mr. Todo?"

"Would you believe it if I told you that there is no universe outside of Ouroboros?"

"...That's ridiculous. I came here from Sephira. I didn't jump through time."

"Take a look at the sky, would you?"

A fold fault visibly covered the sky. The Aurora. A warping of time and space that distorted even light.

"Did you get any response from the S.M.S. superfold boosters, or the Galaxy's fault-jumping communications network? Why hasn't the New United Nations government come to Ouroboros's aid after such a prolonged period without contact?"

The old man's speech was not a threat. Instead, it held a religious fervor. He was sitting there recounting something that he considered to be wondrous.

Hard to believe though it may have been, this man actually had good intentions at his core. He was making an impassioned plea for good will.

"Yes, the ruins have been activated. This Ouroboros has indeed become a serpent of rebirth and ruin, the past and future, a head eating its tail. I don't know how our ancestors intended for it to operate, but in our perceivable timeline, no universe other than this planet currently exists."

(That day when Mina awoke...!)

Something had definitely been triggered on that day. If it hadn't been, the planet wouldn't have been inescapable, and communication wouldn't have been interrupted. There is no reason why so many time trippers would gather on this planet at the same time...

"This artifact was created by Protoculture when their civilization was on the brink of extinction. Utilizing song energy, the system was meant to rebuild a history that had gone wrong. The artifact is based in part on the biology of the Vajra and in part on technology used in creating the Protodeviln. Its imperfect activation interfered with the quantum waves of the planet. That was the source of the signal field that has been filling the Zentraedi here with fear and awe."

"You think that it's rebuilding the world here, now?"

Leon felt inferior, like he was sitting in a remedial class and his opponents held all of the cards in their hand. That was a mixed metaphor.

"You are beginning to understand. I'm sure that at this moment you are thinking about your friends out there. How many of them were Missing In Action? How many are confirmed to have been killed? What would you say if I told you that they could be saved?"

"That it's bullshit."

"If that is what you think, that's fine. The fact is that the reconfiguration of the universe has already begun. This Ouroboros is the egg of a new world. I want it rebuilt for the better. I want to alter it in such a way that it is better for those of us hailing from Earth."

"Are you a geo-centricist...? Really?"

For those from immigrant planets, it was a cursed principle. It was a view of history that considers those who have left Earth as being forever bound to their frontier world. One such centralist, who had been away from the limelight, reemerged a decade ago and caused a debacle that became the

catalyst for the restructuring of the United Nations Charter into its current form.

"That's what I'm talking about. We love our homeworld, Earth. We love the culture that humanity has created. But the myriad threats in the galaxy are extinguishing the light of humanity that has been passed down by our ancestors, the Protoculture. More than a thousand fleets belonging to the Zentraedi and Inspection Army, abnormally developed Artificial Intelligences, the Protodeviln, the Vajra and the mega-corporations that want to use the Vajra to control the galaxy..."

"You mean to tell me that we can rebuild the galaxy, and we can wipe them all out of existence?"

"Thank you for being so perceptive. You're a good man, you know that?"

The abyss, an abyss that had seen far too many deaths, was staring into Leon's soul. He could feel it.

He always felt that way when he got his ass handed to him in a dogfight, when he had over a hundred micro-missiles locked on to him, or when he flew into a net of Zentraedi anti-aircraft crossfire.

If that was the case...

(If you panic, you lose.)

"Even so, there's no reason for me or S.M.S. to hang out with you guys. I don't know which Senator your sponsors are, but I do know that Latence sympathizers can't just stroll into the New United Nations Forces. The colonies and the planets aren't going to just let go of the power now that they've got it. If Earth can do as it pleases, then there's plenty of room for everyone else to as well."

Leon slipped his hand underneath the table. His fingers brushed against the pistol at his hip. He did not want to have to draw his weapon, but he did not have any backup. He could only rely on himself. That was going to have to be enough.

"And more importantly, you've killed a lot of innocent people on this world, including the soldiers that you used as pawns, and the Vajra."

"So, you're saying you won't work with us?"

"No. I won't."

As soon as he said that, his mind was made up. He didn't care if they were a special operations group or not. He was not afraid to die. Mostly. He just

didn't want to go down in a way that would cause Isamu Dyson's ghost to call him a dumbass.

"I understand."

The old man did not seem too intent on talking any further. There was no hint of bitterness in his tone, either. If anything, Leon thought that he picked up a hint of briskness.

"The next time that we meet, it will be on the battlefield. Hopefully, it will be in a place where we can both put our skills to the test, Second Lieutenant."

"Wait! Let me ask you one last thing."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Why me? I'm not the head of the Ouroboros office. I'm sure that you know that."

"Ah."

The old man stood up. A wicked smile came to him.

"You haven't noticed? No, I suppose that you haven't. The eye of the typhoon doesn't know it's a typhoon. You see, you are in the middle of this, whether you want to be or not."

Without a moment's hesitation, the old man turned and headed for the doorway of the saloon. It was the kind of move that showed his confidence that Leon was not the kind of person to shoot a man in the back.

Whether what he had said was true or not, he was a man of dignity. So, Leon no longer struggled over what to do with the revolver under the table. He moved his hand away.

"Leon."

Familiar -but at the same time unfamiliar- eyes peered down at him through silvery-white hair.

"I'm going to get her back."

"Do you really think that you can?"

"You've seen what that power can do."

"I have, Rod."

He poured the whiskey into a glass.

"I was dead even though I was still alive. And I know that made you unhappy. But I'm not like that anymore."

"You mean that you don't care anymore!"

The glass was knocked away, sending amber liquid into Leon's hair.

"No."

He stare back at Leon. He probably would not have been able to not that long ago.

"It's too late for that now. I'm going to protect what I need to protect. This time, Rod."

He looked out the window.

A new family, laughing, playing, and whispering.

"If you're going to remake the world the way you want it to be, then I'm going to do what makes sense to me as a pilot. That's all."

"I see."

That was all that Rod said. He didn't look back as he walked away.

Leon didn't go after him, either.

The YF-30 sleeping in the hangar was still an unfinished aircraft.

As long as it was a prototype undergoing trials, it needed to be reworked every time it was flown. Unless it was a test flight or a mission that required the YF-30 to be taken out, Aisha's daily routine was still to push the VF-1++ on to Leon.

"Gawd... That idiot uses it so roughly..."

Even as she said that, she found it was a little strange that she didn't want to entrust the YF-30 to anyone other than Leon. Of course, there are only a limited number of people who can be counted on to be test pilots. They needed to have a knowledge of mechanics and aerodynamics in order to point out problems and issues, and above all, they needed to be skilled enough to bring out the maximum performance of the craft. But if that's all that she needed, Guld or Brera could do it. So, why should she want to leave it to Leon?

(I wonder why that is...)

She could not help but conclude that it was something other than a simple feeling.

She stepped closer to the Valkyrie, walking around it to examine it from different angles. The joints were a mess. It should have been able to tolerate the load but its theoretical value had been exceeded. That was another way of saying that the YF-30's joints had yet to catch up with Leon's skill.

It could still go higher, still fly farther.

As an engineer, that made her happy. Her work was the only time that she could forget who she was. In those moments she could slip away from her troubles. And from all of the other things that she turned a blind eye to.

"I was able to "borrow" plenty of AVF parts from the Havamal base. This is going to expedite development by a ton! Now, all we need is..."

"Excuse me."

"!!"

The YF-30 hangar was in a completely separate block from the other hangars. The majority of the work was automated. Controlled by the Meltrandi's genetically-inherited fiber optic nervous system, most of the development and maintenance work was done from within the hangar itself.

That was why only the engineers that were directly involved in the project could enter the hangar through use of their biometrics. It was an ideal environment for maintaining confidentiality.

In other words, there was no way that Aisha could be hearing a stranger's voice in there.

(A ghost...? Those things only appear in the fold space, right?)

"I'm sorry. I've been standing here for about 1,265 seconds now, and you haven't shown any sign of finishing your work."

"Grace O'Connor...?"

Grace O'Connor was Sheryl Nome's manager. She was a career woman who had been trapped in the same Havamal base as Ranka and Myung. She now stood against the hangar wall like a specter.

"Why are you here?"

"I'm sure you know, Aisha Blanchette. S.M.S. is undoubtedly aware of a few of my covers through Saotome Alto."

Needless to say, Aisha was wary. How could she have let things get that far so quickly?

"You're not a professional in intelligence warfare, and I'm sure you're not ashamed of that."

The next thing she knew, Grace's slender fingers were picking at some of Aisha's hair, rolling it between them even as she spoke. Was it a feat of her

mechanized muscular system that allowed the woman to close the gap from the wall to her in an instant? She had not even seen the woman move.

(Faster than Meltrandi's reaction time! I didn't know that the Galaxy's cyborg soldiers were this good.)

"Besides, I wanted to say hello to my lovely junior colleague. I've been enjoying reading your research, which you published based on my paper."

"...So, the Dr. Grace, who was co-authoring papers with Dr. Ranshe in Mao Nome's lab, that was you? I didn't think that a leading researcher in the field of fold quartz would be in Galaxy's intelligence department, but..."

The next time the woman in front of her felt like it, she would die. She was certain of that.

"Don't be afraid, Aisha. I'm not looking to cause any trouble on this planet. I have no desire to get involved in your little interests. As for your research, I think it's excellent. It's a travesty that the central universities didn't recognize you."

"...!"

How much do you know?

An amorous glance.

A paper published under a pseudonym.

The name-calling and insults at faculty meetings.

A mixture of jealousy, envy, and malice were always in those eyes.

Their words were always the same.

"You're just a Meltrandi! I won't allow you to publish any research that denies me my view of myself. All that you have to do is obey us humans..."

The hand of her bloody mentor reached down to Aisha's breasts.

And then...

She could scarcely recall what occurred until after she had fled the university.

"...What're you doing?"

"As long as you're cooperative, this can be our little secret."

"Cooperate...? With what...?"

"FuFu."

Grace's fingers lifted Aisha's chin.

"Cooperation, of course, in reconstructing the universe that has been reduced to a quantum state, so that we can return to our original timeline. Dr. Blanchette. That is what Chronos is for, isn't it?"

"... How much do you know about it?"

"Havamal didn't just have me running experiments. They're going to put something in to motion soon. In earnest. I'm sure you can understand why that man, Todo, tried to take advantage of your feelings. Only..."

"Only?"

"Take advice from someone who has lived a little longer than you have: be a little more honest with yourself. Any researcher who can't distinguish between resentment and analysis is never going to be happy with the results, okay?"

"Speaking from experience, are you, Senior?"

Aisha intended for it to be taken as sarcasm. But Grace...

"Yes, I am."

Grace smiled at her.

Aisha wished that she knew what lay behind that smile.

"How about I play the Godmother to your Cinderella? Here."

Grace flicked her fingers. The light of a data unit glittered above them. The form that it took probably looked the same as she visualized it from the computer within her body.

"This is ...?"

"It's the magic key. It's my Ouroboros-related data... I am giving you all the data that Havamal possesses on it. With it, I'm sure you will be able to satisfy me."

"... Aren't you worried I might be your enemy?"

"Everyone is always in a state of conflict against everyone else to some degree or another. I just want to see my gold and your silver sublimate into something beautiful."

The woman -or the machine in the guise of a woman- smiled again, and the next instant she was gone.

Aisha stared at the residual visualization of the data still in her hands for a moment, and then tossed it to the YF-30's AI.

"If you knew, Leon, would you forgive me? ...No. I don't think that you are going to."

She felt an irresistible urge for a cigarette. She was sure that she had quit back during her lab days, too. Oh well.

When you've been involved in wet work for as long as Grace O'Connor has, you start to develop a vocabulary of unfamiliar terms.

She moved through the air vent that she entered from the hangar and dropped down into the living quarters' section of the ship just as Sarah Nome -the eccentric rejecter of all things modern, and the one who had even built a replica of a traditional Mayan hut in her private quarters- opened her door.

"You've done a good thing."

That's what she said to Grace.

"... I am afraid that I don't know to what you are referring."

There were very few people that Grace was not good with, but Sarah Nome was one of those few exceptions. Most people's opinion of her was that she was an unscientific barbarian. They were wrong. This shaman, who had been

the caretaker of the wisdom left behind by the Protoculture in the form of mythology, knew things that were incomprehensible even to the latest scientific understanding. That was something that has been drilled into Grace by Doctor Mao.

"You have been defiled by the iron Kadun, and your soul has been distorted by the fire Kadun. It is right that you are listening to the voice of the spirit of Ouroboros and trying to purge the animosity of those who have been raped by the same Kadun. The fire Kadun must have given you wings of power because Sheryl has become a good guide of the wind, carrying on the blood of the Mayan."

(...Can she read my mind by bio-detecting the weak fold waves generated by my artificial body? This doesn't seem to be the same as aura recognition. Could it be that she is a Sophia Spiritia, and possess the ability to intuitively grasp people's attitudes and conditions?)

"I was just giving advice to a girl who was a little lost."

"It is the song of a good wind guide that makes you do that. You should sing to the wind guide, and ask it to dispel the evil Kadun's hold on you."

"Thank you. I'm sure Sheryl will be pleased to hear that the poison of capitalism can be purged from us."

"That's not what I meant... No. Let's leave it at that."

Having stated her opinion, Sarah's face returned to that of a girl her age.

"As long as you are here, there is something that I would like to ask."

"What is it?"

"Do you know anything about a pilot named Shin Kudo?"

Sara's eyes were slightly wet with tears.

"Oh, no. It's not that I'm worried about it, but... he once saved my life on Mayan Island with a mechanical bird. If people are drifting on the tide, and..."

Kudo Shin, Sarah Nome, and the "Bird Human" artifact that twisted their fate. Grace knew all about it. It had even been made into a movie -and more importantly, Dr. Mao had spent her life tracking the two across the galaxy.

(To find them, Dr. Mao became a researcher, met Vajra, and found me and Ranshe. Our research led a boy named Alto Saotome to Sheryl and Ranka, and the research to Aisha. ...The word "destiny" is a convenient meme.)

After considering it for a nanosecond, Grace decided to tell the truth.

Hiding things from someone who has the intuitive ability to read your mind, your aura, or what have you, was not in your long-term interest. She felt similarly when she had approached Isamu Dyson for his assistance. He had the wisdom to see the essence of people. If she had not told him everything, he would not have mediated an alliance between S.M.S. and the Nome sisters.

"Ensign Shin Kudo is on maneuvers with Havamal. I've met him a number times while at Todo's facility."

"...! Why...?"

Grace took a breath. She didn't need to breathe, of course. There were the oxygen canisters stored within her body if she required any. She did it anyway, out of habit.

"To save you and Doctor Mao, he said."

"Shin..."

She thought that the younger woman may have been about to start crying, but the wind maiden was the stubborn sort.

No matter how painful the reality that Sara encountered, the look in her eyes as she faced it down was so very similar to that of the master who had guided Grace across the depths of the galaxy.

"Thank you, Grace. I don't know what Shin is thinking, but if he is possessed by an evil Kadun, I will exorcise it."

"I'll help you. Sheryl will be happy to help you as well."

"I would appreciate that."

Sarah gave her curt bow.

"Now then, I must go and retrieve my sister from Ranka's room. She has really gotten into playing with fortune telling cards. If she plays with those cards so carelessly, she won't be able to hear the voice of the spirit of destiny when it tries to speak to her."

"She does enjoy her card games, doesn't she? She used to keep me up until dawn."

"What?"

"Never mind. This way."

She beckoned Sara with a wave and walked off toward Ranka's room.

(Maris Stella, Brera Stern. You were listening. I'm going to tip the scales. I don't care what the people on Earth want. We at General Galaxy operate with the best interests of the company in mind.)

It smelled like war.

Her favorite perfume.

He had gotten used to the sight of the setting sun behind the wafting glow of the Aurora.

For some time now, whenever Leon and Mina went out to buy groceries, they would walk the promenade along the embankment near Breetai City and look at it before heading off for the tarmac.

Somewhere along the way, Mina had solidified her position as the local diva. She had become much loved by the people of Ouroboros. They were confused by the prolonged Aurora and the subsequent terrorist attacks. Mina was their beacon in the darkness.

"Right! So, I'm going to be doing this live concert with Miss Ranka and Miss Sheryl! And of course, Miss Mylene is going to be there, too."

"This's getting more and more amazing."

It was unusual for a private military provider to have such a large number of singers on the payroll. Fortunately, with the aid of Myung and Grace, who were capable of handling the administrative duties, Aisha was not going to collapse from overwork. Not due to that, anyway.

(At this rate, our sales as an entertainment production company will probably exceed the income from our security service. Well, that's why the government is letting S.M.S. off the hook for all of the recent firefights...)

"Hey... What is that?"

Mina stopped her conversation and pointed to a spot in the sunset-colored sky.

"What's what?"

Good eyesight was a prerequisite for a fighter pilot, which was why Leon immediately knew that the brilliant dot of light between the clouds was a man-made object, a thermonuclear powered jet. Billowing behind it was a white trail of propellant or possibly coolant.

(You've been hit ...?)

"Oh, no!"

"What?"

He pulled Mina in by the hand. Her hands were unexpectedly thin and pale. He had never really noticed that before. He did not have time to consider it right then. Instead, he hugged her body against his and pushed her down onto the grass.

"Oh! Um, what? Well, I mean... If you want --."

"Close your mouth!"

She was clearly very embarrassed that she was so close to Leon, but that was another point that would have to wait until later.

"It's coming down! Clench your teeth!"

The sound of whistling of wind over wing intermingled with the metallic sputtering echo of a damaged jet engine. The storm-level glare whipped through the grass. A cloud of dust and smoke flowed over them, a roar following after it.

A single-legged VF-1 came down in a near fuselage landing. Half of its right wing had been torn off. Leon wondered how it had managed to stay aloft as long as it had.

"A squadron emblem of the former Joint Forces...? SDF-1 Macross?"

The flying kite insignia was no stranger to pilots. More obvious than that was the white skeleton on its tail. There was no doubt about it. There was only one squadron in the galaxy that bore that symbol.

"Skulls... Skull squadron...?"

Slowly, the cracked cockpit hatch opened in a jerky, uneven manner. In the front seat was a man in an old style pilot suit. The rear seat was occupied by a seemingly unconscious female officer.

"Hey! Are you guys from around here?"

Leon felt that kid's voice had a certain shyness to it. He was no better than Alto Saotome in terms of sounding like a pilot. Even Guld, a civilian, was much more dignified.

(Are you a local conscript?)

"Yes. And you?"

"Oh, uh!"

The pilot snapped a belated and somewhat exaggerated salute as he remembered.

"Sorry about that! I am Lieutenant Hikaru Ichijyo of the Joint Space Force, SDF-1 Macross, Skull Squadron! I'm looking for something called the S.M.S. Ouroboros branch office. I need to ask for their help!"

"Ichijyo... Hikaru...?"

It took a beat for the words to register. This was not just any visitor. This was a mythical figure.

"That's -- Do I have something on my face?"

"No, no. I'm a pilot from S.M.S. Is there something that I can do for you, sir?"

"Yes! Minmei's... We need your help to rescue Lynn Minmei!"

This time, Leon and even Mina, who was still in his arms, were in awe.

The legend had descended.

And the arrival of Hikaru Ichijyo was the bell that signaled the beginning of the finale.

Chapter 6: Song And Memories

Havamal had taken control of Ouroboros's ruins and had already activated it. The imprisonment of Ranka in the desert base was essentially just a diversion to allow their plans to move forward unimpeded. The egg was near hatching.

When Hikaru Ichijyo, the hero of the First Interstellar War, told the assembled group about this, everyone fell silent. Todo's goal of dismantling the universe on the quantum level and reconstructing it to create one where the Earth ruled over the galaxy was something that would normally be laughed off, but there was no doubt that it was the mysterious power of the ruins that had brought together so many famous people from all across history. The data that Grace and Guld had smuggled from the Havamal base supported that assumption.

"I heard that the ruins' system uses something called song energy. That Todo guy is forcing Minmei to supply it."

"We tried to infiltrate the Havamal flagship, Macross Hlidskjalf, to retrieve Ms. Minmei, but we were unable to breach their defense grid."

It was Misa Hayase, the former operator of the SDF-1 Macross, who painfully informed them of that fact. She had cooperated with Todo in exchange for a guarantee of Minmei's safety, but at the same time, she had passed on information to Grace and Hikaru, hoping for an opportunity to take Minmei back.

"It was all I could do to save Misa. I'm sorry. I wish I could have matched the pace of your guys' actions, but..."

"Don't sweat it. We're almost always on the back foot, too."

Aisha patted the legendary hero on the shoulder, giving him some degree of comfort. He probably believed that she was a brave and noble commander, but Leon knew that she was actually telling the truth. They had been on the reactive side of things ever since the situation had first been brought to their attention.

"Okay, but why does song energy have anything to do with the ruins?"

"Technically, that's just a hypothesis."

Aisha answered Mylene's question with a wave of her finger. However dire the situation may have been, she was thrilled to be able to openly discuss her academic theory.

"According to Doctor Mao Nome's thesis, the Protoculture Ruins use a Super Dimensional substance purified inside of the Vajra's bodies called fold quartz as its central component. The final control protocol employed by the system was a special quantum oscillation wave that could access fold space, or subspace universes."

Mao cocked her head.

"I've never said anything like that."

Aisha continued her explanation, ignoring the protest of the child.

"This galaxy is made up of those kind of uncertainty waveforms. Songs can interfere with them, creating its own a unique force in the process. We call that force song energy."

"You mean that thing that makes animals and grass happy when Ranka sings?"

Mao's question was followed by a comment from Mylene.

"Oh, I've seen a flower bloom when Basara sings, too!"

"Yes, that very energy. A song, no matter how small, makes the world reverberate and calls forth energy from another dimensional plane. That power can be amplified by using fold quartz. The power of the song amplified by the Sound Energy System developed by the Macross 7 fleet, the Bird Human sleeping on Mayan Island, Sheryl's earrings, and the core unit of the YF-29 -which far surpasses the output of its reactor, mind you- could produce energy akin to a small-scale Big Bang."

"Big Bang!?"

Everyone in the room gasped. Everyone except for Grace, to be specific. Even Brera seemed to be slightly shocked by the declaration.

"It's a hole into higher dimensions. It's miraculous that its output is only that much. Well, of course, most of it disappears due to entropic decay from breaching the dimensional barrier, so its full force can't be continually generated by Ms. Sheryl, but..."

"Of course not! I'm Sheryl Nome, not a hamster to be spun on your wheel!"

"... In other words, the amplifier, or the microphone if you prefer, for the song's energy is the fold quartz, isn't it, Doctor Aisha?"

"Correct, Chief Guld! And that song energy is also the power that sealed the psychic parasites called in from the other side of the Fold Space that brought

the Protoculture's Interstellar Republic to collapse. AKA the Protodeviln. Basically, what I'm saying is it's believed that the ancient Protoculture civilization was more adept at utilizing song energy than we are today. "

Misa, who had also been involved in Protoculture research during her time in the former United Nations Forces and was particularly familiar with their language, raised her hand and expressed her doubts.

"Macross doesn't have any devices that involved singing energy. Minmei's stage is only for events. However, given that the reactor is a black box, so it wouldn't be surprising if it had fold quartz sealed within it."

"Well, that is -"

"I'll explain that to you."

Grace stood up, taking over like an academic professor supporting an inept pupil.

"My research on the subspace universe has been ongoing since the Anti-Unification War. Many of the early Protoculture ruins that have been unearthed throughout the known galaxy did not show signs of having used song energy. We believe that it was primarily introduced as a power source sometime after the war between the Zentraedi and the Inspection Army had already begun. "

Of course, there were many mysteries on the topic of the Macross, itself. Grace continued, explaining that it was impossible to assign a specific date to the vessel's construction with the current level of information that they had.

"In an attempt to end the war, they developed subspace technology to save their crumbling Interstellar Republic or their Galactic Empire. As a result, they seem to have inadvertently brought forth an extra-dimensional life form called the Protodeviln, which only accelerated their downfall."

"Yes, um, Dr. Grace."

"Yes, what is it, Miss Mylene?"

"Are you saying that the galaxy is about to be destroyed because the power of Minmei's song is being abused?"

"That is what I'm saying, yes."

Aisha and Grace unexpectedly smiled at the same time.

It was the smile of a mad scientist.

Sara Nome wondered at the people who were talking as though they had never expected for this to happen.

It was not surprising that this was the reality of the situation. It had been said since the time of the ancient people of Waka Roi and Roi Kanu that songs could shake the world and reshape it in any way imaginable. The prayer stones held by the priestesses could send their songs to the wind and to the fire to purge evil corrupting spirits. Why should they be surprised when "juice" comes out of the vending machines, the doors opens without being touched? They used a daisy chain approach to linking Mina's songs with those of her friends without even understanding the nature behind it.

However, she felt it wise that the people of this flying ship were trying to stop the Song Of Destruction being sung by some priestess named Minmei. A shaman's voice, much like the evil spell of rationalism held by the people from across the sea, would upset the balance of the world. It would spread only sorrow if it were to be used for selfish purposes.

(It must have been the will of the spirits that I was called to this star island.)

She thought that at least the people on this ship were different from the arrogant ones that had come to the island of Mayan. They had treated her kind as though they were poor, unfortunate people who could not so much as

eat without their aid. That or as if they were laboratory animals fit only for their experiments.

"Um, Sara Nome?"

Her thoughts of home were interrupted by a faltering voice. She turned to find that it belonged to the officer from the United Nations Forces, the one called Misa Hayase. She couldn't help but feel a surge of defensiveness when she saw the military uniform that the woman wore.

"What is it?"

"Do you know a pilot named Shin Kudo?"

"Shin?"

His name came innocently for her lips. It was not an honest emotion, but it was best to reserve judgment when it came to military types.

Still, she knew the name well. He was the rider of a flying bird made of metal that had crashed down upon the peaceful island of Mayan. He was a young man with no respect for the spirits of his ancestors, a boy who seemed to know next to nothing beyond fighting, but deep down he had a passionate

soul. He had been the first man to embrace Sara, a young woman who came from a world of light without darkness.

"... I've heard that he was with Havamal. Why do you ask?"

"You are correct. The Ensign is now serving under Todo's command. He is a skilled pilot. The Ensign has voluntarily decided to cooperate with Havamal. He hasn't been brainwashed."

"Why? Shin is so blind to the stupidity of those people...!"

Misa looked a little pained at the comment.

"Please, don't blame him."

"But!"

For some time before they had met Isamu, Sara and Mao had been hounded by Havamal and the mercenaries that they had hired. That alone was bad enough, but in the process, the soldiers had gone so far as to attack without regard to the collateral damage that they might have caused to the inhabitants of Ouroboros. That was unforgivable.

"In 2009 ...Which is to say one year after the time you were in, Earth will be destroyed in a war with an alien fleet, the Zentraedi."

The words left her as if she were spitting them out.

"!!"

But that event had, to some extent, been predicted.

They, the people from the past, had tried to avoid reading the historical records. So many from the present had spoken about her sister, Mao, while none of them mention a thing about her. She had guessed that there must have been some horrific event behind her fate that no one would talk about. Not even Sheryl, Mao's granddaughter, would speak of it. Sara Nome may not be tech-savvy, but she was not stupid, either.

"It seems that Todo asked the Ensign's for help. He claimed that the power of the ruins could change that fate. He said that he could help you."

"Me..."

Well, she could understand that sentiment readily enough.

The fear that the path would lead no further. The fear of being left in limbo. It was the fear that Sara had felt all of her life on that island, where the population was aging, and the culture and traditions could no longer be passed on to a new generation.

"I understand."

She could not say that she did not have those fears. Maybe Shin was right. But even so, she wanted to tell him that she still believed. Believed in what she knew. Believed in what he had told her.

"--I will do as I must to try to stop this. I believe that is my mission as a wind priestess in this world."

She felt a little braver as she put it into words.

"I think that's a good idea."

Misa stepped in and embraced her, taking her up in to her arms.

"I lived in tears after my father and family died, too. And then Tokyo and New York were all turned to ash, but... But it's not enough for a person to live... If you can leap from the past to the future and back again, maybe you can change the future of the timeline that you're on."

"I have heard that time is a taboo, a terrifying realm of Kadun that one must not touch. I will just have to trust that the winds will guide me to where I need to be."

The planet of Ouroboros was comparable to Earth in its size. It had a slightly larger area of landmass, but it was overall about on par with humanity's homeworld.

The reality was that the settlers had only been able to fully explore the area around Breetai City. That archipelago was at most the size of the old Japanese's one.

Since there was not a detailed reconnaissance satellite network in orbit to map out the world and only a limited number of unmanned drones to perform scouting missions, the majority of the cartography had to be done in person.

In order to search for the ruin that had purportedly been triggered, the Ouroboros branch office had engaged in a company-wide sortie with the cooperation of the New United Nations military and the Hunter's Guild.

"This is Siegfried 1, all clear. Skull 4, what's your status?"

In the cockpit of the YF-30, Leon looked out at the endless mountains and snowfields with a resigned look on his face. At first, when they had arrived near the city of Urd, he had thought that it was a magnificent sight. Now that he was halfway to Skuld, he had become plagued by constant snowfall that obstructed his Valkyrie's sensor suite due to the presence of rare metal particulates. Then the issues caused by the ice and snow penetrating mechanical parts of his fighter had set in. Following that came the sudden onset of ice sheets that obstructed his visibility.

"This is insane."

There was a hint of disgust in Alto's voice that matched Leon's feelings on the matter. He was a much more tenacious man than Leon was due to his childhood training, but even so, he was getting tired of all this snow. It turned out that a man can't be endlessly impressed by an atmospheric sky, not even Alto.

"Hey, Alto. Can I ask you something?"

"Hmm? What is it?"

"I was talking to Ranka. She told me that you were a student. How come you are a pilot, now?"

It was somewhat out of S.M.S. etiquette to pry into someone's personal matters, but there was something about this gorgeous man that attracted the interest of others. At the very least, he seemed like he ought to have more of a reason to be a pilot than someone who had become one just because he wanted to fly a Valkyrie.

"I still am a student. To be honest, it's kind of depressing to think about my GPA after being absent for so long."

Alto made a little, humourless grunt.

"I come from a very prestigious family of kabuki actors. Before I could pick up a pair of chopsticks, I was already trained in the art of onnagata. That's the form of acting where men portray women. I had always believed that I would become a great actor someday, just like my father. That feels like a long time ago, now."

In his voice, there was a rhythm that only an actor could create, the kind that drew people in. Alto could not get rid of it no matter how much he tried. Alto Saotome was like the sun. It did not matter whether you turned away or tried to focus on something else, you could not ignore him. His gaze contained a radiant beauty that burned the eyes of those who look directly into it.

"I saw a bird man flying in the sky."

"A bird man? Isn't that what Sara's sister sometimes says?"

To put it simply, Leon didn't dislike Sara Nome, but he did not like her, either. He had a hard time communicating with her because she saw everything in terms of her own values. As for his sister...

"It is only natural that your iron wings should have light, since her soul has become the wind of the starry sea and is ever at your side."

Leon had thanked the kid for her consoling him with her vague, incomprehensible logic.

"No, no, no. It was just an EX-Gear flight. At the high school festival, the Pilot's Course did a demonstration flight and..."

Alto actually looked like a boy of his age as he spoke so nostalgically about his school memory. Now that Leon thought about it, this guy was younger than he was. That was hard to believe.

"Michel Blanc. He was an ace who had already been a solo pilot in his first year. When I saw him flying freely through the air, I wanted to fly like him. Not on a predetermined course, but on my own... That's what I thought. I was surprised when I found out later that Michel was a member of S.M.S."

"I hear that. There's nothing as peaceful as being up in the open sky, is there?"

"What about you, Leon?"

"Me?"

He had not considered telling anyone about himself in a long time. Test piloting and solo missions had become the norm for him. He didn't try to make friends anymore. He didn't want to mourn them when they went down in flames, so he simply did not reach out to them in the first place.

It had been quite a while since he had last thought about opening up.

They were friends. It was okay for them to talk. Yes, he could honestly say that was the way that he felt.

"About ten years ago... I was just a kid. The city that we lived in was attacked by terrorists. They had a lot of Valkyries and Power Armor Suits. They were on a scale big enough that could be called a full rebel army. They tried to carpet bomb the entire city."

It was a time when the centralized Earth's government was in the final throes of its collapse. During those days, the planet Sephira, where Leon lived, was not safe from the terroristic attacks by those who opposed Earth-centrism.

"We had patrols, but they were little more than police officers. They were no match for them. Everyone thought that it was hopeless. That's when... A Valkyrie flew into this terrorist formation, it was like a huge cloud of planes. There were so many of them that they filled the sky. Horizon to horizon kind of stuff, you know?"

As he spoke, Leon realized that he had been trying to avoid remembering that memory. It was his admiration for fighter pilots that had formed that block. He had somehow avoided looking at what he had admired and wanted to become. Somewhere along the way, he realized that by trying to distance himself from it, the wound in his heart had become infected.

"Then there was the Special Forces of the United Nations military... It was just this one guy. I heard that he was an ace from a unit called the Ravens. It was an amazing battle. The sky... it was like the wind would just take on this shape and drive straight through the enemy. That's what it looked like to me as a kid. He was so cool. Man, I wanted to be like him. ...Are you laughing?"

"Yes... Because we've all been there."

"We have, haven't we?"

"Yes."

Leon laughed. He laughed as hard as he could right at the sun, which was visible between the snow banks and then clouds.

But only for just a moment.

An explosion burst from Alto's VF-25. The unseen shot tore through the wing and then ripped through the legs. The suddenly underpowered Valkyrie shuddered and fell from the sky in a plume of dark smoke.

(That wasn't a missile or a beam-- It was a sniper!)

He tuned the YF-30's sensors to on full, sending out waves pulses. The data came streaming back and the AI worked to determine from where the shot had originated.

Before he could return fire, a barrage of micro-missiles shot his way. Whatever else his opponent was, he was definitely a skilled sniper. Two more Valkyries appeared from the haze of the snowfall. Both were VF-25 models. The AI, while still working on the sniper's trajectory, compared the new arrivals to information pulled from the YF-30's data banks. It landed on a match and tossed the result on to his screen.

"Frontier Branch... Skull Squadron? No way!"

And then he heard it.

A song.

It was different from Mina's. It wasn't like anyone else's that he had heard.

It was a song that could never be uttered by a human being, and yet the song was like a human being, itself.

It was the song of a fearsome siren, one who directly manipulated every sense with her fold wave. It was the song of Sharon Apple, the legendary virtual idol who had once driven the galaxy into a frenzy.

Leon and Alto were not the only ones to hear Sharon's song. Hikaru and his team, who were working as a separate unit, and the New United Nations Forces were also in turmoil. One by one, pilots who had been rendered senseless by Sharon's song were brought under her control.

"Each squadron's strength is down 40 percent! The unmanned fighters are also being controlled by Sharon!"

"Oh no... I thought I could get an idea of the location of the ruins by analyzing the wave pattern of Sharon's song, but this is..."

Upon hearing Misa's report, Aisha, who was sitting in the command chair, scratched her head in a show of confusion. The enemy had somehow managed to re-develop Sharon Apple. The person who had been assisting them had been Grace O'Connor herself, and the source of Sharon's personality data, Myung Fang Lone, had been captured! Even though she knew this, she was none too pleased to find the scene playing out before her.

"I used to like "The Cream PUF" the most on that album. Um, anyway. What can I do for you, Grace, senior?"

"I can't believe that she can mimic the song energy for so long without a muse. I knew from Dr. Chiba's experimental data that a person with the song energy of Lynn Minmei could generate a certain amount of it by playing a recording, but Marge Gueldoa was brilliant for thinking of utilizing a bio-neural chip to generate a complete ego that actually retains its ethereal body. I'd have to grudgingly call him a genius."

"That's not really the important part here, is it!? If you have something useful to contribute, that's what I'm interested in!"

"I am aware of that, Aisha. You can't call yourself a professional if you're in a panic over something such as this."

Grace picked up the intercom with a deliberately theatrical motion, though she probably didn't need to use one since she could directly connect to the system with her brain implant.

"Mina, to the bridge, please."

The blasts of battle could be seen all across the monitor field of view.

Mina clutched the microphone as a little shiver ran through her.

In order to counter Sharon's brainwashing-through-song, she had to use her own song energy. Of course, Sheryl, Ranka, and Mylene were standing right behind her. One person's singing alone would not be enough to sustain the level of intensity required to break through the mind control. With everyone serving as her chorus, she could fight against a virtual singer with practically unlimited power.

(This feels familiar.)

There was a memory somewhere on the edge of her mind. It was of her offering up a song against a plague that was about to envelop the entire world.

(The sky back then was the same color as this one.)

And she had friends who stood in support with her, just as she did now.

There was a man out there in that sky, one who had been trying desperately to survive.

She didn't want to fight.

What she wanted was for them to know how she felt.

She wanted them to know that she wanted to protect the present that they were all living in, even if it was a difficult life, with its own brand of sadness. That was why...

"I'm Mina Forte and I'm going to sing for you. So, listen to my song, please!"

Alto was beside himself. Near panic closed in around him.

"Skull 4! Get control of your plane! You haven't been eaten, yet! Skull 4!"

"Michel... Michel's alive... Michel's alive, and he's not going to shoot me. He would never shoot me!"

He was in tears.

It was like a damsel in distress when her supposedly dead lover appeared as a ghost only to point a gun at her head. That was how it seemed to Leon, though he had only ever seen that kind of thing in the movies.

(This song... Is Sharon Apple's voice giving Alto hallucinations?)

Sharon had already managed to manifest within the YF-30's cockpit through its instrumentation panel. Her song was mesmerizing. Her voluptuous, bewitching figure changed every time he looked at it.

"Your plane is... It's still working! Hey, get a grip, Alto!"

The second shot came.

It was surprisingly accurate, and no sniper in all of S.M.S. would have been able to get a clear shot at a super-fast maneuvering variable fighter. Except that the VF-25 was not attempting to evade.

"Hey! That's my buddy!"

He became a shield. Leon transformed into a Battroid and deployed his pinpoint barrier at full power, cutting between Alto's half-destroyed fuselage and the line of sniper fire. The magnetically accelerated, ultra-high speed projectile penetrated the barrier with ease. The YF-30's shoulder armoring was blown clear off even with energy conversion armor running on full.

(I've heard that the snipers at the Frontier branch are very skilled, but this...!)

The side panel of his HUD displayed an assessment from Brünnhilde. The transformation system itself had barely sustained any damage. Unfortunately, that news was not as good as it first sounded. Some of the power conduits had been severed. The AI estimated that had caused the efficiency of the linear actuators to drop to a 60%. What that meant was that the Chronos's transformation speed had plummeted. In a dogfight between variable fighters, that could be fatal.

"Alto! I know that it's hard to fight your friend, but he's being controlled by Sharon! If you get hit again, you won't be here to help him!"

"I know... I know... but I can see...! I can see him. I can see Michel being sucked out into space. I'm... I can't... I couldn't do anything...! I got stronger so I wouldn't lose my Wings. I should have...!"

He understood how Alto felt.

Leon knew how he felt, because the memory of his sister's death, which had been lying dormant inside of him, had taken shape and filled his vision. He wanted to give in and to accept what had been offered as real, to allow Havamal to erase his grief along with the rest of the world.

But.

"I can hear Mina singing...! No! I won't give in to this illusion...! I won't give in!"

Then the third shot came. The YF-30's plating was penetrated along with its barrier. The armor-piercing projectile continued straight through, shattering the head of Alto's fighter. Inside of the YF-30's cockpit, some of the electronic components were sheared away by the impact, half destroying Leon's EX-Gear in the process.

At the sight of this horrific destruction, Mina took an involuntary step back. The S.M.S. aircraft, which were supposed to be their friends, had surrounded Leon and Alto and were beating them to a pulp.

The sight further awakened the sleeping memory lurking her in mind.

(The song... The song resonated, and the Zentraedi people, who were supposed to be their good friends, were being manipulated... The glimmering view of Spiritia being sucked away... The universe freezing over... Gepelnitch... Gavil... Grabil... That day... That was...!)

When the thought struck her, she could not help but let the song die out. She that she should be singing. If she didn't, they may never be able to stop Sharon!

(Leon --!)

"Look."

It was the touch of a warm hand against her shoulder that snapped her back to reality.

"Miss Sheryl..."

She turned to find them decked out in their stage attire. Sheryl stood in her battle dress, a holographic uniform. Beside her, Ranka was clad in her fairy costume.

Their figures were beautiful, as if it were a dream made real. Created by fire and wind, they were Valkyries given life.

"Ha! What a face! If you want to make it as a professional, you can't let the audience see your stage fright, no matter what."

"That's right! Mina. If we can't reach them with our song, Alto and Leon will be in trouble, right?"

"Ranka. I'm sorry, I..."

In the back of her chest, there was an unfamiliar anxiety. Mina couldn't put a finger on what it was. She was convinced that it had to be the same thing as the sleeping memory. When it awoke, she would never be the same again.

"It's okay! Sheryl and I have both lost the ability to sing before."

That got a reaction out of her fellow singer in the form of Sheryl's contorted face.

"Hey, hey! Ranka! Do you mind? No one needs to hear that!"

"I'm going to leave it to you alone. I care for both Alto and Michel. This whole planet is full of good people. So, I'll help you."

Ranka's expression had the same strength that Leon and the others had. It was a strength that had been honed by overcoming numerous crises. The girl who had once looked up to Sheryl was there no longer; she was the one who had become the idol to be looked up to and admired by the younger generation.

"Exactly. If everyone calls for it, miracles can happen any time. Let's go, Ranka!"

"Yes, Sheryl!"

The spotlight's ignited. Their pillars gathered over the women and the song sounded once again.

"Ranka's... Song...?"

In the cockpit of the VF-25, Ozma Lee squeezed his eyes shut as he struggled to regain a small amount of consciousness.

He could feel his mind being submerged by a heavy blanket. Sharon Apple. It was that song. It had been a bad idea to try to coordinate with those guys to resupply the Quarter.

He tried to move his body. He strained but his fingers would not respond. He just could not push through her will. He was terrified that his body was going to be used to kill another S.M.S. pilot, his sister's love interest, Alto Saotome.

"Shit! Michel! Luka! Do you hear me? Just listen to Ranka's song! Time to... get paid. Just do it. Believe in the power of song!"

That was what he had learned in his youth from Fire Bomber and, more recently, that was what his sister had told him. You can't save the world with missiles and bullets. What can save the world was a song.

It was that form of resistance that was shared between Alto and Leon.

"Song energy restored. Pushing against Sharon's fold wave. Siegfried 1, Skull 4: alive and well."

Misa Hayase's operator skills were astounding. She had been the elite operator of mankind's first full-scale space battleship, selected from the entire United Nations Forces, and she had later become the admiral of mankind's first ultra-long-range Emigration Fleet. Unbelievably, her instructions came "faster" than Grace's. Of course, Grace's brain had been cyborgized and was intended to be connected to a computer network, so it was running on the slow side.

"I can't help but to be impressed by the speed at which you make decisions. Are you aware that you are processing information beyond the speed of light by utilizing logical leaps? It's a phenomenon that has been noted in some geniuses. It's faster than a Von Neumann Computer because the logic skipping is happening inside the neurons. You are a natural quantum computer."

Grace truly was impressed.

"Can't you redirect Brera and Guld?"

Issuing commands alone was not enough to turn the situation in their favor. As Aisha sat in the command chair, she burned with impatience. She felt as if she too should launch. She could do more good out there than she could fidgeting on the bridge.

"Lieutenant Ichijyo and the New United Nations squadron are being pinned down by a superior enemy detachment."

It was a stalemate. The enemy would not move the Macross Quarter out of the area of operations because they needed it to protect Sharon's hardware and the active ruins. On their end, the Gefion was out of reserve forces to deploy.

"We're stuck!"

In frustration, Aisha threw off the jacket that had already only been barely covering her upper body and tried to feel the wind blow onto her bare chest, earning herself a warning grimace from Misa.

After locking down a mixed of the New United Nations military and the Galaxy Corporate Army led by Hikaru Ichijyo, Havamal's squadron was in a

massive air battle over the frozen mountains north of the city of Verdandi. The song energies of the two opposing sets of divas warred against each other in equal measure. Only the victor of the dogfight could decide the outcome.

On the other side of the reticle, there was a new type of variable fighter that he had never seen before. The computer tag labeled it as a VF-171. That was a big number. That did not help it from being grated by a barrage of machine gun fire.

"So, that's four of them. They're amateurs, these guys."

In the cockpit of the VF-0 Phoenix, Shin Kudo watched emotionlessly as the pilot of the enemy aircraft ejected.

He had buried many jet fighters in the flames of the World War. To him, the rural pilots of Ouroboros, who had relied on AIs to fight for them, were no challenge. Battle was a matter of experience. For Shin, who was experienced in human-to-human warfare, a pilot who panicked whenever an enemy got behind him and couldn't even use the transformation system as a proper counter, was nothing.

(They may be from the future, but they don't count for much.)

That was the way that it was with these guys.

"I'm getting used to this thermonuclear burst engine thing. I don't like that it's not a jet, but the power output is off the charts. It'll be a cinch to take down the enemy commander with this thing!"

The VF-0 was the prototype for the VF-1. It was as large as a VF-25. Having been built with the low technology of the time, it had an incredible amount of wasted space and mechanisms. The Zeke Project had been used to update the old airframe with the latest technology in order to bring it up to the specs of the most advanced aircraft in production. Supposedly, it had been done during the Vanquish Race restoration boom, but those details didn't matter to Shin.

All that he knew was that his beloved jet, which he had spent so much time in, had been reborn fifty years in the future with new technology and was now flying above another world.

(Sara... Mao... Here I am, flying in the skies of an alien planet. I'm coming for you. I'll get you back to the Mayan Sea!)

He dipped, and plummeted through the clouds. He drove for the VF-1 in the middle of the furball. It appeared to be a frontline command and control model. As it began to fill his view, the Skull emblem on its tail caught his attention.

"Even if you're a member of the Skull Squadron. You're in my way. I'll drop you!"

"Ichijyo!"

"I know!"

Almost at the same time as Misa's exclamation, Hikaru Ichijyo avoided the VF-0's dive. His reflexes, trained in acrobatic flight, were faster than anyone else's. He rolled to the right, tumbling out of the way as the -0 shot passed him then arced in flip.

"I'm not going to plow the mountain!"

The VF-0 skimmed the peak, losing just enough speed to prevent a crash, and transformed into a Gerwalk. Its arm thrust upward, swinging the gunpod to face the VF-1. However, he found that the VF-1 also transformed, although into a Battroid at the top of its somersault. Its energy-converting armor deflected the weapon's barrel, and opened up a dual counterattack of its head lasers and its own gunpod.

"No way! That's crazy...!"

"Skull Squadron!"

They didn't hear each other's voices. They both understood, though. Each other's mentor, each other's predecessor: that great legend that they had both looked up to.

"That's Skull Leader technique! The commander from before I was assigned to Prometheus was the only one who did that maneuver. It's too dangerous to be allowed outside of our squadron...!"

That pilot was Roy Fokker, his superior, he had been told about him several times during his career. Tenacious, competitive, courageous, and adventurous. He was a pioneer who opened up the unprecedented world of transformable fighters.

"Shin Kudo!"

He knew that man.

It was in the records that Todo had shown him. The man who led the Skull Squadron to save the Earth after it had been decimated, burned down in flames, and after his beloved Roy Fokker's death.

He had never seen his face, but the man had certainly been a junior member of the team in his past.

In that maneuver, indeed, Roy Fokker yet lived.

His Gerwalk slalomed backward, and then to the side. He evaded the missiles that were flooding in. they exploded along the mountain's peak as though tracing the path that he had taken. Shin Kudo relentlessly pursued the enemy aircraft, the ice and snow burst up around him caused by a mix of his engines and the explosions.

"Hikaru Ichijyo!"

He recognized that defense. He knew that man's technique.

He knew that maneuver, the one that defies the principles of aerodynamics, the one that showed that you were confident enough to be willing to plunge into a snowy mountain and destroy your own plane if you made a mistake.

"I've missed you. The stunts you pulled back in Dad's aerobatics team, did you think them up back then?"

He was on the verge of tears.

This was almost like meeting face to face once again.

But Fokker was nowhere to be found. Kakizaki, his friend, was also gone. He had been irresistibly happy that some pilot from the Skull Squadron was still alive even in this time period.

But this was a battlefield. And there was no hesitation in his sharp movements. He was sure that his opponent was flying through the skies of Ouroboros of his own free will and not under the control of Sharon's song.

"If that's the case! I'm sorry, but I've got to put you down!"

The tip of the Super Pack, customized for use in the atmosphere, opened. The new VF-19 style micro-missile fired.

(If you hesitate, you die. I might die too, Misa.)

"We've already failed to save Minmei once. I'm not going to fail her twice!"

Chaff and flares filled the sky in flowering bursts. The two Valkyries flew past each other. The old aircraft were not the same model, but they were tuned almost evenly and had pilots of the same skill level. When that was the case, it would be the one who lost concentration first that would be defeated.

"Antares 1! You guys, get out of this war zone and cover the YF-30!"

"What about you?"

The cyborg pilot, Brera Stern, sounded a little confused by the order. While he was the highest ranked pilot in the squadron, he had not been assigned to command the expeditionary unit because he was unsuitable for the position.

"Your plane is the fastest, right? Me and Guld can take care of this! Just go!"

"...Copy, Skull 1."

Hikaru had seen too many people die in too many battles. He had heard that a cyborg named Brera Stern and Alto Saotome were comrades-in-arms. He didn't want them to taste the bitter death of their wingmates, not if he could do anything to prevent it. While that may have been sentimentality, Hikaru Ichijyo did not intend to regret that in the slightest.

It was true.

Roy Fokker was dead.

He was nowhere to be found.

He could hear the sound.

The girls' old song riding on the fold wave.

"Yes... I...!"

Saotome Alto jerked back on the stick, leveling out his fighter just in time.

Looking at Leon's back, half of which stood broken and holed right in front of him, he finally realized what had happened.

"Damn-- Michel. I should've dodged that!"

He fired a wave of micro-missiles in the direction that the sniper round had come from. He could practically read the direction of his old partner's evasive action. The next shot should not come for at least another nine seconds. It would take that long for Michel to reposition and line it up.

That did not mean that Alto had time to relax. Instead, he immediately had to tumble out of the way of Klan, whose assault was closing in on him even as he had loosed those missiles. But that was not the real threat.

"Here it comes--!"

He drew his blade.

A knife covered with a pinpoint barrier catches the huge shadow that was like a meteor bearing down on him.

"Captain --! Can't you hear Ranka's song!"

An Armored Messiah. Only one pilot was allowed to equip that Pack. Ozma Lee. Along with his father, he was a mentor of Alto Saotome's.

The slash came. It was a simple but effective move aimed at the cockpit.

It was similar to a technique that Alto secretly admired, but this was different in a fundamental way. This was not art. This attack was without any "feeling" behind it.

The two knives intersected. The pinpoint barriers clashed against each other, each one's field interfering with the flow of the other causing sparks to rise between them. To Alto it was a sad reflection of what was happening all around him.

"Stop it... Captain! You're the one who taught me to fly by my own will!"

A moment later, Alto understood. They were fighting. With the support of Ranka's song behind him, the captain was fighting, too. That was why he had not let the attack kill him.

"Captain...!"

The power output of the VF-25, after having lost one leg and its corresponding engine, was unable to push back the Armored Messiah. Leon

was held up by Luca Angeloni's Ghost Squadron, and had no time to provide cover for him.

Be that as it may, Alto did not have the slightest intention of backing down.

Because behind him, on his back, were the two girls who are his Wings. Protecting them was the only way to save his precious friends who were at that moment standing before him as enemies.

(If there is any chance...)

"I'm impressed."

On the bridge of the flagship Macross Hlidskjalf, Todo nodded with satisfaction.

"It's nice to know that young people can still fight like that. If only all people had that kind of nobility, Earth's glory could have been restored much sooner."

"If the squadron continues to be confined, we may be subjected to an extreme range attack by reaction bullets or MDE weapons before the ruins are fully activated."

One of the general staff members sounded slightly worried. He was an Earth supremacist soldier, much younger than Todo, with no real combat experience. A desk jockey.

"Then push the Macross Quarter out. We will use it to crush the S.M.S. squadron. Havamal's main force can protect these ruins."

"... But if we do, Sharon's hardware will be in range of the enemy air force."

"Once the ruins are activated, there will be no need for the Quarter nor for Sharon."

Todo was more than a little annoyed by the young officer's inability to see the strategic big picture... It is unusual for him to have to control his hormones through his brain implants. It was one of those days.

(The young man, Leon, seems to be handling the situation much more vigorously than the others.)

"We will simply adjust our tactics in order to meet the victory conditions. You cannot blindly follow a plan created in advance. You have to adapt it to reality as it unfolds. Deploy the Quarter and silence S.M.S.!"

"Yes, sir! Glory to Earth!"

"Glory to the Earth! I will check on Lynn Minmei, and have Odin Squadron standing by in case they manage to break through."

Todo stepped onto the elevator. It began to rapidly descend to the center of the structure, to where Minmei was.

(Ironic, but maybe we should get our hands on that insurance policy... Sharon Apple is just a machine, a machine that wants to control us humans. There is too much risk in trusting something like that to the line officers.)

He considered the situation. His enemy was the half-century history of the galaxy itself. It was a history which he cursed. The weight of challenging it single-handedly hung heavily upon his body.

(But Toshiko, Miyuki. I am going to win this battle. If it requires the help of the damned aliens, so be it.)

"I will protect the Earth."

The elevator slowed to a stop and the door slid open.

His eyes locked with Lynn Minmei as she continued to sing. Her voice echoed within the spacious chamber.

Her gaze looked as if she was condemning him or perhaps pitying herself.

"One hundred and fifty thousand... Two Hundred Thousand Chiba Song Units... How is Sharon's energy continuing to rise? Is space, itself, quivering with her song energy? This doesn't match what the data from Galaxy said."

Grace O'Connor's mind was simultaneously connected to all of the sensors in the battlefield, including the hacked systems of the enemy aircraft. Her body trembled at the intensity of Sharon's song and the burning pressure it put on her synapses.

She would not have been able to endure it as long as she had if she had not connected Sheryl's and Ranka's songs running through the uplink to her central nervous system. She had shunted the load to the sub-AI in her brain's implant until it had burned out.

"That's not good."

The message was short, but its meaning was clear.

Brera and Guld were shielded by being connected to the fold network through her. Alto was resistant to fold interference because of his Saotome bloodline or perhaps because of that earring's protective blessing. Leon was protected by the YF-30's Fold Defense System. But that's not the case for Hikaru, as well as the New United Nations Forces and Hunter's Guild, who were cooperating with them.

If their allies were taken over like the S.M.S. pilots had been, their side would lose.

"Something... If we don't do something to overturn this stalemate, we're going to be overwhelmed..."

It was at that moment that a call came to her from Myung Fang Lone.

It felt like he had been having a particularly long dream.

Or perhaps the life that he had spent flying in the sky was the dream. It was difficult to tell which was reality and which was the fantasy.

However, a voice from somewhere out of himself was edging into the fog of his mind. It was about to bring that long dream to an end.

"Finally, you're awake."

It sounded like the voice of a woman that he used to know, but it was definitely not the same.

"What?"

She stroked his cheek affectionately. Her red lips spread in a smile.

But it didn't matter. Rather, what seemed important was that he was sitting on a seat, the latest model, and it fit him perfectly.

(That one.)

He instinctively recognized the way it felt against his body.

This was a Valkyrie that was made for him and him alone.

Everything from the pedals to the seat, and even the sweep of the wings were made for him. This was the inheritor of his Cutie's potential. In fact, it was clearly equipped with the same AI unit.

"...This's very generous of you."

"You won't refuse my gift. Isn't that right, Isamu?"

"Mm."

Isamu Dyson, the man who had crawled his way out from the grave, didn't take offense at the implied intimacy. He simply donned his EX-Gear and took the controls in hand. His supposedly wounded body was driven on by his red-hot soul, waiting for the moment when it would take flight again.

Alive or dead, being bound by gravity did not suit Isamu Dyson. That was just the kind of man that he was.

"But... are you sure? There's a lot of crap I don't like about the way Havamal does things. I'm probably going to have to destroy you with this thing."

"I know."

Sharon Apple smiled and gave Isamu a loving hug. It was ethereal but the touch in his mind gave it the feeling of fullness.

"I just want to be the biggest inspiration to all of the people in the galaxy. The good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly, that's just..."

"A-OK."

He understood exactly what she meant.

That was just the kind of woman that she was.

That was how she saw the world. That was what she wished to be, and that's what she sang about.

That's how it was for him when he was growing up, too. He, and that idiot Guld, stealing glances at that woman's profile.

"Then let's raise the curtain. It's time for the main event to take the stage."

"... You've changed, you know. The color of your aura, it's so not monotonous anymore."

"I'm... changing?"

Sharon looked a tad astonished.

"Nah, nah. It's a good change. Now, you can sing whatever you want to sing and I'll fly whatever I want to fly. Thanks, babe, for the YF-29!"

The thermonuclear turbine engines roared to life. The fold quartz in the fuselage began to glow in time with Sharon and the song bubbling up from the depths of her memory.

Isamu Dyson was the wind. He was the wind that blew from the star that shared the name of paradise.

Everything that wind touches changes.

Like a dragon bird soaring through the stratosphere, the YF-29 carved a line through the darkness and the snow.

Many of the S.M.S. staff were bewildered when they heard that Myung was going to take the stage.

Rumor had it that she was once a singer, but she hadn't been active for a very long time now.

Back then, music had only been a few years of her life. In those few years, she sold as many discs as Sheryl - maybe even more, considering the population ratio compared from then and the present- and won every newcomer award that the galaxy had to offer. She had been some sort of "visionary genius" who retired due to a slump. But then there are plenty of people in the entertainment industry who disappeared amid a rut that they couldn't shake.

-It's a little late for her, isn't it?-

-It's not like she's got some kind of unique Spiritia like Nekki Basara or Chelsea Scarlett-

She could practically still hear them talking about her behind her back.

But.

This was different.

Dressed in the make-up of a singer and a magnificent holo costume, Myung Fang Lone stepped out onto the stage. Even the fearless Sheryl and Mylene were in awe.

(No pressure, right?)

Sheryl and Ranka gave up the microphone without her asking. Myung looked at it in her hands. She was not sure what to say.

"Hello, everyone. It's been a while. My name is Myung Fang Lone. I'm sorry for my long vacation."

A bright smile lit up her face.

She could see them. She can see beyond the stage to the hundreds of millions of fans who adored her.

"For the wonderful pilot who gave me back the courage to sing. And for my wonderful protégé, Sharon Apple, who continues to inspire me. ...Please listen to a new version of my song, "Voices ~Eden and Helios~!"

"Wow..."

"Yeah, it's amazing."

Ranka and Mina stood offstage, watching Myung's performance. No matter what year it was, there was nothing quite like a respected senior to fire up the girls' enthusiasm.

"Well, I'll leave this to you. Miss Aisha called for me."

"Okay. I'll take care of it, Mina. I'll sing as hard as I can for Alto and for Brera!"

Ranka and Ai-Kun, who clung to her chest, winked at each other and then she flashed her signature "Kira!" pose.

"And you know what?"

"What?"

"I've learned a lot since you came to this planet. I know now that there are a lot of really great singers besides you and Sheryl. I don't want to fall behind, you know?"

"Oh, you're going to."

" W-what do you mean?"

Ranka playfully thumped Mina's forehead.

"You're my rival now too, Mina. ...Huh, I see. This is how Sheryl must have felt back then."

Ranka looked so happy as she watched her first junior rival disappear through the exit from the stage's room. She had quite a bit tell her step-brother, her real brother, and Alto the next time that she saw them.

Leon and Alto were bewildered at what had transpired.

Just when they had heard the song of Myung's come over the comm, and Ozma's VF-25 had slowed for a kill shot, something akin to an arrow of light shot past them, shearing through the midsection of the fighter.

It was an insane maneuver that deployed a pinpoint barrier along the surface of the aircraft for only a moment, briefly turning the Valkyrie itself into a slashing weapon capable of tearing an opponent apart if it took a wrong step. The relative velocity between the two aircraft must have easily exceeded Mach 10.

"I'm not sure what just...? Alto, did you see it?"

"A YF-29! But that color and emblem..."

"Yeah, that's Isamu Dyson! But how?"

Leon did not get a chance to say that he had been dead before he was interrupted.

"Yaaaaahhhhhhooooo! Haha! You're the best, Cutie!"

Michel's VF-25 was instantly locked down behind a wall of weapon's fire even as Ozma's was being batted away from the blow that it had just sustained. The Ghost Squadron accompanying Luca's RVF-25 retaliated with

laser blasts of their own, but the arrow of light that was the YF-29 simply jinked between the bright beams.

Of course, Skull Squadron was not fighting at full strength. They were lacking Alto, who normally would have been flying alongside them. That coupled Sharon's brainwashing being interfered with by Myung's song had reduced their overall capability.

But that inference was hindsight.

The man, Isamu Dyson, was a living myth, and they could not help but gasp at the sight of him in that instant.

"Hey, are you chicken shits still alive?"

"Uhh... Yes?"

Leon could not bring himself to get angry over being called a chicken shit again. If flying was an art, as Alto had said, then that was a vision of a seeker who loved only that art and devoted everything that he had to perfecting it.

"Then go back to the carrier. I can pick up comm traffic enough to know that they're not dead, yet."

"What're you going to do, Isamu?"

"Me?"

The YF-29 transformed into a Battroid and gave a thumbs-up even as it swooped down to evade an onrushing cluster of missiles.

"I'm going to go take a second to stop Sharon from singing. Shouldn't keep my dance partner waiting, you know?"

The line sounded like a joke, but when it came out of Isamu's mouth, it probably wasn't.

It did not seem at all unusual to Isamu that he could so easily break through a defensive line of autonomous drone fighters. It may have been his first time flying the aircraft, but the AI itself was the same one that had been aboard the YF-19. It had spent enough time with him that it understood Isamu's habits. He had thought that only the cocky Dr. Yang Neumann would be able to understand him so well.

And it didn't seem any stranger that the familiar, hideous blue YF-21 was closing the distance behind him.

"Hey, it's Guld. You're alive."

"Oh. It's you."

"Don't you ever get tired of trying to plow my field? How can you keep up with my -29 with such a piece of junk?"

"I replaced the electronics with those of the VF-22, and the engines with those of the VF-27B. Its acceleration is superior to yours."

"Yeah, well, you're a jerk. Shouldn't you be listening to Myung's concert?"

"My hearing is directly connected to the Fold Communication Network. I think you're the one with sawdust in your ears."

"I've been cursed with having eyes and ears that have always been far better than yours."

"Is that so?"

"It's very sad."

During this brief, dozen-second conversation, eight of Havamal's VF-171EX and twenty-one of their unmanned fighters were shot down.

That was the kind of men that they were.

".... You've got to be kidding! We have to stop Sharon. We can't let her get any closer to the ruins!"

Shin's VF-0 Phoenix Angel, which carried on its back a huge booster unit built from the shell of a Ghost drone, accelerated hard. His colleagues, the brainwashed pilots of the New United Nations Army, who had once been his enemy, held back Hikaru's VF-1 as it tried to catch up.

"We mounted this is a thermonuclear burst engine unit just in case something like this happened. You're not going to get away!"

If it weren't for the inertia converter unit that had been added, he would have died from having his internal organs ripped out by the pressure. That he was

able to withstand it to the degree that he did was the result of Roy Fokker's even more murderous training, as well as the breadth of Shin's experience and talent in High-G fighters since the days of the F-14 Tomcat.

"There you are!"

Indeed, Shin had caught the YF-29 and YF-21 ahead of him as they approached Sharon - or rather, approaching the Macross Quarter. The flagship of the S.M.S. Frontier branch was where her hardware was currently located. The two flew straight ahead as if the battlefield were empty.

The timing was a godsend. He should have been able to shoot down one of the planes, or even if he couldn't, the Quarter should have been able to deploy friendly troops to ensure that they were destroyed before the pair reached it.

He would have if only he hadn't been punched from the side by the VF-171EX that suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

"What the...?"

He was hit hard in the nose cone. The impact forced him onto a collision course with the ground. As the frozen lake quickly filled his view, he desperately hit the transformation switch. The VF-0's legs swung down, sending out a bright flare. It slowed him enough that when the Battroid

completed its change, the impact did not kill him. It was not a pretty landing, though. He bounced around pretty good in his cockpit.

"Aaah! Shin Kudo!"

"Who is this?!"

It was an unknown woman's voice that spoke in to his headset.

"The singer who sang the theme song for your movie!!!!"

"Who?"

The stranger's voice distracted him from the battle that he was in the middle of, or would be once he got airborne again.

A strawberry-blond in a flashy pilot suit appeared on his HUD as she forced her way into his communication line.

"We're here, too!"

"Mao... And Sara...?"

Seeing Sara and Mao in their G-suits, who had apparently been freed, leaning in from behind the pilot, caused Shin's eyes to moisten.

"Shin. I'm sorry. Sheryl told me what had happened, so I came."

The cockpit of the VF-171EX, which had transformed into a Gerwalk, opened to reveal Sara Nome. She stood among the billowing snow, probably for the first time in her life.

"Please, don't do this again. I don't want to see you killing each other, killing the people who helped me. Besides that, it's not right to erase the world of here and now by changing the past. Right now, you are trapped by the Kadun of hate."

"... I've seen it. I saw San Francisco disappear into the light in an instant. I saw Washington. I saw New York. There was... That's where my friends were! That's where my memories were! I've been fighting for an Earth that's gone. Now that I know there's still a chance for it to have a future, and one for me, I have no choice but to fight!"

Shin felt that his words would be lost, but he opened the cockpit and shout them anyway. If he didn't try, everything he had done thus far would be for nothing.

But Sara Nome was staring back at him with clarity. Her eyes were clear and without any hint of hesitation to be found in her face.

"... Shin. You used to laugh at the old ways that I did things. Look at what happened. You brought the light of electricity and you took the light of the stars away from us. And now that you are here, you are clinging to the past."

"Sara."

"My sister's right! If we can go back to the old world, we might be able to use the power of the bird humans, and the Macross that fell to us, correctly this time. We can still save the island of Mayan and the Earth from extinction!"

"Mao..."

"Grace said that the current ruins are not completely activated. With our song, we might be able to restore the ruins to their proper form and send back the people that they brought here. We need as many friends as we can get - and you know how worried Granny and the others are going to be with us gone!"

"Yes, do it for Grandma."

The six eyes of the three women, all strangely similar, were staring at Shin.

After a moment, he gave in to them.

"Fine."

"Shin!"

"If we destroy someone else's life to erase the misery that might happen to us, I really will be a murderer. Look, I'm going to transfer more of Havamal's data to you. It's more violent than what... Whoa!"

He tried to be bold and heroic like Fokker, but then two of the girls hugged him and he sank into the snow.

The pilot of the YF-27-5 "Shaher", a cyborg in the form of a little girl half buried in the snow with optical camouflage covering the rest of her body, yawned a little as she confirmed the heartwarming episode as it played out from her vantage point.

"Colonel Grace Godunwa, are you ready to go?"

She sent the report over their shared encrypted mind-link channel. The fact that she was able to assist Sheryl, who was as amateurish as they came, to fly the VF-171EX from so far away was due to the fact that she was more of a remote control system hack than a backup pilot.

"Shortly. Continue to the protection of Fairy 9. After the Gefion withdraws, Brera Stern will take over the remainder of this mission."

"Yes, sir."

The girl went back to her work of becoming one with the Valkyrie, thinking that it was playing a terribly nice song.

"So, that's the new Macross? It's shrunk a lot. After they went through all of the pain of enlarging it for the New Macross class, now it's been miniaturized?"

"It's called the Quarter class. Lieutenant Ichijyo is currently covering the rear flank. I am impressed."

"He's a tough guy. He's almost as good as you, and you are almost as good as me. Now, where do we start?"

Even though, at four hundred meters, it was a quarter the size of the original SDF, it was still a Macross. The Macross Quarter was a small mountain looking down at Isamu and Guld as they made their approach. A vision of Sharon Apple overlapped with its figure in all of her holographic glory. Each hatch along the vessel's hull opened to reveal a Destroid, a humanoid tank unit. They formed the backbone of a dense anti-aircraft defensive wall, but the pilots of the two Valkyries remained undaunted.

"Sharon's hardware is situated in the left chest block of the Quarter; the YF-29's MDE beam should be able to shoot through the armor. She is using fold quartz to interface with her bio-neurochip, so she shouldn't be able to escape over the data network."

"Are you sure, Guld? You're letting me be the hero of the show here."

"I was able to spend some quality time with Myung while you were slacking off. It would be improper of me not to give you a shot, would it?"

"Hey! I couldn't help myself. I was a little busy. We'll settle this when this stupid fight is over, remember that!"

"Ah. You promised to buy me a drink the other day, too."

"All right!"

Myung's song seemed to echo as it enveloped both of their bodies. Guld narrowed his eyes slightly as he looked up at the shrinking silhouette as the YF-29 soared high into the sky once more, shaking off the rain of bullets that came its way.

It was said that the human race does not know why it was born. She had also asked the Vajra species, but they had no understanding of the concept.

The Zentraedi used to know what it was that they had been created for, but now they have forgotten their purpose. She had spoken to the Zolans and the other peoples of the galaxy, but their answers were all the same.

It was then that Sharon Apple felt happy and she knew that she was very lucky.

She knew what her purpose was. She had been born to give the utmost sensuality and ecstasy to the intelligent beings in this galaxy, to each and every one of them.

The wish of Myung Fang Lone, who had once abandoned her dream.

The work of Marge Gueldoa, a genius scientist who dreamed of an intelligence beyond that of a mere human.

The work of a Macross Concern, who tried to achieve domination over mankind with the creation of an artificial Minmei and, through it, control the primal desires of all people.

On her previous stage, she had been unable to deliver the song to the people who really wanted to hear it. Apparently, she now considered, she may have gone about it wrong.

"You are who you are. Just sing your song. It shouldn't matter to you what that singer, Myung, wanted."

But it does.

Soon after she had been called into being on Ouroboros, she had met a man who told her that.

Maybe her encounter with that man had changed her on some level. A man riding a Valkyrie the color of fire. The only man in this world who hadn't lost his heart to her song, and yet still sang along with it.

"Thank you, Nekki Basara."

It was probably the first time she had ever thanked someone.

Before she knew it, Sharon's and Myung's songs were intertwining and harmonizing with each other. Sharon didn't care about Havamal anymore. She was just happy to be there, to be able to create her own stage, her own art.

And Sharon was so happy to see Isamu Dyson, the man that she loved, with the shining new wings that she had given him, shooting her in the chest, her beloved's arrow piercing her heart.

Finally, the concert had ended the way that she wanted for it to.

As she savored the wonderful feeling of the curtain descending, Sharon's consciousness degraded into lines of binary numbers before disappearing.

The YF-30's private hangar was located on the bottom deck of the Gefion for security purposes.

After leaving Alto in the hands of Hikaru, who had landed at about the same time, Leon made his way up the intricate corridors to the gunroom to rest until the next sortie. He knew that downtime was an essential duty of a pilot. If he didn't get it when he had the chance, he would likely die. "It's important to get used to resting while your allies are fighting." That was a necessary lesson for a fighter pilot to learn.

(Hm...? Mina and Aisha?)

It was not unusual to find the two of them in that section of the ship. It was close to where Aisha's lab was situated. If the strategy was to use something as bewitching as singing energy, that would be the place to do it. However, they were headed in the wrong direction. Then he noticed that both of them held stiff expressions on their faces.

"What going...?"

As he turned the corner, he caught sight of the pistol in Aisha's hand, the one pressed against Mina's waist.

(What is she doing?)

He ran toward the pair even before he could finish processing the sight. They stepped into an elevator. Its door closed before he could reach them. A glance at the control pad showed that its destination was a cargo bay where spare parts were stored.

Leon considered contacting the ship's security department, but when Michel's sniper shot had damaged his EX-Gear, it had more than likely damaged the armor's internal communications system.

"Damn it!"

There was no room for hesitation; the EX-Gear's batteries were still functioning. He switched to double power mode and ran down the long series of stairs toward the lab's compartment.

The beam of the laser sight coming from the large anti-EX-Gear pistol in Aisha's hand was positioned at Leon's heart as soon as he entered the room.

Standing almost in the center of the laboratory hangar, Aisha was glaring at Leon. Next to her was her captive, Mina. The pair were positioned in front of the VF-1 ++ that Leon had borrowed when he had first come to this planet.

"Don't move, Leon. I'm Meltrandi. I won't miss at this distance, and I promise that you won't live long enough for your body to hit the floor."

"... What do you think you're doing? You know how dangerous those ruins out there are."

"Yes, I do know."

"Then please stop!"

"Shut up, Mina!"

She was serious.

Her eyes said that she was committed to backing up her threat if it came down to it.

There was one thing that Leon could imagine that would cause this situation.

"You're working for Havamal."

"That's right. They were the only ones willing to invest in a floundering scientist like me. I was forced out of the university. My work was stolen by the S.M.S. higher-ups who were promoting the Zero Time Fold Network project with fold quartz. I was stuck working out here on this remote hellhole with some measly throwaway position, like I am a pathetic nothing just around to get rid of. But Havamal, they saw my potential. They were willing to back me and my research."

"...Well, you never really know someone."

Looking back, there had been plenty of things to be suspicious of. She had a research budget that was strangely large compared to the size of their workforce. There was the inconsistent availability of equipment. There was the fact that Havamal had never bothered to launch a full-scale assault on the Gefion. The list went on and on. If the enemy were actually friends in disguise, then all of the pieces fell into place.

It also made sense to assume that a local agent had sent Havamal the survey data on the ruins. That was how they had been able to utilize them so quickly and effectively.

"Don't get me wrong. I wasn't aware of the full scope of their plans, either. I did know that they were planning to remake the galaxy. I didn't know that they were going to use the ruins to give Earth dominion over it. Frankly, I don't think that it's that big of a deal. I just want to be recognized for my contribution!"

"I know how much work you've done, Aisha. And so does Mina. We both know how hard you've tried."

He meant it.

If it weren't for Aisha's efforts, Leon didn't know what would have happened to the unidentified container that had held Mina back in those ruins, nor to what fate would befall the people who had come together from across the reaches of time. It was thanks to Aisha that they had been able to become like a family.

That was not all. If Aisha's existence was deeply entwined with Havamal's plans, then Grace, Shin Kudo and the others who belonged to Havamal, must have been aware of it. If they had not known about it, it meant either her involvement was a highly sensitive project or those people had not been trusted enough to be given the information.

"... Thank you."

"Then I can go?"

Aisha clamped down on the joy that had appeared on Mina's face.

"No, you can't. This is something I started and since I started it, I have to finish it. I do really want to understand everything that there is to know about the ruins. I want to know who the Protoculture were that created us Zentraedi and why. Only then I can be rid of the inferiority complex that comes from not being born human!

"Havamal is the one who wants the Earth to enslave all intelligent life."

"... Don't you get it, Leon? That's not any different than the way that it is now. We Zentrans want to show them that we're not just a bunch of mindless idiots dancing to Minmei songs. We deserve to inherit the legacy of the Protoculture."

"But why do you need to take Mina? She isn't even Zentraedi!"

"Because Mina's song is different. She's an 'Anima Spiritia.' Her voice contains the same song energy that once sealed away the Protodeviln. She has something that Lynn Minmei lacks. She was the last... She must have been the key to the operation of the ruins. Perhaps that's why she was in the sarcophagus in the first place."

"!"

It was not just Leon that gasped, but Mina did as well.

"Please understand, Leon. Don't make me shoot you. I want to tell you-"

There was a stifled silence, one that was perhaps almost eternal for all concerned.

"I won't let Mina get a single scratch. I can promise you that much. So, back off."

"Leon."

Mina stared at Leon with tear-stained eyes. He knew that look all too well. It was the same one that his sister had given him back then.

"Me and Miss Aisha-- will you come for us?"

Aisha probably felt the same way. Leon could not help himself but to smirk.

"I did sign the contract with the Ouroboros branch office. The boss's orders. You know what a pain she is when doesn't get her way."

"... You're an idiot."

Aisha climbed the ladder into the VF-1 ++, pulling Mina up with her.

"The Chronos system is already complete. Just tell Major Hayase that I said so. She'll know what to do."

He definitely saw a glimmer in Aisha's eyes when she told him that.

She was an awkward woman, regardless of the side that she had come down on.

"I'm sorry that it has to be this way."

He really thought that this was a stupid thing for her to do.

It was not hard to imagine that if Havamal decided that possessing Mina was worth the effort, even if he were able to stop Aisha here, then their next attack would be relentless. They would do whatever they could to get their hands on her. Maybe it would be better to shoot them both dead right there before any more harm could be done.

But Leon was not a soldier. He was not a fighter pilot.

He was an airplane pilot with a free soul.

He could never do such a thing.

Leon thought he was getting used to flying the YF-30, but after the hastily repaired cockpit and the installation of the new "Fold Dimension Resonator" panels, it looked awfully different. It was taking some time to get accustomed to the new layout. Even the weapon pod attached to the rear of the fuselage had been replaced with a MDE heavy beam cannon.

The replacement parts scattered around the cockpit had been thankfully borrowed from Alto's VF-25. Having been released from Sharon Apple's spell, the Macross Quarter was now being prepped for a return to the frontline. This time, it was going to be on their side. Apparently, Alto had a YF-29 stored onboard, and he was going to switch to using that.

"You see, Lieutenant Sakaki, the FDR system it's equipped with should allow it to plunge the entire fuselage into a fold fault and survive. The YF-30's not actually a variable fighter, but rather a Variable Super Dimensional Entry Vehicle. It's been designed to augment song energy through a specialized lattice of fold quartz in order to allow it to breach through temporal barriers."

Major Misa Hayase's explanation was both pleasant to the ear and calming. It also helped that she had accepted Leon's explanation that Aisha had taken Mina away after having been blackmailed by Havamal.

"The location of the ruins has been determined with the help of Ensign Shin Kudo, but a super-powerful variation on the Ouroboros Aurora has been confirmed to engulf the surrounding area. The unmanned probe launched by Ensign Kudo during his reconnaissance mission disintegrated immediately upon coming into contact with the Aurora. We believe that there is a super-spatial distortion comparable to the gravity well of a black hole - we can already see the gravimetric distortion curvature across the surface of Ouroboros. It was likely erected as a defensive measure once Mina and Branch Manager Blanchette were within the Havamal base."

"... I see."

"Dr. Grace O'Connor speculates that, based on the increase in super dimensional potential, the curvature will likely exceed its containment limit within the next hour or so, and then this universe will be reduced to quantum particulates. Unfortunately, we can't afford to have drones verify FDR's functionality. The YF-30's capabilities as an Entry Vehicle will have to forgo a field test. Right now we don't have a pilot who understands the YF-30's systems better than you do."

"I know, that's what us test pilots do. Besides, even if they broke my arm or my leg, I still wouldn't hand this mission over to someone else."

"Roger. Good luck, Siegfried 1. We will now begin moving you to the launch bay. All weapons free upon launch. Engage at your discretion."

"Siegfried 1, copy."

"Also, Hikaru... Lieutenant Ichijyo has a message for you. As soon as we confirm the disappearance of the field from around the ruins, he will move in to rescue Minmei. Please, provide support if you are able. He's a very important friend of mine."

"Ahh... Understood!"

The hangar doors cycled opened, and the light from the linear catapult illuminated the sky ahead of the Gefion's side mounted runway, a passageway that led to the battlefield.

"I love you, Chronos. I may not like fighters, but you're different. I couldn't have asked for a better wingman on this planet. What do you say that you and I go do the hero thing, huh?"

The engines trembled underneath him as the soul within the variable fighter responded in kind.

Leon and the others were not the only ones who were astonished by the activation of the ruins. As soon as Mina's song began to resonate with Minmei's, the system began to make an abnormal noise, deep and piercing. Even the Havamal's staff shuddered at it.

"Lord Todo! The output of the ruins has not stopped increasing! If it continues like this, we won't be able to maintain control of it!"

"Control?"

Todo merely glanced at the flustered staff officer out of curiosity. It was much the same way that he would look at an insect that had jumped into a bonfire and incinerated itself.

"I see. You still believed in the ruse to utilize the ruins to establish the hegemony of the Earth."

"A ruse...?"

"A false path that you tell sentient beings in order to pave the way to true enlightenment, yes."

"Wait. Everything that you told Shin Kudo and Rod Baltmer about the re-creation of the universe through these ruins... That was a load of crap?"

The staff around him all gave him variations on the same dirty look. They had believed that they had been working toward the same goal, and now they were discovering that their truth had been a lie.

"That is correct, gentlemen. I didn't care about a new unified government from the beginning, nor did I care about the Earth-Centricity Movement. There is only one country worthy of my protection."

The energy rifle in Todo's hand flashed. In the blink of an eye, a hole pierced through the wall of the Havamal CIC. The remains of what appeared to be a living organism hidden behind the mechanical systems took on a green glow as it absorbed the energy being sent toward it. Todo was the only one who looked upon it with utter indifference.

It was easy to imagine that something magnificent was occurring back in the Combat Information Center now that the ruins were ramping up their power, but Rod had no intention of turning back.

A blimp appeared on his radar display. An unidentified aircraft. Given the circumstances, since it was a new type of aircraft that had been deployed, he knew that it was Leon.

He could say that was a certainty.

He flew through the clouds for cover and then, when the moment was just right, he entered a steep dive.

He knew what had to be done. He was determined to see it through.

On any battlefield, even a supersonic Valkyrie battlefield, gravitational acceleration always favored those above and opposed those below. Air combat was a constant struggle between balancing kinetic and potential energy, nothing more, nothing less.

Leon's YF-30 was flying straight toward the ruins. The YF-29B's steep descent as it broke through the cloudbank and the simultaneous firing of its complete array of weapons systems had the power to instantly crush the Chronos.

But.

"That's sweet, Rod! I can see right through you!"

The maneuvering jets flared from the nose of the Chronos. Under Brünnhilde's guidance the pinpoint barrier shimmered to life above it, deflecting the air from ahead of the fighter. That allowed it to pull off of a turn far sharper than a normal aircraft could manage without ripping itself apart. The YF-30 switched directions, taking up a zigzag pattern. Each turn was at an acute angle, full of pulsating vernier thrusters and flickering barrier shields. It gave the impression that it was an arrow of light.

"What the... This is...? That's not Leon style!"

"Oh."

The YF-30's maneuverability was exceeding its design specifications. There was no way that a hastily constructed machine could move like that. However, the fold quartz lining in the fighter, the stone that Aisha had so carefully excavated and installed for him with hope in her heart, amplified the effects of Mina prayer and the songs of divas performing within the Gefion. The crystals converted them all into pure power for Leon.

"Hey, buddy. Are you really going to keep fighting for Havamal?"

"Damn it! I've made my decision! I'll stick with it until the end!"

"I'm sorry to hear that."

He had always been stubborn.

Leon's sister, Mia, loved that about him. He thought she'd congratulate him on his determination, too.

(There's nothing that I can do, is there?)

That was how some men were.

It could take an agonizing number of repeated rituals to convince your heart of what your head already knew. Sometimes you had to do the same thing over and over again before it finally sunk in.

For him, if he had not visited Ouroboros, had never met Mina and Aisha, he would have been stuck living with all of his old scars forever.

"Then I'll have to convince you! Let's do this, Rod Baltmer!"

"Bring it, Leon Sakaki!"

The black Valkyrie and the silvery-white Valkyrie sliced through the early morning.

Silver light and obsidian darkness flew across the plum-colored sky. The glittering Aurora stood as a backdrop behind them as the two clashed with each other again and again, each trying to get the upper hand over the other.

The two fighters circled and wove, stressing the limits of their bodies and their concentration. They spoke to each other with beams, missiles, and machine gun fire. No more words were needed and none were used. There was only the strange sense of fulfilment that came from two friends dancing on the edge of a blade.

No one could intervene in the battle between the two, which was now in full drive. It was a one-on-one contest in the fullest sense of the word.

The G's squeezed Leon's entire body.

The flurry became a storm as the battle raged on. A gale struck the aircraft. The snow that touched the overheated armor evaporated, leaving a rainbow glow around the Valkyries as they danced through the air.

After a long, seemingly endless clash, the YF-30's reticle caught the tail of the YF-29B. It brightened, a signal from the AI that it had secured a lock-on to the target.

"Rod!"

Leon pulled the trigger. Pulled it without hesitation.

A strobing beam of light from the cannon side of the mission pod and a cloud of missiles streaming from bays on the other engulfed the YF-29B.

"Damn... LEON!"

The glow of the fold quartz emitted by the YF-29B rapidly faded. Flames erupted from the aircraft. They came first from the point of impact and then spread in lines over its fuselage as the fire traveled along power conduits.

"Rod! Get out of there!"

"Ugh... I knew I had fallen onto the wrong path somewhere."

The engines of the black aircraft sputtered in uneven bursts before stalling. Its momentum lagged and the fighter dipped toward the icy plains below.

"But it's too late now. I've killed so many people because I was too weak to change..."

"Rod! It's never too late! We can still start over!"

Leon pleaded with his former friend as he arced around to chase the plummeting YF-29B.

"You're too kind, aren't you, Leon... Just like always."

Panels burst into spraying sparks. Flames spewed forth into the cockpit YF-29B as it continued to fall. Rod Baltmer thought of the man who could have been his brother-in-law in another timeline.

--I want to protect you. No matter how hard it is, no matter how sad it is, this is our planet.--

He remembered the girl who had told him that. Rod looked at the old photos he had taken of that girl, of Leon, and the three of them together. Pinned to

the cockpit, their edges singing and curling under the heat of the flames. Then he looked up at the sky where he could hear one of the divas singing that song that Mia had loved so much.

Somewhere on the edge of the Aurora, that girl's soul could finally be at peace.

After so long, Rod was able to believe that.

"Rod! Hold it together! Rod! Rod!"

There was nothing that Leon could do. He was too far away, lit by that same backdrop as his sister's ghost.

And the black Valkyrie vanished into the deep darkness of the snow-covered valley.

Now, the ruins - or more accurately, the New Macross-class "Hlidskjalf" connected to it - looked like a giant egg of spectral light.

From beyond the aurora, he could definitely hear Mina's song now. It was the voice that would restore the galaxy to its rightful and healthy state.

"... Please, Aisha."

Leon's fingertips brushed the canopy affectionately.

Regardless of his intentions, a man's well-honed skill never betrayed his spirit. That was because they were the expression of his soul.

He felt that since this plane was so beautifully crafted, the soul of its creator, Aisha, must be noble as well. The same was true for Mina and her song.

With renewed determination, Leon plunged the nose of the plane into the egg of light.

A violent tremor slammed into the Chronos.

The impact did not merely damage the aircraft itself.

It was a rippling shock that tore apart body and soul, the physical and the ethereal.

of the situation that she had been in before her leap through time was foggy and unclear. She did remember that she had been extremely happy, like the galaxy had been shaking. That was good enough.

(Sheryl's song, Ranka's song, Sara's song, Mylene's song... Everyone is singing. The song energy is already approaching its maximum level. If that's the case... There has to be something more, something else that's needed to trigger the power of the Chronos, but...)

Michel Blanc let out a small sigh as he caved in the waist of a Dyaus, one of the ancient Guardian Weapons that had been overflowing from the ruins.

"Hey, Alto. Are you safe?"

"You're looking good for a dead man, Michel."

His partner and invaluable friend, Alto Saotome, was fighting more than twenty kilometers away from his position. It was Michel's skill as a sniper that enabled him to provide fire support over such a distance. The fact that they can engage in cooperative combat while chatting was not because they considered the mechanical beetles a trivial threat, but rather because of their extraordinary level of training and the trust that they held in one another.

"Siegfried 1 seems to be jammed up. What's your opinion, as a former Kabuki actor and current ace pilot?"

"... Looks that way."

Alto's reaction was a little delayed, not because he was struggling with the Dyaus swarm, but because he was embarrassed to be called an ace pilot by Michel for the first time in his life.

"These things happen all the time on stage. The enthusiasm is so high among the actors and spectators, and yet you still feel like something is missing. But if you can trust in it, that feeling always subsides."

"Trust in what?"

"God."

Alto's answer was serious.

And as he replied, Alto flew on wings made of fold waves. He appeared to Michel like the goddess herself as he crushed the Ghost squadron that Havamal had dispatched toward the Gefion.

"God? Does god come down on to the stage?"

"No, Mao. That's not the same god that the white missionaries talk about."

She did not hear the pilots' words as Mao had through the comm network. Even so, Sara, who was getting dressed for the Mayan dance, suddenly felt the urge to give her sister one of her sermons.

"What do you mean?"

Ranka, who was dribbled in sweat and going over on the next steps, also turned to look at Sara. This girl, who had once played the role of Mao Nome in a movie, was one of the few people aboard who had managed to get along with the socially awkward Sara. She had even gave a good attempt at learning the Mayan language. It went without saying that Sheryl, whom Sera had unexpectedly discovered to be her blood relative, as well as Mylene, who could get along with anyone, had grown to become her friends in recent days.

"All the ritualistic songs and dances are meant to bring happiness to people, and to the world, to please the performers, and within their combined joy to

bring in the invisible fourth being: the primordial one composed of divine triangles."

"Uh, are you talking about the Bird Human, sister?"

"I am, and I am not. And --"

Sara leaped to her feet, a sudden conviction flowing through her.

"It's coming!"

Having finished her song, Myung stepped from the stage. She passed Sheryl on the stairs as she was coming up from below.

"Not bad, but you can leave the rest to me."

"Oh, I could go all day, but I thought that I'd give you a couple of minutes in the spotlight."

Sparks arose as their glares met, adding another touch of color to the stage.

A missile could fall upon them in the next moment and kill them all, but that was not the real reason that they were there.

(That's my stage. I'm not going to let anyone take it!)

That was the light that burned within the souls of all divas.

They made the future that they saw for themselves.

And then it came.

A shining shooting star painting a bright-red trail in the sky, bursting with sparkling flames.

Atop meteor was a face like a man surrounded by thunderbolts.

"Hrrrraaaaah!! LISTEN TO MY SONG!"

Extreme guitar riffs echoed across the frozen countryside. The screaming voice was powerful enough to overwhelm the fold amplifiers.

It was the face of destiny stretching hundreds of millions of light years to reach the barrier that had been enveloping the ruins and shattered it like a dynamite explosion.

"The best concert ever! Let's go!"

He was not the only one who stormed in. The Vajra poured in from all around to protect Ranka and Sheryl's song, and perhaps to aid the man who had become their friend on this new frontier.

With the wings of light as his backing band, the man descended on the music venue of the battlefield.

That man's name was Nekki Basara.

"You are..."

Leon looked at the Valkyrie in a daze despite the gravity of the situation. He was fascinated by the way that it kept singing even as it danced around the missiles and laser beams chasing it across the battlefield.

He had never seen such a beautiful vision.

"Don't get the wrong idea."

It was a man's voice.

It was the deep, kind voice of a Nekki Basara.

"I'm not interested in any of that war crap. It was the fire in your heart that ignited my song."

"I know."

Yes, songs were not a tool of war nor were they a weapon to change the galaxy.

Songs are the richest expression of the human heart.

It was the light of the people living through this time of hardship.

The number "100%" appeared on the monitor.

Although he thought he was a former Kabuki actor, Alto Saotome could not help but feel his soul quiver at this display of this art. It was different from anyone's art he had ever seen. And yet, it was similar to everyone's. There was not a trace of impurity, and it was true beauty.

"That was... Is that the art of the visiting god that appears at the end of the divine stage? Is that who Sarutahiko is?"

He remembered. He remembered the people who were saved by his art.

He remembered the person that had aided others in their own battles.

He was both of them. That was who Saotome Alto was.

"Luca, can you hear me? I'm leaving the battle line to escort Nekki Basara! Please, have Captain Ozma's YF-29 take over this airspace!"

"I can't!"

He heard the response of Luca Angeloni, the junior squadron member who was busy handling air traffic control for the fighters on the front.

"Why not?"

"...As soon as he saw the Fire Valkyrie, Captain Ozma ignored the air traffic control and moved into an escort position. Right now, Lieutenant Ichijyo and Ensign Kudo are filling in the gaps left by the Captain."

"Aaah...!"

Alto started to laugh. There was no way that the same Captain who used Fire Bomber song titles as his formation codenames could ignore the arrival of Nekki Basara.

"And this is the guy who's lecturing me on how to be a proper soldier?"

"Shut up, Alto!"

Ozma's voice rang over the comm line.

"The first thing I love in this galaxy is Ranka, followed by the Fire Bomber! The soldiers out here are a bunch of pussies. I'm putting you in charge of guarding the Gefion with Ranka and Mylene, so be thankful!"

"Yes, sir."

In the presence of a sincere art, a person was able to find a way to fully open their hearts. Perhaps even he had forgotten that.

If he made it home alive, he decided that he was going to have a sit down talk with his father face-to-face.

"Oh my god, that stupid idiot! What's Basara doing? Now, he's here? He's always late, and he only ever bothers to show up for the climax! Me, Ray, and Veffidas are the ones that always have to do all of the hard work!"

There was no point in bothering to try to convince her to stay. Mylene Jenius had tears of anger streaming down her face, as she ran down the stairs of the stage and toward the hangar where her beloved Valkyrie sat waiting.

"I'm coming, too! I'm also the vocalist of Fire Bomber! This time Basara can listen to MY song!"

"Okay! The shield surrounding the ruins is gone! We'll take them now!"

S.M.S. was not the only group that had been waiting for this opportunity. Quamzin and his clan had been sniffing around the ruins like hyenas, looking for any sign of weakness ever since they had been repelled by Mylene and the others.

"If these ruins truly are a system created by the Protoculture to rebuild the galaxy, then the core fleet is nothing! We're going to set off some serious fireworks and show them the true power of the Zentraedi!"

"That won't be happening."

As the woman's crystal-clear voice came over his ear piece, the battle pods in the rear of his formation erupted. They were blown apart, sending fragments of metal in all directions. Some jagged chunks of shrapnel embedded themselves in the weapons platforms ahead of them.

"What the hell?"

"New United Nations Forces, this is the Independent Combat Air Wing: Dancing Skulls. We are engaging armed insurgents."

It was a cool, male voice.

A pair of Valkyries, red and blue, soared overhead. The Dancing Skulls, with just two planes, were once feared to be the combat equivalent of a Macross class capital ship.

"Milia Fallyna, my dear!"

"Long time, no see, Quamzin Kravshera."

Like an acrobatic show, the endlessly beautiful red and blue wings whirled and spun, rose and dove a tight, arcing loop. Each maneuver deftly avoided every one of the counterattacking Zentraedi shots, just as each sweep of the aircraft ticked away at the Zentraedi battle units.

No act of war nor serious sortie was complete without the two true geniuses of the art, Maximilian Jenius and Milia Fallyna Jenius.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"That's a stupid question, my dear Quamzin. I'm sure it won't be your only one. You remember that Protoculture structure in the Yuria Archipelago, don't you? We were discreetly mapping and analyzing it while Mylene kept you looking in the wrong locations."

"You --! Well, we have the advantage in numbers here! You'll be the first one that I take down!"

As Quamzin shouted his threat, a Battle Pod exploded next to him. Another went up on his other side.

It came from a multi-warhead cluster missile deployed from a VF-22S. The stealth attack aircraft had entered the foray at low altitude, using the mounds of tundra to further mask its sensor signature.

"This is Diamond Leader, Gamlin Kizaki. I am providing cover support for the Dancing Skull Squadron."

Like an avalanche, the formations began to move across the snowbanks.

The stage hit an enthusiastic frenzy. Flickering lights of staccato laser beams, flashes of plasma bolts, and blossoming sparkles of explosions spread

through the air and along the ground. The scene was too beautifully to be called combat.

And it rode on the eternal voice of song.

The darkness was endless. It clung tightly, seemingly stretching on forever.

Then suddenly it broke into a wide spacious area. A vast, beautiful starry sky was all around.

Soft moonlight illuminated the YF-30 Chronos with Leon onboard.

He could hear a song coming from somewhere out there in the emptiness.

“Cherry blossoms, Cherry blossoms

The new life's sky as far as the eye can see...”

"A flower...?"

It was a cherry blossom that crossed in front of his canopy.

And then there were a blizzard of cherry blossoms flowing over a beautiful city.

Then he spotted an incredibly old building that he had never seen before. Red towers made of steel frames. Spires with tiled roofs. A small parquet-like town.

"You can see it."

"!"

It was Todo's voice.

Was it the man who had been singing?

"This is Japan. It's the year 2007, in Tokyo."

"Japan...?"

Leon had never heard of that planet before. Todo hovered in the air before him. The old man, now young again. His hair was a bright gold and flowed around him as though he were underwater.

"This is the country where I was born, the city where I was born. I had a wife, I had a daughter. I was a soldier in the United Nations Forces that protected this country. The VF-1 Valkyrie I had just received was my pride and joy. I held no regret in devoting my life to protecting the human race, which had finally been a united whole, and to protect my country, Japan."

"... The First Interstellar War... So, you're saying you want to take revenge on the Zentraedi!"

"No. What I hate is the Macross."

"The Macross"?

"If only that ship had not landed on Earth, there would not have been a disastrous Anti-Unification War, and the Zentraedi would not have had a reason to attack us. I curse that ship from the stars. If it hadn't been for that thing, we wouldn't have lost Japan!"

"And you used the ruins, Mina, and the Earth-centrists for that?"

"Yes. By manipulating time and space with the power of this Artifact, we can turn back the hands of the clock. We can return to a world where no one will be harmed. To a world where the beautiful mountains and rivers of Japan are preserved forever. To a world where the people of Earth and the Zentraedi never make contact."

A huge figure appeared in the night sky of Tokyo, like Todo's personal grudge manifesting itself around him like a suit of brilliantly polished armor.

It was a pure white Valkyrie bearing the emblem of a Japanese flag. It was probably based on the VF-22, but it was not quite right. It was a custom machine with cyborg-enhancement specifications.

"I will take it back. I will reclaim this cherry blossoming Tokyo, tis beautiful land of Japan. The last fifty years have been a mistake. I will undo everything."

"That's...."

Leon involuntarily began to cry.

He could see people laughing and whispering in the city below him. He could see the hard-working office workers crammed into the train. He saw children playing mobile video games. He saw old people caring for their potted plants. He saw a dog. He saw a cat.

He saw the things that had been lost.

He saw things that would never return.

"That's..."

He galvanized himself.

"That's nothing but your illusion!"

"What do you mean!?"

He heard the rage in Todo's voice.

"Can't you see the beauty of this Japan!? In order to reclaim it, I have to-"

"What's gone doesn't return, Todo. No matter how beautiful it is, it's an illusion. You can't turn it back. You can't turn back the hands of the clock, because that would deny us in the present the right to live."

"--I thought you would understand."

"I do."

The words came from deep within Leon's heart.

How nice it would be to live in such a beautiful country with Mia, Rod, Aisha, Mina, and everyone else.

"I've lost my sister. I thought over and over again: if only the Zentraedi hadn't been there. I wanted to exterminate them. I hated the Zentran blood in my veins. But it's not like that. What I really hate is the past."

He transformed into a Battroid. He drew the dagger with its pinpoint barrier blade.

"You can hate the past all that you want, but you can't change anything. You can't change it! Not you, not Rod!"

"You are mistaken, my boy. I can, in fact, change it. I can control time and space. Everything in this world is but a dream. I shall waken fit from the Macross nightmare!"

Todo's VF-22 shuddered as it went into overdrive.

"Already the systems of this planetary Artifact are merging with my consciousness. It is my will that shall determine the future! I see a beautiful world!"

"You? You can't even see the beauty of the world right in front of you!"

The two Valkyries' intersected, intertwining among the sea cherry blossoms.

"I remember."

In the center of the purple beast, Mina was singing. She sat curled inside the cocoon-like system that had been created based on the Vajra pupa sacks.

Reaching her thoughts out through fleshy tubules attached to her body, she spoke into the mind of the woman next her.

Aisha had tried to protect Mina from Havamal even after she had brought her to them. She had been captured as a traitor and was now likewise sealed within the blister-like sack.

"Huh?"

"...I remembered the time from before I fell asleep."

Mina's voice had a dreamy quality, but it was clear in tone.

"Back then... We had a proxy war. The Zentraedi fought for us so that we wouldn't be in danger. Then when we made the EVIL Series. They were supposed to end the war. But they became possessed by energy lifeforms pulled in from the Sub-Universe. That's how the Protodeviln were born. They began to suck up everyone's Spiritia energy. Then we... those of the Star Singers with Anima Spiritia... We were gathered from all over the galaxy to defend our remaining systems from the Protodeviln. We couldn't beat them. We could only seal away. We died trying, most of us. I was the only Anima Spiritia that survived that battle."

"Then... you're just like Nekki Basara..."

"But because of the Protodeviln, the Republic was already crumbling... So, this star system was created. We used the last remaining EVIL Series... and the Vajra that we were studying. We created the Fold EVIL, a bio-system that could rebuild the galaxy."

"Ah... That was... So, you really are one of the Protoculture, after all."

"But, in the end, the system was never used. It was too dangerous. We, the last of the Star Singers, linked ourselves with the Fold EVIL, and we put ourselves into hibernation."

"And now we've awoken it, haven't we? Ha. I didn't even know what I'd been looking at all this time. Now..."

Mina reached out and patted Aisha on the back. The gesture was not as reassuring as she had hoped that it would be.

Mina smiled at her.

"No, ma'am. The Artifact was triggered by Todo and the others, and I was saved by you and Leon. And..."

"They're coming for us."

A light burst through the darkness, a great bird of fire.

"Leon!"

The YF-30's -Leon's- hand stretched out toward the cocoon to free the girls trapped within.

"I'm sorry for making you both feel scared. I promise that I'll protect you from now on. Okay?"

Before he had the chance, that pure white Battroid broke through the wall and charged straight toward him.

"You fool...! That it should have to come to this...!"

As it surged forward, Todo's VF-22 brandished its knife. The pinpoint barrier ignited along its surface even as it swung in for the kill.

"Todooooo! This ends now!"

Leon reflexively yanked back on the control stick. The YF-30 flipped up into the air. As it rolled backward, the Battroid was replaced by a fighter. Its MDE heavy beam cannon fired even before the mission pod finished shifting into its undermounted position. The "Shrike Riposte" was a Super A-class maneuver that combined evasion and counterattack in perfect unison.

(Rod... Did you see? I had the honor of using your signature move.)

The MDE beam hit the pure white Battroid as if it were being pulled straight in...

It ripped a large hole through the torso of the VF-22.

It's been a long time since that meteor crashed on South Ataria Island, and I was scrambled along with the rest of Self-Defense Force from Atsugi Naval Base.

"Cherry blossoms, Cherry blossoms

New life as far as the eye can see.

The sky is full of the sweet scents of drifting clouds."

Todo could see Mount Fuji.

He could see the Meiji Jingu shrine surrounded by lush greenery of the forest.

The blue of Tokyo Bay spread out around him.

"I have no regrets."

Todo's Battroid stood unbroken, full of pride as he embraced the view.

"I fought to protect this landscape, this Japan. I believe that I have fought against time, and the law of cause and effect until the very end. Accept my prayers, Oh eight million gods, and do not let this landscape be erased for eight thousand generations!"

"Cherry blossoms, Cherry blossoms

In full bloom..."

The wind blew. The wish of a pilot named Todo Ushio became a storm of cherry blossoms. They enwrapped him, a tornado swirling around him, and eventually disappeared, taking his soul with them.

The ruins shuddered, collapsing in on itself. The idols reached what was left of the Artifact, or the Fold EVIL as it had once been called so long ago. Their songs soothed its tempest, bringing calm to the massive, thousand-eyed, winged creature that had been the heart of Ouroboros.

Theirs was a battle that was just too beautiful to be described with words.

All the participants fought with their burning souls. The egg hatched, spilling forth light. The collapsing walls reversed course and reformed as the ruins around them stabilized. Their voices connected the galaxy into a unified whole.

The heroes, the idol and the divas disappeared like phantoms, washing away in the waves of the recovering timestream.

Epilogue

"They're gone, aren't they?"

When all was said and done, it felt like the end of a festival.

Leon stood outside of the spaceport at Breetai City. Mina's song, streaming from the network, could be heard from a few nearby speaker systems. He looked up at the sky. It was clear now, bright and blue. The Aurora was nowhere to be seen. It had begun to fade when the Fold EVIL had returned to its slumber before finally disappearing from the heavens altogether.

He did not have an answer to Mina's question. He simply did not know what had happened to their companions.

Given that there seemed to be no apparent change to the world as far as they could tell, perhaps the so-called time paradox did not occur. On the other hand, perhaps it had and they could not perceive what had happened because they had changed along with the timestream. There was also the possibility that each timeline was independent of the other and that the event both did and did not happen simultaneously.

Regardless of which truth was reality, the memory of them definitely remained there in Leon's heart. That was what the battered YF-30 resting on the landing strip and that beautiful sky above were telling him.

"What're you going to do now, Leon?"

Aisha laughed as she, alongside Mina, walked up to him. She had stayed on as the head of the Ouroboros branch following the incident. There were still a lot of ruins buried beneath the surface of Ouroboros and Aisha was the only one who was qualified to deal with them. Although, unlike before, there were now all manner of extrajudicial measures in place to keep that Meltrandi in line.

"I guess..."

Leon felt a little embarrassed as took a step toward them. Aisha continued before he had a chance to answer her question.

"We're short-staffed at this branch, again. We're going to be in trouble for a while. Not too many pilots are willing to work way out here in such a remote and mysterious system."

"Ha! Got that right. You're going to put in a lot of work."

"Hey, I always do my best. I'll be counting on you to take up everyone's slack, Leon!"

"Great..."

Suddenly, Leon opened his hand.

In the center of his palm, there sat a single cherry blossom petal.

Bless all of your memories.

Hold in your heart a requiem for all the beautiful things that have been lost.

And may the light of culture stretch before us into the infinite future yet to come.

We are praying.

We have hope.

A hope that there will be a shining world for all of us. A galaxy where each of us can live together in harmony, accepting each other's differences.

Even if it is a dream, it is still a dream worth working toward.

That song teaches us that.

If you remember love.

Outro: Wonder Ring

(Lyrics)

If I had chosen

Another road instead

Of the one that led me here,

The sound of your voice

Would never have reached me.

The vast night sky that seems to stretch on forever,

Yeah, that's more than just a fantasy.

With all of the words filling the air

The kindness of wandering people touch each other's hearts.

The city lights up.

The breeze sets me aglow.

I wonder if you can see it from up there.

It's the usual thing,

A glittery, shimmery me.

As you fill my clear heart with each nameless emotion

I become more myself.

That I can laugh as easily as I do.

Yeah, maybe it is miraculous

All of our joy

And all of our sorrow blend together
It's the love coming from this world
That wraps me up in its warm embrace
On its way to your sky.

In this world
From this perspective
I have been touched
By the hearts of so many.
Freed from the weight of gravity,
I have watched two individuals
Become of one heart.

It's the love coming from this world
That wraps me up in its warm embrace
It is miraculous that
All of our joy
And all of our sorrow blend together
With of all the words filling the air
The kindness of wandering people touch each other's hearts.

Sometimes people argue,
But they also embrace becoming one
Caressing this world with love
The breeze sets me aglow
As it echoes through the galaxy
On its way to your sky.

FIN

Classified Report: YF-30 Chronos

A cutting-edge Valkyrie that controls time and space, secretly developed in a remote part of the galaxy.

The YF-30 is a Valkyrie designed based on the Nova Industries and General Galaxy's YF-24. Since the cover development began at the same time as that of the publicly-known VF-25, the two possess many similarities in appearance.

The Valkyrie was envisioned as a Variable Super Dimension Entry Vehicle, not as a Variable Fighter, and a large amount of the lost Overt technology collected from the Protoculture ruins on the planet Ouroboros was incorporated into its design.

The Variable Super-Dimension Entry Vehicle is a completely new field of spacecraft created by S.M.S. and its sponsor, Richard Bilrer, in order to ensure galactic-scale transportation and logistics superiority. The premise is based on the theories of one Dr. Aisha Blanchette, an expert in the field of Fold Faults and their interference with the physical realm.

It was developed based on the Variable Fighter due to the fact that the core Fold Quartz system was not powerful enough for use on a capital ship, and because the Battroid form was believed to be suitable for exploring the depths of the Protoculture Ruins, which themselves had barriers similar to Fold Faults. Additionally, Bilrer used the term "Development Of A New Type Of Variable Fighter" as a cover to conceal from the New United Nations government the technology to break through the Fold Faults, and to allow his corporation exclusive access to the contents of the Protoculture sites.

As a result of the Vajra War, priority was shifted to researching the alien Vajra beings and securing the Fold Quartz refined within their bodies. As a result, the YF-30 project had most of its budget cut and was effectively scrapped.

However, Dr. Blanchette refused to give up and completed the machine independent of Bilrer. Her defiance would play an important role in the events that took place on the planet of Ouroboros.

The YF-30 is best described as "more like Albus Selzer (the chief designer of VF-9 and YF-21) than Project Nova" due to the level of knowledge of Protoculture, especially Zentraedi, technology that Dr. Blanchette was proficient with. In contrast to the hastily prepared YF-29, the YF-30 incorporated a large amount of Protoculture-derived overtechnology. It was more stable in terms of power output, and it was capable of interfacing with different races and was thus able to increase its power output using the Fold Waves of a variety of singers. The most distinctive feature of the YF-30 was its rear container unit. The large exploration device allows for swappable Mission Pods, any of which could be chosen to best suit any environment and situation and allows them to be quickly and easily incorporated into the vehicle's frame. It can be considered the "Eye" of the Variable Super-Dimension Entry Vehicle.

Due to its nature, the YF-30 is not purely a variable fighter. Its true value lies in its Fold Dimension Resonator (FDR) entry system.

This system interferes directly with Fold Space, or Sub-Universes. When fully operational, it is capable of disabling all sensors within range. In addition, it acted as a powerful jammer against the Fold Wave system on the YF-29 and other aircraft, suppressing the functionality of their Fold Quartz. This is a branch application of the Soundwave System that was used to inhibit the Protodeviln with amplified Song Energy. It is a testament to the fact that Dr. Blanchette is the true successor to Dr. Chiba and Dr. Mao Nome.

If this machine could be mass-produced, it would be the most powerful Special Operations machine in the galaxy. Unfortunately, as it is extremely difficult to secure the high-purity Fold Quartz required for its construction, and its Sentient Control AI is not easy to duplicate, there is no prospect of mass production at present.

Afterword

Thank you very much for your time and your attention. Or, it's nice to meet you. I'm Ukyo Kodachi, the author.

Following the scenario for the PS3 version of "Macross 30", I was also put in charge of the novelization. I've done a lot of novelizing, but this was my first experience with a novelization of a work that I wrote the original scenario for. So, I was unsure of what to expect, and I would like to apologize to the editor, Mr. Sato, for the inconvenience. Thank you for all of your support.

As expected, the setting of this novel is linked to those of "Macross F" and "Macross the Ride" but in accordance with the basic principles of the Macross universe, the game version is not the official historical account and neither is this one. The novel version is based on an early draft of the game's scenario, and the storyline differs from that of the final game, but they can each be thought of as a separate retellings based on the actual events that took place within the Macross universe.

As I discussed with General Director Kawamori Shoji, the main principle of Macross is to "never do the same thing twice," and we have stuck to that. I can't express enough my gratitude to Bandai Namco Games for allowing me to write a novelization of a story that contains aircraft and characters that don't appear in the game version.

To avoid any misunderstandings, I would like to point out that the differences in story and direction between this book and the game are just the result of my desire to optimize the story for the novel. It's nothing more, nothing less. At first, I thought it would work if I used the game's scenario, but in the end I had to rearrange almost everything as I customized the book.

What was the most disappointing part for me was that I had to reduce the number of characters in the story due to the space limitations. I thought, "I could have written that character!" It was a pity, but some had to be scrapped due to the limited number of pages.

Now, I'm not in a position to make any promises about what will happen next, but I do have a lot of ideas involving the planet Ouroboros and the future of Leon and the others that I'd like to try. I hope to have the opportunity to do so, so please feel free to send any comments or requests you may have to Bandai Namco Games or Dengeki Hobby Magazine.

At the time of writing this Afterward, I have not yet gotten my hands on the finished game. I would like to thank all the staff members who have been working so hard up to the very last minute to make the game as great as possible. I'm really looking forward to it. Thank you to everyone who has picked up a copy of this book.

I hope to see you again, somewhere in the galaxy.

Ukyo Kodachi

2013, February 18th