

GAIGEAR 1

The cover art features a close-up of a young man with short, spiky blonde hair and blue eyes, looking directly at the viewer with a serious expression. He is wearing a dark, possibly black, tank top. Behind him, slightly to the right, is a woman with long, dark, wavy hair and green eyes. She is wearing a white top with orange and blue accents. In the background, a large, dark-colored mecha with blue and red details is visible. The title 'GAIGEAR 1' is at the top in a large, white, stylized font with a red star and orange lightning bolt graphic behind it.

YOSHIYUKI TOMINO

Translated by Zeonic[Scanlations]

Copyright © 1988 by Yoshiyuki Tomino
Copyright © Kadokawa Shoten

This book is a fan translation.

Support the official release if there ever is one.

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

Kadokawa Bunko "GAIA GEAR VOL.1"
Released 1988.09.01

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

Novel Translation and Book Layout by Zeonic|Scanlations

First Edition: August 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter.01	On the Beach.....	004
Chapter.02	Separate Ways.....	014
Chapter.03	The Storyteller.....	024
Chapter.04	Sea Jack	034
Chapter.05	Arson.....	044
Chapter.06	The Legacy of Sieg Zeon.....	055
Chapter.07	Farewell.....	066
Chapter.08	With Land and Sea to His Back.....	077
Chapter.09	Inertial Flight.....	087
Chapter.10	Krishna Pandent.....	096
Chapter.11	Monologue in Darkness.....	105
Chapter.12	UI Urian.....	113

1

Does the wind carry the murmuring of a rising tide, or was it the rising tide that carried the sound of the wind?

He no longer asked himself those kinds of questions.

It seemed like only yesterday that he'd been in the habit of observing and analyzing phenomena of that nature. But, for now, all he did was feel the mixture of the sound of the surf and wind on his skin, accepting the pleasant feeling for what it was.

That isn't to say he turned off his analytical processing. He was consciously bypassing an intuitive, logical approach to the phenomena he saw, so he didn't dam the free flow of thought with causal questions.

As for where he had learned to do that...

"Leaving things that aren't so clear-cut vague isn't a bad thing, nor is it something to feel anxious about. So, I don't feel so restless anymore."

All he could see were stars.

It was one of those rare, windless nights where the stars stretched across the sky, unobscured by clouds and haze.

He lay on his side on the sandy shore.

The ocean came in contact with that shore a few meters beyond where his feet lay, yet the waves were silent.

Instead, the coral shells lining the shore's edge plinked and rattled as they clattered against one another in the faintly lapping tide, which could be heard over the water. The sounds of the tide came from the open sea, lapping at the coral reefs forming beyond the beach.

When had it been that Affranchi Char started to feel ambiguity?

Until now, he'd practically been programmed to collate all phenomena theoretically.

He was now, if memory serves, 19 years old.

The elder of the island and his adoptive parent, Gaba Suu, had told him so. Around this time, he'd become aware of ambiguity, though it was only recently that he'd truly begun to accept it.

As he counted each point of sharp, piercing starlight, he suddenly felt a ticking sensation somewhere inside his body.

"Ambiguity, huh?"

** tick, tick **

"That's a good thing."

** tick, tick **

** tick **

Something that didn't seem like a sound was ringing as if rejecting what he was saying.

He knew full well what it was.

And that was also why, annoying as it was, he couldn't bring himself to reject it.

It was the sound from the flood of cell chips in the deepest recesses of his memory web, waking up and resonating.

Down came the rays of starlight into Affranchi Char's periphery, and he almost felt like he could hear the sounds of the light itself.

Chaa...rrrr...

Even on an island like this, it was rare to have a night where a star of the eighth magnitude was visible to the naked eye. The Earth's atmosphere was as polluted as could be, and the weather was fickle.

But things were different now.

As Affranchi listened to the sound of the light that fell from the stars, he felt a strange sensation and abruptly stood up. For a moment, he thought he'd heard something that sounded like a person's voice from among the stars.

No, it sounded like it could have been the voice of some consciousness itself.

"!?"

The light from the stars suddenly grew brighter and more concentrated inside his body.

"Ahh!!"

** tick, tick, tick **

Was it a hallucination?

His memory web was suddenly enveloped in a sharp, metallic sound as it tried to resolve the malfunctions of his hallucinatory and visual sensors.

For a moment, he felt as though he'd seen a vast array of visual phenomena.

He saw thousands upon thousands of people's faces. Their wills, the Earth and the nature that encompassed it, the extinction of the dinosaurs, the atomic structure of vitamins, the collision of metal particles, the creation of machinery, and more; a kaleidoscope of rushing images that numbered too many to put into words.

It was a visual phenomenon amplified by the accumulation of memories. In other words, a collection of memories from the past, piqued by the light of the stars, and he'd perceived them all as a persistence of vision for a brief moment.

Thus, his latent potential was understood.

"Outer space is full of people... it seems that's a fact..."

Affranchi Char recognized that.

2

"A-ffranchi Chaaar!"

Everly Key's exploding voice, one that could be heard even in the most violent of storms, made its way to Affranchi's ears. Except they were in an inland sea, and it was a sunny day.

Her voice faded away like a flash between the sea and the atmosphere.

Hearing it, he swam in the direction of her voice, cutting through the water with overarm strokes.

She pronounced the initial sound of Char's name quite accented.

"A-ffranchi Chaaar!"

Everly Key was balancing on the diving board of the floating buoy. She was a girl who instinctively relished being seen. She knew exactly how to strike an alluring pose precisely in Affranchi's direction.

However, there was no sign that she knew what she was doing.

That's why it was so attractive.

When Affranchi tried to grab her ankle on that floating board, she quickly flipped her body. In his eyes, her heels rose on the floating platform, and the toes on her long legs kicked and stretched out.

"Eva!"

Char called out to her.

Her body vaulted over his head as he looked up like an arrow released from the bowstring, looking much longer because of the extension of her arms.

The droplets were so tiny and light that the sound of her breaking the water's surface wasn't even audible as the water swallowed up her suntanned skin.

Char dived as well, following after Everly.

Beneath the water's surface, the translucent light crisscrossed unsteadily in vertical shafts, creating a hazy scene, and her limbs rotated gracefully across the blue expanse.

Everly's body, already down on the coral reef, drew further and further away from Char. He chased after her legs as they bobbed up and down and the round, plump buttocks that supported them.

The color from the tide cast a slight shade over her body, though the shadows that were highlighted were clearly visible. slightly but bringing it into sharp relief.

The underside of the surface of the sea reflected her limbs in multiple fragments before fading away.

Groups of small striped fish scattered in a flutter of brilliant colors.

Crickle, crackle.

As he followed after Everly Key, he could hear the sounds of the sea, the leftover reverberations from the ocean tide after it swallowed up the pulse that came up from the Earth, the seabed.

Crickle, crackle.

And a sudden flash.

Even the tiny bikini Everly was wearing became a part of her body, accentuating her beauty more than if she were completely naked, as if she were a mermaid in a fairy tale.

"!!!"

Is this love?!

Love?

What is love?

This here was the symbol of eternal, absolute ambiguity.

And it was beyond the form of his focus, Everly Key, where the colors from the tide looked like a wall, an abyss, symbolizing the existence of something absolute.

Everly's black hair spread wide in the tide, drawing her closer to Char. Her teeth glistened like pearls in the tide.

"Hehe... Hahaha!!!"

Affranchi could hear her laughter as the tide carried it. This time, it was Affranchi's turn to be chased. Then, in one go, he took a deep breath and sped up his escape.

Blub! Blub!

The bubbles created by his breath grazed past his ears and mixed in that sound, that sizzling.

It was not the sound of water pressure but the pulse from the Earth that thrummed rhythmically on his eardrums.

Then, Everly's hand touched Affranchi's skin. As he turned, her firm but supple breasts touched his chest.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

The heartbeats made Affranchi feel, with the touch of skin to skin, the pulse of the organ that gives birth to passion, the source of energy that makes the blood run.

How warm the tides of the southern islands were to these two.

3

It seemed like the heavy winds would uproot all the palm trees across the island. The spray from the tide erupted from the shoreline, becoming a white curtain as it assailed the island.

Whump!

The heavy thuds of falling coconuts punctuated the raging storm.

"We have to hurry!"

The shout came from the youth Carre Haw, a friend of Affranchi who always spoke respectfully of him.

The two raced through the grove of palm trees with their upper bodies almost at ninety degrees. Still, the wind would push their bodies back if they weren't careful.

Raindrops stung their shoulders, chests, and faces.

The house, only dimly visible in the raging storm, looked like a person hunched low before the forces of nature. The house appeared to be made of wood, but it was made entirely of reinforced plastic.

It would neither corrode nor would it age. It would look new for three hundred years, but beyond that, there was still no guarantee of how it would deteriorate.

The scientists, or the companies that manufacture and sell the materials, say, "Even after a thousand years, there will be no material degradation. Worry not." They say that because they have perfect results from scientific durability tests.

"Do they have the technology to condense time? Then maybe there is technology to lengthen time." Affranchi Char often thought as a child.

That was particularly the case when he thoroughly enjoyed himself; the thought would arise: "If only time would move more slowly!"

Now, as he got older, he no longer got as excited, nor did he think like that anymore.

Instead, he thought, "Time itself must have its properties. How fantastic would that be if there were people with the technology to replace one property for another, but could that be possible?"

Such thoughts ran through his mind now.

"Gaba Suu!"

Affranchi took the hand of the frail older man lying on the bed, tears unwittingly welling up in his eyes.

Gaba Suu's skin, hardened by the sun and tides, was creased with deep wrinkles, and his once thick, strong fingernails had become brittle.

The hand that had held Affranchi, beaten him, and fed him now felt oh-so-light as it sank into Affranchi's youthful hands.

The entire structure rumbled as if terrified by the storm.

A gust of wind blew in, causing the sun-baked lace curtains by the windows to flutter violently.

Everly Key entered the room.

"The Elder?"

"Hush now."

The elders gathered behind Affranchi chided her.

Affranchi drew his ear close to Gaba Suu's moving lips.

"You must go out into space... You are of this Earth... I was only entrusted with you, to raise you here... But... I know nothing of your origin. I never asked... But, I know, all I know is that the universe is waiting for you..."

"To outer space?"

Affranchi Char echoed.

"Outer space?"

Everly's voice trembled slightly, frightened.

The terror in her breath rang clearly in Affranchi's ears, even over the sound of the storm raging outside.

Long breaths escaped from her lips...

When the storm passed at dawn, Gaba Suu was dead.

"He lived a long life. Do not be sad."

The older woman, now the eldest of the group, spoke.

"Gaba Suu died of natural causes. He was born on this island, and there were times when he ventured from island to island. And after experiencing love a few times, Gaba returned to this island. I remember that time well... Gaba Suu returned to our island and married Kasan Mooth... I guess he had no love for me."

That's when the older woman let out a brief chuckle. Yet, no one blamed her; instead, they listened cordially.

"It has been twenty years since Kasan died, right?"

"Twenty-three years!"

There was some reproach there.

The whole assembly looked at the man who got the number of years wrong, with some saying, "You've gone senile, haven't you?"

"Gaba, he had many children, but Gaba's children were all strong. But because they were strong, they all left the island. Many of them liked to meddle with machines... So when you came, Affranchi, Gaba raised you."

"And now, here I am, older..."

The whole assembly nodded in agreement.

"By Gaba's dying wish, Affranchi, go forth into space."

So they said to each other.

"But, I... I only know this island. I am afraid to leave here..."
stammered Affranchi as he stared down at Gaba Suu, who now looked as thin as a sheet of paper.

4

The lingering winds after the storm continued to batter the coast, thundering and rumbling. Another wild whitecap rolled in on the other side of the coral reef, creating a wall of white spray.

"No! No, no!" Everly repeated as if those were the only words she knew.

"I haven't made up my mind yet," Affranchi said firmly, standing against the wind.

"Nooooo!"

Everly wailed, bent over, burying both elbows into her midriff. The wind whipped her rough dress around her, a fitting reflection of the storm within her.

"That's why I said, let's talk about it!" shouted Affranchi, running after her as she fled. Everly ran as if she couldn't bear the thought of him getting any closer, her cries of "no" echoing in the air.

Affranchi understood her pain.

"But why, why am I chasing after her? Why am I trying to convince her?" he wondered to himself.

Affranchi realized that he had already decided to go to space. But he couldn't bring himself to fully commit to it yet. On the other hand, he didn't dislike the idea of living with Everly, catching fish, tending to the sugarcane fields, collecting coconut oil, and making tools for daily life with coconuts.

"I don't dislike that at all. I love it, in fact."

Affranchi Char said, pausing in his stride. As he watched Everly run away, those words escaped his lips.

The sun cast its blinding rays through the gaps in the drifting clouds.

Her back against the light, Everly collapsed onto the coral beach with a thud, crying. Affranchi could see her back rising and falling, heaving as she sobbed, the sight strangely clear in his vision.

"But Everly... she is convinced I will go to space..." he thought to himself, feeling a sense of discomfort wash over him.

Others were already predicting and deciding for him what he was trying to avoid. It was an even more uncomfortable feeling than the ambiguity he had felt earlier.

"I'll go, then..."

That is what Affranchi wanted to say.

That is how he felt.

"...?"

Beyond Everly's trembling back, a shadow loomed.

"There shouldn't be anything that tall up there."

As he tried to walk past the crying Everly, he looked down at her exposed shoulders, which were glistening as they shook.

"...!?"

Affranchi felt a pang in his chest at the sight.

5

"Everly," Affranchi began softly, his hands gently grasping her shoulders, "I'm sorry, but I saw something strange, and I need to go check it out."

Everly gasped, her face contorted in shock. Tears still stained her cheeks as she tried to process Affranchi's words, forgetting to stifle a cry. Affranchi's expression was troubled and complicated, something she had never seen before. Affranchi saw that her face was imagining all sorts of thoughts, but she would probably never be able to express them adequately.

"Wha...? What?"

That was the most Everly could muster.

"Over there," Affranchi replied, gesturing towards the shadows as he helped her up, "It's... that."

The shape of the shadow defied Everly's imagination, the sheer strangeness of it making her stand bolt upright.

Affranchi held her by the waist and moved closer to the shadow.

** tick* * tick**

Affranchi's memory began to click in place, steadily but surely.

It was as if the shadow had awoken his memories. Affranchi tightened his grip on Everly's shoulder, feeling uneasy.

He wasn't aware of it... No, he was.

tick, tick

The machine had washed up on the rocks at the outer edge where the cape met the reef.

A violent spray caused the shadow to gurggle and shake.

Despite its size, the machine seemed light. That was how it had managed to ride the waves over the reef and end up there.

"Is it a machine?" Everly asked, standing still out of fear. The machine looked like a person's upper body as if a man had been cast adrift and was clinging to a rock.

Affranchi approached it, moving over the rocky promontory, making his way in the lull between waves.

Its surface was covered with a thick layer of shells and seaweed. In some places, the machine itself could be seen.

It was a dark green surface that looked like a special metal.

It was not a solid chunk but rather a complex construct made up of connected blocks of various shapes - round, square, pointy, and thick.

"Affranchi! Come back!" Everly shouted, inconsolable in the strong wind lingering after the storm.

"Wait a sec, just for a little bit!" Affranchi said as he touched the surface of the machine that was cutting into the rock.

Whoom!

Another spray of foam shook its shadow, but it remained in place. He continued feeling up the machine's surface, not caring about how it shook. It was slippery and cold to the touch, like it had been at the bottom of the ocean for ages.

Yet, despite that, it was as if the material itself had some warmth to it. He could feel how strong and hard it was.

Skreeee!

A high shrill noise followed...

Affranchi looked up and pushed on a plate that was covering his head.

Creak!

The plate rang and moved, sounding like it was breathing instead of the harsh sound it made as the waves rocked it.

When he tried to let go, it stopped in the same position.

A beautiful glass surface appeared to glow in the back, supported by the plate and the dimness of the machine's interior.

It was filled by the tide, washing out the glowing thing, and Affranchi saw what looked like a seat.

"..."

Affranchi peered inside.

A seat immersed in seawater appeared to be surrounded entirely by glass.

"A machine in the shape of a man?!"

tick

Affranchi's mental circuits fractured, fires running along them.

He noticed a book submerged in the water surrounding the seat.

He retrieved it from the water and found it was made from a plastic-y sort of paper.

The machine shook violently from yet another strong surge.

He held the wet book in his arms and descended to the rocky shore.

"Mobile? Machine...Gap...? I can't read this... It's filled with entries... Is this a maintenance manual?"

Wiping the seaweed from the book, he found that the book was not suffering from any rot whatsoever, and it was as good as brand new.

"A machine from over a hundred years ago..."

Once again, Affranchi looked up at the shadow.

The humanoid machine continued to sway from the spray.

Whoosh!

Suddenly, a supersonic wave hit the island and distorted the machine's shadow.

"A pillar of fire!"

Everly curled up on the beach; her hands clamped over her ears to block out the deafening wake of the space-bound shuttle taking off from the island's southwest end.

The bright light from its tail nozzle flickered in the clouds.

The islanders loathed the condescending sound, referring to it much the same as Everly.

Affranchi, too, found the islanders' expression of contempt unsatisfying. But this time, something stirred within him as he clutched the manual in his arms and approached Everly.

"Everly, I... I am going where that pillar of fire came from."

At that time, those were words that Everly simply could not hear.

1

"A-ffranchi!" Everly's voice was as gentle as the sea's ebb and flow, lacking its usual vivacity. She bit back from calling him by his familiar name, "Char."

Affranchi lay motionless, his body gently rocked by the waves, his gaze distant and unseeing.

tick, tick, tick, tick, tick

The monotonous sound beats in his head like a drum, but it's Everly's voice that breaks through and keeps him grounded. Her soothing melody merges with the rhythm of the waves, pressing down on him like a heavy burden.

"It's heavy..." A voice within him laments. This voice does not stem from his conscious mind but rather from a deeper, introspective part of him.

"Eh...?" Affranchi's head snapped up, drawn by the sound of his inner voice. He turned his gaze towards Everly. The vibrant hues of the coral reef shone through, highlighting the fluid grace of her brown limbs as she moved with the ease of a shark.

"How is it that only Everly's form is visible in the water?" Affranchi mused, a hint of wonder in his voice. But even more mesmerizing than the sight before him was the overwhelming sensation of her presence, a memory that lingered in Affranchi's mind like a haunting melody.

"..."

The weight of his thoughts caused him to recline on his board once more, a sorrowful expression on his face.

"It's like being ambushed from the heavens..." he whispered as the wind rustled through his golden hair.

"Ah!"

He gave in to his instincts and spun around, diving into the water with a splash. The foam rose around him, the warm tide enveloping him like a comforting embrace.

As she drew near to him, Everly's skin blazed with a fiery passion, igniting the sea into a tempest that enveloped him. Her vibrant form was visible through the frothy waves, her threads long since cast aside.

Affranchi swam as if he was trying to escape her, drawn towards the machine on the cape. Between each swell, she cried out his nickname, "Char!" He could feel that there was still time.

So when Everly's hand brushed his leg, he did not resist. "Oh, Affranchi! Don't leave me!" she wailed, their bodies entwining, rising and falling with the tide. "Why won't you answer me? Why won't you tell me that you won't leave?" she pleaded, her ample breasts heaving against his chest.

Even in the tumultuous waters, the evidence of her passion was unmistakable. But to Affranchi, all he could see was the machine on the cape, calling him with an irresistible pull.

"A man-machine!" The phrase echoed in Affranchi's mind, a term he coined himself but with a strange familiarity. However, Affranchi could not recall ever encountering such a machine. All that remained were distant memories from long ago. Memories that predated even Everly's abandonment of her loincloth. But when was that?

"I must uncover my origins, understand who I am. Without that knowledge, I fear I cannot love you without peace of mind," Affranchi confessed.

"Why? I'm right here, aren't I? That I can't love you just because I'm here, that's a lie!" Everly protested, her teeth nipping at Affranchi's lips.

2

As Everly pivoted away from Affranchi, she propelled herself toward the behemoth machine with amazing grace and might. Her back muscles rippled like a warrior's, slicing through the water with ease.

"Eva!" Affranchi called out, trying to get Everly's attention as she swam with unrivaled strength. He himself stood tall in the water, his upper body rising above the crashing waves.

"What is driving her?" he wondered. Yes, a power that should be wielded within becomes a threat when pointed elsewhere. So you feel abandonment, a fear of being forgotten, a panic born from selfish desires of being human, with a body and emotions.

Naked and unashamed, Everly reached the jagged outcropping and faced the towering, dark green machine. Its massive frame still swayed with each incoming wave. A low groan echoed as it continued to chisel away at the coral reef, moving with even greater ferocity.

"This! This thing!" she cried as she hurled a piece of coral at the machine, like a tiny ant daring to challenge an elephant. The coral ricocheted off the machine, an absurd spectacle to behold.

The brittle seaweed that clung to the machine's top undulated in the wind, looking like hair but tearing away in mock laughter at Everly's expense.

"Everly Key!" Affranchi called out, using her full name as he restrained her arms behind her back.

"No!" Everly's cry of protest echoed faintly within the cockpit of the machine, resonating like the beating heart of the dark green, human-shaped machine.

"It's because of this thing that you're leaving!" Everly's sad shout rang with a clear truth.

But Affranchi's mind could not grasp that logic easily.

"That's not true! You're wrong. It's because Gaba Su's dying wish was for me to go to space..." As he spoke, he realized that these were nothing but hollow excuses born of his own sadness.

"Affranchi, you care more about machines than you do about me. How could you?"

"How could I?" Affranchi was unfazed by this leap in logic.

"To think that humans can understand to this extent... Our abilities are truly remarkable," he mused, his subconscious speaking for him.

Everly, caught in Affranchi's embrace, turned her frightened gaze towards him, tears streaming down her face.

"Oh, Everly..." he held her tightly to his chest, his arms wrapping around her shoulders with all his might.

"I don't even know why I have to go to space. I can't explain it," he whispered, his own fear preventing him from speaking his thoughts aloud. It would become a harsh reality if he did, and that terror kept him silent.

But Affranchi resolved to pour all his love into Everly until the next storm hit.

Another storm arrived, a frequent companion that Affranchi Char knew all too well. The direction of the wind and tide was always in his favor during this season.

The tumultuous waves brought a humanoid machine, battered from its time at the bottom of the sea, closer to Affranchi's island.

And in these times when Affranchi came of age, that machine finally found its way onto the shores of his home.

"I have to check on the coconut trees," Affranchi proclaimed as he stepped outside into the height of the storm. Within his hut, Everly had moved in as his new wife, a union accepted by all on the island, both young and old.

Although some may have expressed their objections to the manner in which Affranchi and Everly lived together, especially in the midst of mourning for Gaba Suu, the elder members of the community understood the ways of the heart and respected their choice.

"Affranchi intends to continue Gaba Suu's legacy by venturing into the cosmos," the elders murmured. "That's why, for now, he has found solace in Everly."

And...

"Just for now, solace..."

The inquisitive young girls tried to bring up the speculation to Everly but ultimately decided against it, not wanting to cause her any heartache.

And...

Their fleeting romance as newlyweds continued until today.

"Would you like me to accompany you?" Everly wavered, a feeling of foreboding washing over her. It was similar to the apprehension she felt when a storm approached, but she dismissed it, her unease swept away by the raging storm.

And so...

With fierce determination, Affranchi braved the storm alone, racing against its tumultuous winds toward the island's far end. He retrieved his concealed canoe from the shore and set off to brave the open sea. With the help of the gusts, he aimed to reach the island where the great ocean liners embarked.

Thu-thud!!

Affranchi manned his canoe, a Luger with him, rowing with all his might as he cleared the treacherous coral reef. The rain poured down in sheets, and the wind howled in protest, tossing Affranchi's canoe like a tiny sesame seed. But God, and that machine, both sided with Affranchi.

Breaking free from the reef, Affranchi's canoe surged into the open sea, a sea churning with rage. In an instant, the island where Gaba Suu and Everly made their home was swallowed by the storm, lost to Affranchi's view. A towering wall of waves stood between him and the isle, and Affranchi's heart ached with longing.

"The islands where Gaba Suu now rests..."

The towering waves scaled the heavens, then plummeted back to the depths below. The ocean was now a tempest, its fury unmatched.

"Gaba, shield me!" he cried out as the storm raged on.

The sadness plaguing him as he left the island faded, replaced with a fierce determination to protect his canoe from the unrelenting waves.

"I can do this! I'll make it to the island I'm heading for!" he declared, harnessing the power of the wild waves and flipping his canoe to take advantage of their tumultuous movement.

He submerged himself in the canoe hull, a technique the islanders used to weather storms. Surrounded by complete darkness, he couldn't see anything, just a tiny, cramped space.

Gripping the sides, he steadied his breathing and found purchase for the rest of his body.

Beneath the waves, the tides raged with tremendous force. Yet, Affranchi felt as if the canoe was suspended in mid-air, buoyed by the turbulent sea.

Nature's fury was on full display, stealing both the air and the wild tides with its reckless abandon.

"That's nature..."

The canoe flipped, cresting the waves as its hull took in air and gave Affranchi a moment of hope. But as it plunged into the troughs, he was thrown about, nearly bashing his head against the boat's underside.

"Gaba!" he cried out in fear, blinded and battered by the waves like they were the hand of an invisible giant.

"Gaba..."

He wept under the canoe's hull, feeling his body being compressed and his emotions becoming muddled, destroying even the most primal of human emotions, sentiment. This kind of trial can break a person but also make them stronger. And right now, Affranchi was searching for that support, though the person he sought was no longer Everly.

Because Affranchi was on a journey of self-discovery.

Everly had learned that Affranchi and the humanoid machine had been swept away by the tide when the storm had passed.

She did not cry, biting back her tears.

"These tears, they're nothing but..."

One of her girlfriends caught the stifled whimper as the words escaped her lips, harsh and jagged.

But that night, in the hut where they'd shared their first nights as a married couple, she wept until dawn.

4

After the storm had subsided, the waves continued to crest with ferocity for the remainder of the day. But for Affranchi, it was a tranquil escape as he lounged beneath his sail. A canteen of crisp water and a few coconuts, tethered to his canoe, were his only sources of sustenance, but they sufficed for his journey.

He could see the sun through the clouds drifting in the wind.

The elders of the island still whispered the secrets of the ancient art of sea navigation. This time-honored technique, depicted with stones on the sand, was passed down with reverence and simplicity.

Affranchi had listened to their tales countless times.

When taught these ways, the children adorned crowns carved from the trunks of palm trees on their heads.

In the eyes of the island, the mastery of navigating by the stars and tides was a sacred rite, and only those who had purified their minds and hearts were deemed worthy of learning it.

As the night approached, Affranchi could sense, by the rhythm of the tide, that the sea had begun to forget the storm.\

There, Affranchi first smashed a coconut with his hand knife, drank its juice, and tasted its pulp.

With a knife in hand, he cracked open a coconut, savoring its sweet juice and meat. The sun dipped below the horizon, and the moon took its place in the sky.

"I'm on the right path..."

With a contented sigh, Affranchi hoisted the sail on his canoe.

"Everything is falling into place..."

tick, tick

That sound echoed in his mind once more.

But Affranchi was determined to leave behind all that he had known and believed on the island.

"It's all something my client set up," he reassured himself.

But even he couldn't deny the ambiguity of his thoughts.

"Still, I won't let that ambiguity faze me."

It was the serenity of his mind that allowed him to come to this conclusion.

As the last rays of the sun faded from the sky, the stars twinkled to life. Affranchi gazed up, his eyes fixed on a cluster of bright lights flanking the moon.

These lights, he realized, were from the shining space colonies.

"Space colonies, huh? No oceans up there," Affranchi mused, a hint of regret in his voice. The idea of a world without the sea was a distasteful one to him.

5

As Affranchi navigated his canoe through the tumultuous waves of the storm, he caught sight of something blocking the starlight. It had to be an island, shaped like one he had visited many times before with Gaba. Confident in his recognition, he stood up in the canoe, his spirit soaring.

The other islands surrounding it only served to reinforce his certainty.

"From there, there are ships leave for Hong Kong, where they launch pillars of fire."

The only sounds were the soft lapping of the waves and the gentle hum of the tides. Even the seabirds had gone to sleep. Affranchi gazed longingly at the empty horizon behind him, where the waves had lost their whitecaps and now only showed large swells.

"Eva..." he whispered. The name used to stir something within him, but the storm had stripped Affranchi of all sentimentality. So, he crouched and took up the oars, rowing with each breath, determined to reach the lights of the island's harbor.

And so, hours later, he brought the lights of the island's harbor into view. The brilliant boundary between the island and the sea captivated his vision. Despite their small number, the lights exuded a man-made strength that glimmered in the night. As he made his way toward the piers, his canoe drifted past abandoned fishing boats, their night lights swaying in the breeze.

6

Affranchi tied up his canoe under a concrete pier and decided to set up camp in the open air, far from any snakes or other unwanted creatures. A massive ironclad ship was docked nearby, its lights off, and around it, dozens of the island's fishing boats were cast in the shadows of the night.

The haunting melody of a male singer seeped through the darkness, reminding Affranchi of the humid air of the island.

"Anastasia--"

The male vocalist's mellow song reminded him of the humidity that enveloped the island.

Lured by streetlights, Affranchi found himself on an asphalt road in front of the harbor. The air was still and heavy, with the music coming from one of the bars.

"I've eaten here before."

Affranchi peered inside the bar's door, not expecting to find a meal at such a late hour. Under the warm glow of orange electric lights, he could make out the figures of several men, their gaming machines shaking the air with their racket. The air was thick with cigarette smoke, dulling the brightness of the lights.

"It stinks," he thought, but he was willing to pay if they had anything to eat. He had money.

Before venturing into the bar, Affranchi covertly slipped his pass case from his pants pocket into the safety of his shirt. With his dark skin contrasting against the whites of his eyes, the bartender fixed a stern gaze upon Affranchi.

"What do ya want?" he gruffly asked.

"Just looking for something to eat," replied Affranchi. The bartender reached for a handful of peanuts and dropped them onto the counter.

"Do I have to order a drink too?"

"Well, this is a bar," the bartender reminded him.

"Then I'll have something with the least alcohol possible."

"You a kid?"

"I'm an adult, technically," answered Affranchi. "But I've never been to a place like this by myself."

A chuckle came from across the room, where a middle-aged man was drinking.

"Hehehe!"

"...?"

"Mix your drink with water."

The man behind the counter took a glass as he said this.

"Thanks."

Affranchi ignored him and popped open a peanut, opting not to engage in any further conversation.

The fidgety man adjusted the lapel of his jacket and said to Affranchi, "Don't take it the wrong way, but in a place like this, it's a bit unusual to be so straightforward."

"Unusual?" Affranchi repeated, his mind wandering to the peeling paint on the wall.

"Yes," the man continued, "If it's difficult to understand what you're saying, it can make people feel embarrassed. You know what I mean, Glenn?" the man called out to the bartender.

The bartender, mixing a drink with water, flashed a grin that revealed his white teeth.

"Embarrassed?" Affranchi echoed, feeling increasingly confused.

That said, trying to question a man about whom he didn't know the first thing would have been even more tedious. A glass of pale liquid clinked in front of Affranchi's eyes.

"At the same time, you pay for it, right? Sir?"

"And then you grab the glass with one hand and drink it down, easy peasy, young man from the island," the middle-aged man teased.

"I'm supposed to do it on my own?"

Affranchi asked, looking skeptically at the stranger now with a hint of rosiness to his cheeks from the alcohol.

"Heh, hehehe," the man feigned a laugh and lifted his glass to his lips.

"..."

As Affranchi munched on his peanuts and sipped his diluted drink, the barkeep suggested the middle-aged man call it a night.

"Hey, boy..."

"...?"

"What's your name? 'Boy' is a bit informal, don't you think?"

The middle-aged man said.

"It's Affranchi. That's what everyone calls me."

"Affranchi...?"

The man swiveled to face Affranchi.

"Who gave you that name?"

Affranchi evaded the question with a shrug.

"Do you know what it means?"

The middle-aged man inched closer, examining Affranchi's face.

"The meaning?"

Affranchi furrowed his brow and gazed at the man's scruffy beard and weathered skin.

"Sure, names like 'Carpenter' and 'Johnson' have pretty clear meanings, but what about 'Affranchi'? You know the meaning behind it?"

"No... I just liked the sound of it," Affranchi admitted.

"Affranchi... Affranchi... what's the best way to put it?" The man muttered, searching for the perfect phrase. With a snap of his fingers, he exclaimed, "Affranchi Char!"

"Yeah."

"Affranchi Char," he mused, "a symbol... of what I wonder?"

Deep in thought, he gazed at the ceiling, his hands tucked neatly between his legs.

"But you don't like Char, do you?" The man chuckled, revealing a row of neglected teeth.

1

"Ya know, it's a sin to be ignorant, yet it's also a sin to know too much..." the man said, letting out a chuckle, "Oh, the irony of proverbs! Much like a coin has heads and tails, truth can have two sides too!"

The middle-aged man's imposing presence radiated an air of nonchalance, suggesting a past he had long left behind. His disheveled appearance seemed out of place amidst the serene beauty of the southern islands.

But does that imply that all northerners are bound to a life of sorrow?

"I go by the name Truth Stronger," the man introduced himself, casually brandishing a bottle of spirits as he followed Affranchi out of the bar.

Affranchi tried to brush him off, but the man persisted. He staggered across the asphalt road in his drunken stupor towards Affranchi, leaving him nowhere to escape.

Driven by curiosity, Affranchi trailed the man, keeping a watchful eye on his back. The man, who identified himself as "Truth," appeared to anticipate Affranchi's actions.

"You're Affranchi Char, aren't you?" he said with an air of certainty. "A liberated Char... Did you know that?"

His drunken eyes danced around, and returned to gaze on Affranchi.

The glow from the streetlights outside the bar cast a subtle light on his face, emphasizing the lingering scent of alcohol.

"A liberated Char?"

"It's a name that carries a haunting significance," the man declared before releasing a resounding hiccup and turning away from Affranchi once more.

"I only know my foster parents..."

"Is that so?" Truth mumbled as he tucked the bottle into his jacket pocket and disappeared into the shadows.

Beyond the road facing the harbor, the path grew darker, save for the sparse lights illuminating the mountainside to their left. Despite the darkness, the glow from nearby houses made the area feel more "civilized" than the island where Affranchi had grown up.

Yet, that term seemed somehow misplaced. In this day and age, it was the more undeveloped places that were often regarded as genuinely civilized.

"Affranchi Char abandoned on the last remaining southern island on Earth without knowing his true parents... Hehehe..."

Truth chuckled softly, his silhouette seeming to eclipse the starlight.

"What did you say?" Affranchi demanded.

"You were brought to this southern island to hone your skills, shouldering the burden of the white man," Truth explained cryptically.

"The white man's burden...?"

Continuing to weave unsteadily between the palm trees, Truth elaborated, "It's the dilemma of the white man... The whites..." His final words lingered in the humid air, trailing after him as he vanished into the darkness.

2

The room brimmed with not only columns of floppy disks but also cascades of literature. However, the majority of objects lay strewn about rather than neatly organized. Three archaic reading displays also stood, their presence muted in the undulating amber glow.

"Quite the oddity, don't you think?" Truth flicked the light on by manipulating the switch on the bulb, then gestured at the luminous orb with a nod of his head.

"It's not a fluorescent panel?"

"Nope, do you know what this is called?"

"It's spherical... was it a light bulb?"

"That's right. Within the glass orb lies a filament, and when ignited, it casts this enchanting golden radiance."

"It's mesmerizing... I cannot pinpoint the reason, but it exudes a sense of antiquity, like a long-forgotten hue..."

"Absolutely. It's a light that whispers tales of bygone epochs. A dull, aged hue... And yet, within that waning chroma, lies an everlasting verity... Do you know why?"

"No..."

Truth eased into the sofa permeated with the salty essence of the sea, nestled his jacket between his legs, and extracted the liquor bottle with a deft twist.

"Really? I believe you do... Time-honored relics have undergone the trials and refinements of time, leaving only their essence to fade in hue, revealing authenticity. After all, falsehoods and fiction don't stand the test of time, right?"

Truth placed the bottle on a side table, pushing aside the volumes that had rested there.

"Oh...!"

"However, let the faded be consigned to oblivion! Just like the adage suggests, right? Truth and the like are precisely that! Heh heh heh!"

The philosopher took a swig from the liquor bottle and looked intently at Affranchi, who was standing in the center of the room.

"I see, you're... a certified white man, aren't you?"

"Do you mean I'm a purebred white man? What do you even mean by 'white man'? Which ethnic group are you referring to?"

Affranchi was mildly perturbed. He couldn't pinpoint the precise reason, but it was evident that the man's words had evoked an emotion akin to ire.

"You're asking which ethnicity the what man is... What a stupid question. Has growing up on a southern tropic island made your blood go stupid from the heat?"

"That's a disrespectful way to talk, don't you think?" Affranchi replied firmly.

"Hmm... Admirable disposition. Very well, I shall enlighten you. The white man is the patriarch of humanity. They aren't merely an ethnicity." Affranchi considered this to be the incoherent musings of an inebriated thinker.

"Patriarch of humanity? What does that mean?"

"You're one of them, and you're not even aware of it... Hehehe... I don't actually believe that white men are the patriarch. But the person who named you Affranchi, man or maybe a woman, believed that the white man is such."

The man hoisted the liquor bottle toward the light bulb before casting it on the floor. It produced a dry, empty thunk.

"Who are you? Listening to your story makes me angry."

"Why?"

"What you're uttering reeks of racial bias... Such expressions are antiquated... relics of history."

"Ah... It's remarkable that a young individual like you is familiar with such terminology."

Truth retrieved the bottle from the ground and began to drizzle droplets of booze into his open palm. His eyes locked onto Affranchi.

"You chuckled, didn't you?"

"Yes..."

"Why?"

"I merely proposed a theory, yet it provoked your anger. Why the fury? It's because you feel unease. What triggers such disquiet? It contradicts your ideals, your beliefs."

"I suppose so..."

"But, you've got it all wrong, young man."

"...?"

"The real reason for anger, the real reason for discomfort, is that you have desires you're suppressing with something called common sense. In other words, when someone points out a latent desire, a person feels genuine discomfort."

"..."

Affranchi sat down on the bed.

Kachink! Tick, tick, tick, tick

Again, that sound in Affranchi resonated powerfully, shaking the depths of his semicircular canals.

"Elucidating the subconscious... the latent consciousness, the unconscious self... Ordinary individuals dismiss its existence, but..." Truth licked his palm and yawned.

"You harbor such prejudiced perspectives..."

Affranchi tried to make some space to lie on the half-cluttered bed, the room functioning partly as a storage unit.

"Fools who grasp concepts like the subconscious mind, who can effortlessly comprehend its essence and assert that I possess such and such a subconscious mind... It's no laughing matter. The subconscious isn't that elementary... Tsk!"

Truth flung the liquor bottle out the window. In the process, his torso slid down the sofa.

"...?"

Was he going to sleep like that? Affranchi wondered.

"However, you see..." The man yawned, his chin starting to droop.

"There are instances when individuals precisely articulate their own unconsciousness..."

Affranchi contemplated closing the screen door behind the man.

"...!"

He rose and circled the sofa.

"It's emotions. Emotions... By examining one's comprehensive emotional expression, or during a moment when emotions erupt spontaneously, you can discern their latent desires... After all, self-aware consciousness is merely the tip of the iceberg..."

As those words trailed off, the man fell asleep.

3

The next day, when Affranchi woke up, the occupant of the house was no longer on the sofa.

"...?"

He went outside to check.

The location, quite a distance from the coast, felt like an inland area with a vast sugarcane field on one side.

"..."

Where had that eccentric man gone?

Affranchi rinsed his mouth and washed his face at the outdoor faucet.

"..."

Unlike the stimulating conversation he had had the previous night, his body's senses finally seemed to have returned to a state of calm.

"...!"

Suddenly, he remembered Everly Key.

So, Affranchi hurried back to the cabin and scanned the walls of the man's room.

"...!"

Affranchi looked at the faded timetable for a Hong Kong-bound ship posted on the wall.

"...?"

He checked the date on his wristwatch.

"There's no departure for Hong Kong today?"

It was a shock, as he hadn't expected this.

"So, there was no point in getting through the storm..."

During his battle with the storm, Affranchi's emotions had been linear. During such times, thoughts tend to simplify as well.

So, he had naturally believed that he could board a ship today.

He was taken aback by his simplistic assumption.

Tick, tick-tick!

People have such tendencies.

"Was the ship I saw at the pier last night not a regular service?"

Vroom vroom

The soft purr of a motorcycle engine caught Affranchi's attention as he looked out the window.

Beyond the torn screen door and through the sugarcane fields, the man from last night approached, smoothly riding his motorbike.

He sported a sun-bleached jacket and shorts, his face calm and reddened – whether from alcohol or sunburn, it was hard to tell.

"...?"

Affranchi greeted the man at the doorway.

"Good morning."

"Ah... did you sleep well?"

"Yes, there's something reassuring about sleeping under a solid roof." "Glad to hear that."

He had a fish dangling in his hand.

"Managed to nab one."

"By yourself?"

"I've got a boat... Took me twenty minutes, but it seems the world still has something to offer."

Truth grinned mischievously and asked,

"Are you tired of fish for breakfast?"

"No, not at all..."

"You're an islander, after all, right?"

As the man headed to the kitchen, Affranchi asked,

"Could I stay here again tonight? I'll pay."

"Really? It's quite expensive, you know?"

"...?"

Realizing he had unintentionally offended the man, Affranchi apologized.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know how else to ask... I apologize for bringing up money."

Even though it was called the kitchen, it was just a room separated by a single door.

"Hehehe..."

The man's back seemed to laugh as he continued into the kitchen.

"How about you clean my room for me? That'll be your rent."

"Sure..." Affranchi agreed.

That day, Affranchi spent the whole day cleaning Truth Stronger's room.

The small shack consisted of a living room, kitchen, toilet, and shower room, but Affranchi ended up taking a whole day to organize the books and floppy disks.

"First Love? A Russian novel?"

"Mechanics and Histology of Plastic Fatigue?"

"Whale Breeding?"

"History of the Buddhist System?"

With a large number of books and floppy disks, you can learn a lot about these sorts of different things. They ranged from historical accounts, travelogues, space colony construction manuals, geology, oceanography, orchid cultivation techniques, and even deciphering books for Tagalog, ancient Basque, and Esperanto languages.

"Tank Technology Development Competition During World War II. The History of Space Migration up to Neo Zeon. Hormones, Myosin, and Actin Metabolism. The Krater Series..."

Affranchi stopped trying to figure out the person named Truth Stronger.

"He must be quite the hobbyist.."

As Affranchi spent the entire day toiling away cleaning, Truth spent the entire day outside with a portable display. Could he make a living without doing any work? Affranchi couldn't help but feel puzzled by Truth's appearance, which didn't seem to reek of daily life.

Dinner was the same as breakfast. The sun was still high in the sky. As the calm hour ended, the wind became gentle and pleasant before nightfall.

"Thank you for the meal."

"You earned it, you've worked hard. Thanks to you, I don't know how to find what I want to read."

"Sorry, I didn't know how to categorize the books, so I just tidied them up as best I could."

"Being too clean feels strange."

"Really...?"

"Don't you think we live quite comfortably amidst the chaos?"

"Chaos?"

"Is there anyone who lives only for one discipline? We eat, we sleep – even these actions involve a combination of multiple knowledge areas. That's why living with things neatly organized feels off..."

"That's an interesting argument."

Affranchi laughed.

"Is it strange?"

"Maybe. People can't do everything. So, even though our lives may be chaotic, we process information like high-performance computers, choosing what to focus on and moving forward."

"I didn't expect to hear about organization theory."

Truth chuckled bitterly.

Tonight, he hadn't started drinking yet.

"People say we can only do one thing at a time, but are we really that limited?"

"I'd like to think that human abilities are infinite."

"Interesting contradiction. Isn't the will to choose what to focus on a challenge towards the infinite?"

"...?"

"Out in space, there's a new world for humanity – space colonies."

"I've heard of them... People living in space..."

"It's because of these colonies that humanity, now numbering over ten billion, can still live on Earth. In the last century, people believed that once Earth's population exceeded twelve billion, humanity would self-destruct."

"But thanks to human wisdom, we've managed to survive until now..."

"The creator of these space colonies was a white person."

"Are we back to that story? So, you're saying other ethnic groups are subordinate to white people?"

"There's a theory like that. Both Earth and the universe exist for white people to share. Affranchi Char appeared to put that idea into practice."

"Again..."

"I told you, didn't I? Affranchi is a term for the Franks who were liberated. Frank is a general term for white people. The prefix 'a' denotes free or liberated. Put together, and it's Affranchi. The person who named you must have had the rebirth of white people in mind, right?"

"...So, Affranchi Char is... like a king for white people...?"

Affranchi muttered, still not quite understanding.

"So, your name isn't like the name Campbell, which is just meant to intimidate enemies."

"Campbell?"

"That comes from an old Celtic word for boar. To use such a name as your family name implies that it's meant to intimidate enemies. But Affranchi is different."

"Is that so?"

"However, I don't like the 'Char' part... it's Oriental, isn't it?"

"..."

"But there's a strange persuasiveness in the combination of a name that evokes other ethnicities and Affranchi. It means don't forget your enemies, right?"

"Is it that combative?"

"Listen. To make both Earth and space belong to white people, we have to defeat other ethnicities. If we don't, the world will never truly belong to white people. A world ruled by the powerless will only cause chaos."

"I understand that logic, but..."

"Hate it all you want, Affranchi. But remember this: God placed other ethnicities in the world to challenge white people and spread the seeds of conflict. If they exist for that purpose, they are both adversaries and potential allies for white people. Only by mastering and defeating them can white people become the true masters of the world."

"I understand the argument, but I'm Char, a freed white person. I won't get on board with that line of thinking."

"Hmm... Do you answer that way because I'm only giving you the logic, not speaking sincerely?"

Truth Stronger sighed.

"Yes, Truth, there's something I don't understand. Please tell me."

"What is it?"

"Why, during the space colony era, were none of the people living on these islands forcibly relocated?"

"Ah... everyone living here, including us, has been allowed to live here. Or rather, we've been made to live here."

"Made to live here? For what purpose?"

"To forge white people."

Truth had a smug grin on his face.

"Are we going back to that topic again?"

"The mistake of the space colony project was that there were fools who thought that in space, a new global race that transcends ethnicity could be created."

"You mean like Earthlings?"

"That's right. Those who think ethnicities can mix."

"Is that a bad way of thinking?"

"Who can say? I don't know."

Truth, who was sober, simply said that.

4

The next day, Affranchi went to the pier to catch the regular ferry to Hong Kong.

The sunshine from the south was intense and hot.

"You are an intriguing person. I've come to believe that the world throws challenges at us sometimes."

Truth was in a good mood.

"So are you saying the people around here were left on Earth as a test?"

Sneering at Affranchi's misguided response, Truth said, "What's troubling is that the will of the people and the will of the world are, on a latent level, doing things like this. I find it unbearable."

"Why is that?"

"It's impossible to sense a person's desire to consciously oppress and experiment on people, right? The people only knew to resist when there was someone like Hitler, for example. But since the subconscious mind is a mystery, we have no idea where to attack to eliminate the wicked logic that induces madmen to use people for experiments."

"True..."

"And if you're being oppressed, there's no way to just leave, which is frustrating, right?"

"You don't like the feeling of not being free, do you, Truth Stronger?"

Truth frowned.

That's when it happened.

"Af-franchi Char!"

Affranchi looked in the direction of the voice.

Everly Key was running towards Affranchi, her back to the pier.

"Eva...?"

Affranchi muttered under his breath.

But Truth heard Affranchi.

"...?!"

As Everly was running toward him, Affranchi saw Truth's stout body sliding in between them.

In front of Truth was Everly, whose face was full of joy.

Everly was wearing a modest dress!

Yet her whole body was overflowing with joy as she ran towards them in the bright morning sunlight.

Then...

Smack!

Truth slapped Everly's left cheek, and Affranchi saw her flinch to his left.

"Don't you dare come near Affranchi, vile woman!"

Affranchi heard his voice overlapping with Everly's figure flowing through the air.

1

"Truth!"

As Everly brushed past him, Affranchi broke into a run.

"Affranchi, you embody the pureblood myth! I can't stand a woman who doesn't understand the importance of that, approaching you like some subservient dog, tail wagging!"

Truth's voice echoed in Affranchi's ears, enraging him.

"That's just your prejudice! It's unforgivable!" Affranchi shouted back, his anger even more intense than Truth's, and his arm shoved the man away.

"Affranchi!"

In the sunlight, Truth's eyes, hidden deep within the shadows of his sockets, quivered.

"Your expression of emotion reveals a twisted subconscious!"

Affranchi's words were not those of an island youth ignorant of the world. He crouched beside Everly, who had collapsed on the pier's planks, gently touching her shoulder and waist.

"Ah!"

Affranchi's consciousness marveled. In the sunlight, her body, clad in a modest dress, accentuating her firm, voluptuous curves, radiating brilliantly.

She exuded the intoxicating aroma of youth.

"To be frank, it's a tool employed by women to lure in men."

This assertion stems from the fact that "female humans resorted to utilizing their sex appeal every day of the year due to being in more perilous circumstances than other creatures."

Tick...

The familiar sound within Affranchi resounded once more, ringing clear.

Nevertheless, such a backdrop should no longer be relevant in contemporary times. Humanity had surpassed mere sexual desires.

And yet, they still acknowledged sex.

The chasm between reality and perception...

"Why did you come here?"

"I want to go, too."

Everly's eyes, contrasting Affranchi and the man standing behind him, trembled.

"He's a friend. Just a type we haven't known until now." Affranchi didn't have the confidence to explain it any better to her.

"You ought to choose a woman as well! One suitable for you!"

Truth hurled another venomous phrase.

"I've grown weary of your prejudice."

"Is that what you say to the one who educated you!"

"Affranchi has been liberated; that's the precise meaning. 'Fran' signifies freedom itself, and the Franks is a term originating from the Gothic language, encompassing the Germanic sense of superiority over Latin and Slavic people. Furthermore, the meaning of the Franks shifted to denote a privileged class and later became a derogatory term for Christians in the Arab world. It's not uncommon for the meanings of words to be detached from their etymology and used freely. It's laughable to try to construct logic and speak of truth based on such words."

"...?"

At Affranchi's words, the philosopher opened his mouth wide in surprise and stepped back.

"Despite knowing all that, you still listened to my story?"

"I was forced to listen, and then I remembered... that's who I am."

"Hahaha... Is that so? I meant to explain it as a story about what your godparents thought when they named you. The prejudice lies with the parents who gave you the name Affranchi."

Affranchi no longer wanted to engage with the man.

"Thank you. These two days have been an intriguing and stimulating experience. I am grateful."

Affranchi, embracing Everly's waist, turned his back on the man.

"I have no interest in such a young man either!"

Receiving those words from Truth Stronger, Affranchi directed his steps towards the gangway of the scheduled ship.

"Can I come with you?"

"No, it's not a good idea."

Affranchi responded firmly.

"Affranchi!"

Everly stifled her words and halted.

2

To Affranchi's surprise, he managed to resist his persistent inner cravings for intimacy and reject Everly, just as he had before.

"Affranchi!"

A voice called out distinctly from over his shoulder.

"I had a hunch it was you."

Affranchi caught sight of his friend, Carey Howe, standing across from the regular ferry's gangway. He had just climbed up after mooring his boat below the pier.

"Can't you take her with you?"

Carey Howe inquired tentatively.

People swarmed around them, readying themselves to board the regular ferry. Indians, Vietnamese, Chinese, Whites, Blacks, and Middle Easterners were all present—every race remaining on Earth frequented this small island.

"Does this place serve as proof that it's an experimental region on Earth?"

Affranchi remembered Truth Stronger's words.

"Carey, I need you to take Everly back to the island with you. Consider it almost an order."

Carey Howe stammered as he prepared to reply. Feeling sorry for his friend, Affranchi continued.

"You know I have a mission to fulfill. I must return to where I came from, a truly dangerous place. I love Everly and don't want to put her in harm's way by bringing her there."

Affranchi let go of Everly.

He broke contact with her, emphasizing the gravity of his words. However, he found himself dumbfounded by his own statements.

"Where I came from?"

"A mission?"

"A dangerous place?"

"Everly getting hurt?"

These were all unverified notions.

"Affranchi... I understand your point, but it's unfair to Everly. That's why I brought her to you. I believed that with you, she would avoid the storm..."

Carey Howe spoke, rubbing his body as if distressed.

"Affranchi, is what you just mentioned true?"

"It is..."

"Will you always be gone?"

"I can only return if it's for you, Everly."

"Oh, Affranchi Char! In that case, I'll wait. I'll wait for you forever?"

Naturally, her willingness to do so would bring him immense joy.

"Had you told me earlier, I wouldn't have chased after you."

"You know I couldn't ask you to do that. Even you have the right to live freely and enjoy your life..."

"That's not true! To me, Affranchi, you are everything!"

Everly wrapped her arms around Affranchi's neck and embraced him with all her strength. Affranchi reciprocated by holding her waist firmly.

Looking past Everly's shoulder, Affranchi locked eyes with a disheartened Carey Howe.

He shrugged his shoulders and a forced grin.

3

Affranchi leaned on the handrail and waved goodbye to Carey Howe and Everly as they stood on the pier. At first, Everly raised her hand in response but then buried her face in Carey's shoulder, shaking and overcome with sobs. Affranchi couldn't help but notice the apologetic look on Carey's face.

"Carey, promise me you'll watch over Everly!"

He shouted out to them.

"Take care of her."

Those vague words held a multitude of meanings. Their shared apprehension for the unknown future and potential transformations that awaited... Did it concern Carey and Everly, or was it something else entirely? Affranchi couldn't be sure, but it was alright not to have all the answers. Such ambiguity was life's most reliable response to its inherent unpredictability.

"Even though that's the truth for life, in my case, it's embodied in the name Affranchi..." he mused, disgusted.

Vrrrrrrn!

The whistle blew, and the regular ferry departed, casting waves to collide with the dock and the vessel's hull.

"That ambiguity... it's a veil that preserves the dignity of existence and conceals the folly of humanity," Affranchi mused internally.

Affranchi borrowed a hammock and stretched out on the crowded deck, letting the sea breeze wash over him. The deck was so packed with cargo that scarcely any room remained to stand.

The island's fruit fetched a high price in Hong Kong, not for its uniqueness but because local produce was celebrated as cultural fare.

He didn't know how long he slept, but Affranchi sensed an uneasy ambiance even in his sleep.

"Eek!"

"Pirates!"

"They've taken a hostage!"

It wasn't long before such cries reached his ears with absolute clarity.

"A hijacking?"

Affranchi sat up in his hammock, wide awake. Passengers amid the cargo had moved to the left.

Bang! Bang!

The sharp, out-of-place sound echoed from the starboard side, cutting through the humid atmosphere.

"..."

Affranchi leaned over the handrail. A cruiser was positioned in front of them, about to make contact.

"We've got a hostage! Let us board, or we'll kill her!"

A man with a bullhorn yelled from the helm of the cruiser.

"A hostage?"

Two men appeared on the vessel's port side, gripping a bound girl between them.

"Everly?" he whispered, his heart dropping at the sight.

"Is she really a hostage? Isn't that girl part of the gang, too?" a crew member on the ferry's bridge retorted.

"How could you even joke about something like this?"

The man with the bullhorn gestured, and one of his accomplices pressed a gun to Everly's temple.

"I'm not one of them! Please help me!" Everly shrieked.

"If she dies, it's on you!" The man threatened.

"Go ahead and try!" a hot-headed captain retorted from the ferry's bridge. He seemed like a hot-headed man.

"Stop it, Captain! She's really being held hostage! She's my friend!" Affranchi hollered as he sprinted along the ship's edge towards the bridge.

The man on the cruiser spotted Affranchi running and said, "Captain! There's a friend of the hostage among the passengers! Ask that man!"

As the amplified voice reached him, Affranchi scrambled up the ladder leading to the bridge.

"Captain!" He vaulted over the restricted access barrier that connected the upper deck to the bridge.

"Are you one of them too?!" he asked, bewildered.

Affranchi was incensed by the captain's unanticipated accusation.

"What are you talking about?! That girl is my fiancée!"

"Really...?" The captain hesitated.

"Don't think islanders are stupid! Don't shoot her! She's my future wife!" Affranchi's words were met with roaring laughter from the men on the cruiser.

"Affranchi!"

Life returned to Everly's expression.

"Eva!"

"Don't move! I mean, what are the chances her man happens to be here, Captain! If you don't let us on board, we'll just have to have our way with her!" One of the men threatened.

"Heh! Hehe! It's a lesser sin than killing her!" One of the men holding Everly hitched up her skirt.

"Stop it!" Everly fought back, only to be met with a slap across her cheek.

"Ouch!"

"Eva!"

Affranchi tried to climb over the handrail.

"Wait, young man!"

The captain stopped Affranchi and addressed the men on the cruiser, "Get on board! But don't you dare harm the girl!"

4

"Make sure you tow the cruiser properly, got it?"

"We're doing it! What do you think this hijacking is for?!"

The crew, threatened by the two men, went to the stern to secure the ropes that connected the cruiser.

In front of them stood three men.

The one who appeared to be the leader wielded a compact machine gun.

"You'll find out when we get to Hong Kong. In the meantime, radio operator! Step forward!"

When the leader-like man found the radio operator among the lined-up crew members, he said, "We intercepted the radio message you sent to the police," and struck the radio operator with the butt of his machine gun.

"Ugggh!"

"You've got some nerve!"

The radio operator crumpled onto the deck, receiving kicks from all sides.

Everly, forced to stand across from the man, had her arms twisted so harshly that her elbows nearly met. Her captors showed no mercy in binding her; instead, they appeared clueless about proper procedure. She was simply restrained, haphazardly and brutally.

"Change course and head for Hong Kong. The police won't catch us. Isn't that right, Captain?"

"Got it. There's no valuable cargo on board anyway, you know that, right?"

"Hmph! We're not pirates," the man said, letting out a laugh, "You said you're name was Affranchi, yeah? You've got quite a pretty girl with you."

The man with the machine gun, swung his hips back and forth, eyes darting back and forth between the two.

"Heh, hehehehe!"

"Do they want something from me?" Affranchi thought to himself.

"We've got time. Guess I'll have my way with the girl later, won't I?"

"Just try it and see what happens..."

In an instant, the man's machine gun barrel collided with Affranchi's side.

"Ungh!"

Affranchi doubled over in pain.

"You won't act so tough when I put a bullet in you. Got it?"

Affranchi gradually straightened up, clutching his side. It didn't hurt as much as he pretended.

"Affranchi, right? That's you, isn't it?"

"What if it is? What does it matter?" Affranchi responded coolly, having no memory of being targeted by this man.

"What does it matter? If you're Affranchi, this is what you get!"

The man swung the machine gun at him, aiming for his solar plexus. Affranchi shielded himself with his elbow but still absorbed the impact.

"Agh!"

"Next is the jaw," Affranchi thought as the man used the butt of the machine gun to strike.

"Simple, huh?!"

Affranchi absorbed the blow to his jaw somewhat but mostly deflected the man's force and fell. For a moment, the man appeared

baffled, likely because he didn't feel the expected impact. Affranchi grew slightly uneasy.

Moreover, he was surprised at his ability to predict everything that was happening in such a spontaneous situation.

"Hahaha! Just like Truth said, you're a weakling! Mikhail!"

The man standing before Everly applauded, and the man who had struck Affranchi regained his confidence, smirking.

"It's just a side job. Is this good enough?"

The man said, poking Affranchi with the barrel of the machine gun.

"Truth? Michael? No, he said Mikhail, right...?"

"Alright, men, toss them in the cargo hold!"

Affranchi shut his eyes. He and Everly would be held captive separately!

"Get over here! You want to die?!"

The machine gun glinted. Affranchi could see the determination in the eyes of Mikhail, the man issuing orders to his accomplices flanking Everly.

"An ordinary person can be manipulated like that... I need to be careful."

Affranchi observed the men's actions with a composed demeanor, even as he worried about Everly. A conviction grew within him. The men's overconfidence provided an opening for him to exploit.

The man who had been standing behind Everly turned his back and stepped forward to face the crew. Mikhail, wielding the machine gun, attempted to move behind Affranchi. The man holding the end of Everly's rope tried to push his way between crew members.

Pretending to be in pain and clutching his stomach, Affranchi staggered towards Everly. He then lunged at the man holding the rope and seized the gun from him.

Tick!

The sound of the gun firing in Affranchi's hand and the sound that rang in his mind coincided.

"Agh!"

Blood splattered on Mikhail's shoulder.

"Next!"

Affranchi's handgun shattered the advancing man's hand and then kicked up Mikhail's machine gun as he tried to recover his poise.

"Ugh!"

The crew members pounced on the men, and Affranchi embraced Everly.

"Ha!" A sigh of relief escaped Everly's lips.

The entire episode transpired in an instant. As the moment faded, both the crew of the regular liner and the hijackers stared at Affranchi, tense.

"W-what the hell? This isn't what we were told..." One of the hijackers whimpered.

"Are you some kind of pro? Or a soldier?" The captain asked Affranchi while helping restrain Mikhail.

"No... I wouldn't have fought back if they hadn't used a woman as a tool. Call the two who are preparing to tow the cruiser," Affranchi said, making sure a crew member was untying Everly's ropes.

The captain and the radio operator picked up the guns dropped by the young men and forced them to the ship's stern.

Seeing their three comrades surrender, the remaining two men also dropped their guns.

5

"Mikhail Kinzey, huh? He says he has no background?"

"I don't really understand. What does that mean?"

"I don't have the ability to investigate nor the desire to do so. We just need to hand them over to the police, right?"

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"Either they're petty thieves or part of an anti-Earth Federation government movement. Either way, it's quite common."

"I see. So it's quite chaotic, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is," the captain said, opening a can of juice.

Affranchi and Everly were in a spacious cabin of a first-class stateroom.

"I understand how you feel, but even if we inform the police, they won't come. They'll just say to bring them to Hong Kong. That's how the current Federation bureaucracy is."

"I see..."

"Oh, and I want to clear up a misunderstanding. I don't want you to think I have any sort of prejudice. When I thought you were one of the hijackers, it was because you were dressed like them. It's difficult to judge a person by their appearance alone. I hope you understand."

"It's okay. What happened, happened."

"No, there's something more important. You possessed the same intensity as the hijackers. Power. A spirit that radiates strength. In reality, you single-handedly defeated the hijackers."

"It was just the adrenaline rush of seeing her taken hostage."

"I served in the military myself. Your performance was on par with that of a trained soldier. I was impressed."

"Thank you."

"Um... Please, relax. Until we reach Hong Kong, you two are this ship's VIPs."

"Isn't that kind of treatment a form of discrimination?"

"Not at all. You're still young, aren't you? Is it because of someone's abilities that they are treated with hospitality? It's just common courtesy, and it's not the same as discrimination."

"Courtesy, huh...?"

"If there's anything that sets humans apart from animals, it's this."

Affranchi remembered that there was another way of thinking about this matter. However, he didn't feel like discussing it with the captain, so he just smiled and nodded.

And then, the room was just for Affranchi and Everly. Affranchi gently caressed the rope marks left on Everly's arm.

"Oh, Affranchi, if we could have moments like this, maybe we wouldn't have to part ways in Hong Kong."

"I can't say for sure," Affranchi replied, feeling a pang of pain at Everly's selfless words.

1

The impoverished lovers Affranchi Char and Everly Key. However, Affranchi's bravery and Everly's beauty and attentive demeanor endeared them to the ship's crew. That's why they were allowed to use the first-class cabin, although it meant they had less time alone.

"Well, it's clear that Everly only has eyes for you and hasn't spared us even a glance. But that's part of her charm. I usually have no patience for lovebirds, but with Everly, it's different. When I see you two together, I sense a deeper connection," the captain mused more than once.

"I'm not sure what to say to that," Affranchi admitted, his cheeks turning pink.

"Don't be shy. It takes a man of true merit to make a woman fall head over heels. Wear that as a badge of honor. It's your medal," the captain encouraged.

Affranchi's face flushed even more, and he cast his eyes downward. Everly gazed from the captain to Affranchi's rosy visage, her own eyes twinkling.

Seeing Everly like this, the captain remarked, "It's a wonder that such a girl still exists on Earth. Maybe humanity isn't entirely doomed after all."

With that, he rose and took his leave. Later that day, as their destination in Hong Kong neared, Affranchi Char ventured to the ship's hold to confront the young men responsible for the hijacking.

Two crew members stood guard, tasked with watching over him.

Affranchi struggled to comprehend the true motive behind the hijacking. The captain's explanation seemed far too simplistic.

"They're rebelling against the Earth Federation government, which governs over 20 billion people across the planet and space colonies. They're perpetually discontented, the sort who can't find satisfaction without voicing their grievances," the captain had explained.

The windowless cargo hold was permeated by a musty scent, and the faint glow from the night lamps cast an oppressive ambiance, which persisted even during daylight hours.

"I don't understand why you attacked this ship just to target me. Did Truth Stronger compensate you that handsomely?" Affranchi inquired.

In response to his first question, Mikhail Kinsey flashed his pearly whites. "No, it was merely a coincidence."

"A coincidence?"

"Yeah, who would have thought you were such a valuable man? Haha. We knew you were skilled, though."

"Did you learn about me?"

"We did, indeed."

"What did Truth request of you?"

"He said to kill you."

Mikhail replied casually. The simplicity of the answer made Affranchi realize the wickedness of human sensibilities once more.

"I see. Was abducting Everly Key also part of Truth's plan?"

"That's part of it, but we also thought she was a good girl based on our own judgment."

"Why's that?"

"Because she's innocent."

"So, you're implying she's easily manipulated?"

"Precisely... Haha!"

Mikhail chuckled at Affranchi's guarded line of questioning, seemingly amused by the conversation.

Affranchi felt his anger rise but forced it down and posed another question.

"Is your name Mikhail derived from Michael, like the archangel?"

Mikhail's irritation surfaced this time, "That funny to you or something?" he snapped back.

"No, I simply don't know much about angels."

"Don't you like it? What's your issue?"

"There's a lot I don't know. That's why I seek to learn. That's the truth."

"Kind of like your woman? She's too trusting, which made her easy to approach."

Affranchi felt that this man enjoyed stirring up other people's emotions.

"So, you thought she was a promiscuous woman?"

"Exactly? Hahahaha!" Mikhail Kinsey and his cohorts erupted in laughter once more. Their crude chuckles reverberated through the

ship's hold, agitating the stale atmosphere and causing the hull to sway listlessly.

"She's the type to fool around, huh?"

A coarse voice came from the back. "Does that mean she'd sleep with just anyone?"

"Isn't that what people on the island do?"

"?!"

Enraged, Affranchi swung his fist. Despite his hands being bound by rope, Mikhail nimbly evaded, but Affranchi's fist tracked Mikhail's cheek.

However, the fist stopped just before it touched Mikhail's cheek. For a moment, a tumult of thoughts and emotions battled within Affranchi.

Tick, tick, tick, tick!

That sound resounded once more.

At Affranchi's tongue-clicking, "Heh! It's not right to hurt someone who's restrained," Mikhail grumbled.

"You're a smart man."

Affranchi wanted to clarify that his reason for stopping wasn't so straightforward but chose not to. If he confessed that he was simply obeying the sound, they would only mock him again.

"Why did you abduct Everly?"

"I didn't know she was your woman. She was getting cozy with another man."

"That's Carey Howe. A mutual friend of Everly's and mine."

"Really? They appeared quite close. That's why I knocked him out and took her aboard the boat. To be honest, I thought she'd be a woman who'd appeal to us because she seemed strong-willed. A hostage considered a friend is no good. I wanted a woman who would likely put up a spirited fight."

"Truth Stronger ordered it too. Why! You racist bastard!" Affranchi grabbed Mikhail's T-shirt collar.

"Don't throw outdated terms at me, Bossman."

Mikhail remained composed.

"Tell me what you're after! Your boat is laden with high-grade explosives. Why? Are you anti-Earth Government activists?"

"We're just going to blow up the shuttle launch pad in Hong Kong. Earth-dwellers don't need to inhabit space. Truth concentrates on race, but we're different. Our focus is the conflict between Earth and space..."

"But you targeted Everly due to racial prejudice."

"I told you it was coincidental. You're really a naive islander, aren't you? Yet you employ kickboxing or taekwondo or something similar. I don't comprehend that."

"I don't recall learning any martial arts," Affranchi retorted irritably, releasing his grip on Mikhail.

"You're lying... you're white, right? Affranchi, what did you say it was?"

"Char..."

"Ah, right... so, why do you despise Truth Stronger? He's your pal, isn't he?"

"Blowing up the shuttle launch pad won't separate Earth and space... and you can't stop someone coming down from space."

"Sure, we can. We just need to rattle the Federation. And then profit from it."

"How absurd!"

"Really? Well, on top of that, we'll seize control of the Federation."

Once more, the young men's laughter, tinged with derision, filled the hold.

"Hahaha..."

Affranchi joined in their laughter.

Tick!

There was a distinct sound of something snapping.

"If what you say is true, I'll lend you a hand."

The reverberations of the sound still lingered in Affranchi's head.

"Huh...?"

"I hate that kind of joke the most. But if you're serious, I'll lend a hand."

"And if it was just a joke?"

Affranchi took out a knife from his back pocket.

"I'll kill you. So, are you genuinely joking with me?"

"Uh...?"

Mikhail Kinsey gazed at Affranchi, his mouth agape.

Affranchi brandished the knife blade.

"Kukuku...!"

The young men behind Mikhail snickered in the shadows.

"That's enough!"

Mikhail yelled, then turned back to Affranchi.

"We're serious. Otherwise, I wouldn't bother with such a pain-in-the-ass hijacking."

"What organization is backing you?"

"That was a mean joke. We still don't know anything about you... Just think of us as the Hong Kong Mafia."

"Got it."

Affranchi rose to his feet and folded the knife blade.

It was an unsettling moment for the young men. It appeared as though a light hovered behind Affranchi.

2

As Affranchi emerged from the cargo hold, a pair of crew members outside the door breathed a sigh of relief.

"Quiet in there?" one of them asked.

"Yeah," replied Affranchi, "they seem like they're at their breaking point. They're probably regretting their decisions."

"Did you learn anything?" another crew member inquired.

"They mentioned the Hong Kong Mafia is funding them."

"Figures," the crew member said. "Those types always create chaos in society and profit off it."

"Being from the islands makes it hard to know about those kinds of things," Affranchi said. "But where's the money coming from?"

"The mainland government. If they create enough havoc, the government pays out, and companies hand over cash when passengers are held hostage. Insurance easily covers the expenses..."

With the two crew members guarding him, Affranchi ascended the gangway.

"Want to see the engine room?" one of them asked.

"No, I'll visit with Everly later. Is that alright?"

"Sure thing."

They climbed up to the next floor.

Passengers crowded the narrow deck, with people praying in front of the bathroom at the back.

"The water's overflowing!"

"That's because you guys don't know how to use it!"

One of the crew members behind Affranchi snapped, "Can't you be nicer to them?"

"Listen," he continued in a hushed tone, "those guys take advantage of kindness. Please, just go ahead."

As Affranchi made his way up the ramp, he caught a glimpse of the chaos on the floor.

"Oh no, why didn't they warn us it had gotten this bad?"

The crew member whispered this and rushed to the bathroom, pushing aside the passengers.

As Affranchi stepped onto the ramp, he peeked at the commotion on that floor.

"Oh no! Why didn't they let us know it had gotten this bad!"

The bathroom was overflowing with sewage, sloshing back and forth with the ship's movement.

The crew member opened the hatch at the end of the corridor facing the bathroom.

"Wait! I'll call the person in charge!" he shouted, running towards Affranchi, who opened the gangway for him.

"What's on the other side?" Affranchi asked.

"Cargo. There's no way water could get in there," the crew member standing above him laughed.

"It's almost time to arrive in Hong Kong, and they're still causing trouble," he added.

Affranchi felt confident that the promise with those men would soon be fulfilled.

3

"Tour the engine room?"

Everly wore a puzzled expression.

"I know you're not interested, Everly, but would you do it for me?"

"Affranchi...?"

"To be honest, I'm not sure why. I just feel like we have to."

"Oh...! Affranchi Char!"

Everly embraced him, her arms wrapped around his neck.

She said nobly that she might be able to part ways with him if their time together on this ship lasted.

Yet the warmth of her embrace...

"Boppo-kkyu-kkyu!"

Everly placed both hands near her ears, comically mimicking the movement of a cylinder head.

"Hahaha!"

"Classic Everly!"

The mechanics laughed and enjoyed her lighthearted antics.

Grateful for Everly's sincerity and initiative, Affranchi took advantage of the situation to swipe some machine oil and a rag.

On the way back, he also picked up a length of rope.

"What are you going to do with that?"

Everly asked as she watched Affranchi soak the palm rope with oil.

"Well, the world is... dirty, or rather, scary, and different from the island. You should go back to the island, Everly."

Affranchi coiled the rope.

"Is it for going to space?"

"That's the plan. I may not make it, though..."

"You will."

"Once I figure out what I need to do, I'll come for you."

Everly didn't respond.

Affranchi looked at her downcast back, resisting the urge to embrace her, and opened the door to the room.

Shortly after he returned to the room where Everly was waiting, black smoke billowed from the cargo hold near the economy-class restroom.

Affranchi knew that the cargo hold was right above the room where Mikhail Kinsey and the others were.

4

"What's going on?"

When Affranchi stepped onto the deck from the room, the crew members were scrambling about.

"Everything's fine here! We can even see Hong Kong now!"

"A fire started on some fabric!"

A crew member clutching a fire extinguisher hurried past.

"Stay put!"

"Affranchi!"

Affranchi instructed Everly to remain where she was before heading to the lower deck.

"What about the men we detained?"

Affranchi asked the deck officer in charge of putting out the fire.

"We're getting them out now. It's dangerous down there with all the smoke!" Affranchi peered down the ladder from the upper deck through the crowd of evacuating passengers.

Kinsey and his group were climbing up.

"Cough, cough!"

Hunched over and choking, Mikhail noticed Affranchi and looked at him with tear-filled eyes.

"Hey!"

Affranchi took out a knife and cut the rope around Michael's wrists.

"Was this... your doing?"

"Don't leave the rope here..."

"Got it."

Mikhail leaned over the side of the ship, confirming their boat was still tethered behind them.

"Don't blow up the shuttle rail. I'm going to need it soon."

Affranchi whispered into Mikhail's ear.

"Using the available facilities without destabilizing the Federation is the right thing to do."

With that, Affranchi moved to the next man ascending the ladder, and as he brushed past him, cut the ropes around his wrists,

"Follow Mikhail."

"Huh? Oh!"

Affranchi pushed the knife into the man's hand, then navigated through the crowd of evacuees to the upper deck, where he accepted a fire extinguisher from a descending crew member.

"We're going to need more of these!"

With a determined shout, Affranchi rushed towards the blaze.

At that moment, he saw Mikhail and the others being carried away by the current.

Ignoring it, Affranchi joined the crew in putting out the fire.

He tried to forget about the men.

"I shouldn't remember. That's a different matter."

He deliberately forced himself to forget, as though under self-hypnosis.

If he remembered, he'd be forced to lie.

Nonetheless, his aid in the firefighting efforts allowed Affranchi to dispose of the charred remains of the palm rope near the cargo hold entrance.

"Be sure to douse the back with plenty of fire suppressant!"

As the captain barked the order, the situation finally began to subside. It was then that the crew members realized the freed men had disappeared.

"The boat!"

By the time the captain roared on the bridge, Mikhail Kinsey and his cohorts' cruiser was already speeding towards Hong Kong. Ahead of them, a huge structure towered between the sea and the island: the launch rail for the space shuttle.

"The fire was deliberately set. Someone took advantage of the restroom cleaning to sneak in."

"If that's the case, I could be suspected too."

"Right... The police will likely investigate, but we can't hold the passengers indefinitely..."

"What about the boat...?"

"We've contacted the Hong Kong authorities. I'd like to think they won't get away, but the police can be slow."

"I'm sorry for causing so much trouble on board."

"A promising young person like you shouldn't say that... Speaking of which, there might be a passenger identity check. Can you write down your accommodations in Hong Kong?"

"Yes..."

Affranchi replied nonchalantly, though he had no prearranged accommodations. He returned to his room and wrote down the name and address of a hotel listed in the tourist guide on the form the captain had given him.

"Affranchi!"

At Everly's voice, Affranchi approached the window.

The ship was just passing beneath the massive shuttle launch rail.

"Did humans make this?"

"It seems so. Even bigger things are floating in space."

"I see..."

Everly looked up at the towering steel lattice over the sea with a worried expression.

"It's scary..."

"Things look so different on TV..."

Affranchi, too, was captivated by the same sense of awe as Everly.

"We didn't know anything living on that island, did we?"

"No, we didn't."

While Affranchi's eyes were drawn to the artificial landscape of the island where the rail began, he pondered the meaning of Everly's question.

"Our island... it was deliberately isolated. The adults on the island were gathered because they only cared about surviving..."

"Why?"

"Maybe they wanted to create a paradise just for those kinds of people."

"Who did...?"

"I can't begin to imagine."

Affranchi sighed.

"So, it's a paradise there..."

"Yes. Outside, islands are packed with cars, concrete, and plastic. Over there is the mainland... Look! The air is polluted."

"Yeah..."

Everly leaned towards the direction where she thought the city of Hong Kong was.

"The air is so stagnant and black..."

"If that's modern life, I can see why someone would want a paradise..."

"Affranchi... You study a lot, don't you?"

Everly looked intently at Affranchi's face again.

"I don't remember studying. You know that better than anyone. We went to the same high school on the island, and after that, we either dived into the sea or worked in the fields."

"That's true. Even at that school, the teachers didn't teach us anything. Not about the colonies floating in space, nor about wars... My parents were uneducated, so they only knew how to catch fish and grow taro."

"No, they also taught us how to weave, didn't they?"

"Yes...!"

"And Gaba Su taught us how to navigate by looking at the stars and the moon. That's amazing, isn't it?"

"Why?"

"The captain of this ship said that he could navigate just by looking at the machines. But that would make us forget that the ship is sailing on the sea. In the same way, if we could survive like that, it would be very unnatural."

"I see... People outside live like that, right?"

"That's why the island's way of life is right. Bringing together people who wanted to protect that kind of lifestyle was the right thing to do."

"Even so... Affranchi, are you leaving?"

"Why?"

In that instant, for some reason, Affranchi sensed it might be the last opportunity to tell Everly the truth.

So, he told her.

"It's because of the sound inside me."

"Sound?"

"Yes, the sound. The sound of the universe resonates in my head. No, it's in my memories. That's a better way to put it."

When the ship arrived at the port of Hong Kong in the evening, the two of them were the first to disembark. As the captain had predicted, the police had not yet arrived at the pier, thanks to their

negligence. If they had been there, Affranchi would have been questioned and likely apprehended for his clumsy crime.

"Affranchi Char?"

In front of the towering buildings, a well-dressed woman stood before the awestruck Affranchi and Everly.

"We've been expecting you. Please come with me."

Before Affranchi and Everly could answer, the woman led them to a luxurious car.

Chapter.06

THE LEGACY OF SIEG ZEON

1

In the heart of Hong Kong.

The era is the Universal Century. Hong Kong remained as a relic from a bygone age. Throughout various conflicts, such as the Principality of Zeon's One Year War demanding autonomy for Spacenoids, the subsequent struggle between factions within the Earth Federation government, and the skirmishes incited by Zeon remnants, Hong Kong remained a city imbued with the scent of the bygone century. Hong Kong was "sanctified" as a port city connecting Earth and space.

Certainly, such cities were not rare on Earth. The planet was not so minuscule as one might imagine when gazing upon it from the boundless void of space.

The limousine, driven by a woman with a fiery mix of red and bronze hair, navigated the labyrinthine, congested streets. This woman, who greeted them, was undeniably career-driven, anything but a demure force to be reckoned with. She even let out a disdainful "Tch!" when compelled to halt the limousine abruptly.

"Affranchi..." Everly Key clutched her arm tightly against him, her eyes brimming with anxiety.

"I don't understand what's going on... Please, just bear with it for now..."

Before Affranchi could articulate his thoughts, there was a sudden, thunderous bang.

"Eek!" Everly pressed herself even closer to Char and turned toward one of the windows.

WHUMP! THUD!

The glass reverberated once more, with a more violent impact this time. On the other side, a massive Caucasian man peered in menacingly.

"Hey!" Affranchi yelled toward the driver's seat.

"Don't worry, it's bulletproof glass," the woman's voice reassured them through the intercom. A translucent plastic partition separated the driver's compartment from the cabin.

The limousine began moving again, nudging the vehicle ahead as the man battering the glass was left in its wake, futilely kicking the rear bumper.

Though evening approached, the sky remained illuminated. Buildings crowded together, with signage of every kind filling the gaps. This must have been what old-century cities were like. Amidst the cacophony of red, black, green, and yellow signs, a sea of diverse faces ebbed and flowed.

There was an air of detachment among these people. Unfocused gazes trailed the napes of those ahead, only to sharpen like a predator's when the need to intimidate cars arose during street crossings.

"Why is it so filthy? Does filth accumulate when people congregate?" Affranchi wondered. "Is this the only way for people living in the cities left on Earth?"

A sudden, violent sound echoed through the air. It resembled a pillar of fire, but it stirred an even more visceral sense of discomfort.

"...?"

Dozens of motorcycles zipped through the spaces between cars. Affranchi and Everly were unfamiliar with gasoline-powered bikes; in their time, bikes were electric and silent, truly meant for peaceful means of travel. These roaring motorcycles appeared to be vehicles of madness.

One of them, trying to slip past the limousine, inadvertently kicked the window with its rider's leg.

"Ah!" Everly cried out, alarmed once again. The bike screeched to a halt in front of the limousine, and a swarm of motorcycles followed suit.

Loud honking erupted, accompanied by the screech of tires. The sounds were foreign to Affranchi and Everly. The bike that had stopped in front suddenly turned and rammed into the side of another. The impacted motorcycle slammed into a parked car and tumbled between vehicles, pursued by another bike.

"Aiee!" A strange yell raced across the roof of the limousine from back to front. Then, a man leaped from the hood of a car, darting away just as the bikes collided. Traffic resumed its sluggish crawl.

"Hey!" Affranchi banged on the plastic barrier separating them from the driver.

"Don't worry," the determined woman repeated her earlier reassurance. The bikers were preoccupied with their own competition rather than disrupting traffic.

One man, striking a karate-like pose atop a car, signaled the direction of travel to the bikers behind him.

"Aah!" Amid the din of horns, exhaust, and urban clamor, Affranchi heard the man's final scream with unnerving clarity.

"Did they use a gun?" Affranchi understood. The traffic inched forward once more.

"What on Earth?!"

"It's like this every day," the driver said as the limousine finally crawled out of the main street. It sped along a narrow road that could hardly be called a highway, ascending to higher ground.

THUD! CRASH!

"Uwah!"

"Yeah!"

Something struck the limousine's roof, accompanied by the shouts of children. Then the glass took a direct hit.

"Affranchi...!"

"Ah, ah...!"

Stones pelted the limousine, too many to count.

"It's better not to look outside," the woman in the driver's seat advised.

Stones flew from the shadows of crumbling buildings and twisted metal fences on both sides. Children's silhouettes could be seen through the gaps. Some children were running around in just their underwear or shorts.

When a large stone hit the car directly, even louder cries erupted.

"Is this a slum?"

"Not really a special place," the driver replied.

The headlights illuminated the cobblestone road ahead, albeit faintly.

Affranchi let out a heavy sigh. With each acknowledgment of reality, the sound of Affranchi's breath rang and trembled in his head, echoing and causing his heart to feel as if it was being clawed at.

"Ugh...!" Affranchi choked.

"Affranchi?" Everly peered at him. His eyes were filled with tears that spilled over.

"Affranchi?! Why?" Everly asked, almost slapping them.

"Ah... I don't know why," Affranchi said as Everly's eyes quivered before him. "I don't understand. I just feel so sad. But it's not because I'm scared of people's actions..."

"I think I understand, kind of..."

"It's not even because people are too poor... Can people really become this impoverished?"

"Oh, Affranchi... Yes, I'm sure..." Everly's eyes, too, welled up with tears.

"But there's no need for you to cry, Everly."

"Why not? You said something incredibly sad, Affranchi."

Everly's tears streamed down as they embraced Affranchi, attempting to absorb Affranchi's tears with her lips. However, Affranchi's tears continued to flow, far more than Everly could handle.

2

The limousine continued to climb the steep road, its sides scraping against the cracked concrete walls before turning into a narrow alley. The area echoed with the sound of children's voices. The car came to a stop.

"Here we are. Can you open the door?" The career woman showed her first sign of feminine consideration.

"Huh?" Affranchi carefully opened the door, worried that if he hit the wall in front of him with it, the woman might scold him. But upon reflection, she didn't seem to care whether the car was kicked or pelted with stones.

Affranchi's tears had not yet dried. While waiting for Everly to stand up, he wiped his tears with his fingers. Sharp gazes met him from the other side.

"Please wait in front of that green door."

Without waiting for Affranchi's reply, the career woman drove the limousine away and disappeared around the next corner.

A cacophony of Cantonese, English, and Thai bombarded Affranchi and Everly. Children, seemingly hidden until now, peered out from windows and alleys, watching the newcomers and whispering amongst themselves. Amid the voices, they heard a clear demand: "Give us money."

Everly clung to Affranchi's arm as he firmly guarded the canvas bag between his legs.

"We don't have money!"

It was after repeating that phrase 13 times that the green door behind them opened.

"Please come in."

It was the career woman.

They climbed the stairs lit by flickering fluorescent lights and turned several corners in the dark hallway with rooms on either side. Some rooms even had transparent light bulbs hanging like those in Truth's room. The career woman opened a thick wooden door.

"Please," Her sharp brown eyes stared down at Affranchi.

Affranchi gripped Everly's wrist and entered the room. In the dimly lit space, a man awaited them.

"Good work," the man said briefly to the career woman. Everly looked around the room while holding Affranchi's arm. The empty room was surrounded by moldy, stained white walls and thick humidity.

There was another door on the window side leading to another room. A white man in white clothes introduced himself, "My name is Baam Segen."

Affranchi asked, "Can you get rid of the smell in this room?"

"Miranda!" The man called to the door on the window side.

The career woman, named Miranda, entered.

"Open the window. The cigar smell seems to bother them."

"Yes..."

Miranda's shapely nose seemed to give a snort of amusement. The three in the room watched Miranda's back as she opened the window. There was no view or airflow, as the wall of another apartment building blocked the way. Miranda snapped her long fingers, took the lit cigar from the man's hand, and left the room.

"Are you sure it's not a mistake?" Affranchi asked.

"What do you mean?"

"That you called us here."

"You're Affranchi Char and Everly Key, right?" Baam Segen showed no emotion.

"Now, how did you find out that we were on that ship?"

"You're familiar with Mikhail Kinsey and his friends, right?"

"Do you really think Mikhail and the others had the time to inform you of our arrival?"

"Hehe... You have quite the intuition."

"Then... it must be Truth Stronger?"

Affranchi's deduction was met with a smile from Baam Segen.

"Did you ever consider that someone from your own island may have reported you? Perhaps someone who's been keeping an eye on you?"

"Someone from the island is watching us? You know I'm not originally from that island."

"Of course."

"Well, never mind that. What made you want to leave the island? It's such a nice place to live."

"To go to space!"

Everly leaned in, her eyes pleading with the man. She suddenly thought that perhaps he could prevent Affranchi from leaving Earth.

"Please, don't let Affranchi go to space."

"Eva!"

Affranchi gently pulled Everly back.

"Are we the ones taking Affranchi to space?"

"No, no. Affranchi yearns to see the world beyond, filled with strangers!"

"I see. So, regardless of who we are, our very existence leads Affranchi to space, does it?"

"Yes, that's it! So please!"

Everly nodded vigorously.

"But even if you say so, we can't simply cease to exist."

Everly was at a loss for words, while Affranchi was impressed with her insight.

"If she can grasp situations so broadly, she won't go wrong in life."

And...

"Affranchi, Everly doesn't want you to go to space... Are you willing to abandon her for the stars?"

"Once I'm determined, nothing can sway me."

He could only say that with resolve.

"She seems like a good girl. But you can't go to space, you know?"

"Why not?"

"Space travel tickets aren't easy to come by. They're for the privileged class."

Baam leaned against the window frame; his expression was solemn.

"Of course, there are forced repatriation shuttles. Regular flights are provided by the Earth Federation government. But no matter how many thousands there are, they're like ancient slave ships. They're shuttles forcibly sending the poor and those deemed unfit to stay on Earth to colonies. Can you board one of those?"

"I understand... You're an Earth Federation official, aren't you?"

"The Federation government?"

"Yes. I've heard tales of a department hunting people for forced migration... They say they hunt people..."

"Even on the island, such stories circulate. We have television and newspapers."

"That's right. And outsiders can live there too."

"So... what's your objective? There's no benefit in you meeting us."

"I merely wanted to understand why someone like you, living a peaceful life on the island and would never be subjected to a manhunt, suddenly decided to go to space."

"What for?"

"No particular reason. I'm simply fascinated by human behavior. I study it after all."

Affranchi hesitated, trying to decipher the man's words.

"You're lying, right? It feels like you're watching us."

Affranchi finally managed to string together the words.

"No, it's true. I don't need to spy on or watch you to gather information. If I lend a sympathetic ear to people's grievances and anxieties, showing good intentions, they'll reveal all sorts of things," the man elucidated.

Affranchi considered this, and it seemed the man's claim about his field of study might not be a lie.

"For example, Stronger was my drinking buddy. Even after he moved to that experimental zone, he would still call me to vent. That's how I came to know about your actions," the man elaborated.

"Experimental zone? Is that what Truth was talking about?"

"You failed to recognize the most superficial phenomena, even though you possess a keen intellect..."

Baam Segen chuckled, a subtle change in his demeanor as he cleared his throat. It was the first time he exhibited genuine emotion.

"But that's the nature of human perception. I'm not calling you a fool, mind you."

"Of course not...!" Affranchi retorted, bristling at the man's impudence.

3

"Didn't you sense something unnatural about the natural environment of those birds?"

"Managed nature, perhaps? I couldn't tell, as I have nothing to compare it with."

"Yes, exactly."

Baam Segen seemed satisfied.

"Yet, you decided to venture into space."

"Perhaps I imagined a truer nature out there in the cosmos?"

Affranchi spoke as if it were someone else's concern.

"You longed to witness that. So you traversed the tempestuous seas in a canoe. The power of humanity is truly remarkable. I was once again moved."

"Really? You might not know the true terror or the true gentleness of the sea."

"Ah, you're right. My apologies."

"Could you tell me more about the experimental zone?"

"It's simple. We still don't know whether artificial environments cultivate or cripple people. This is a global issue, including space colonies. Thus, we must preserve contrasting cases for comparison. That's the purpose of the experimental zones... What does a natural environment offer a person? To answer this question, the Earth Federation government has established several such experimental areas worldwide."

"I see... Mr. Bureaucrat."

"I'm not a bureaucrat, Affranchi Char."

Affranchi, irritated by the man's haughty tone, said, "Leave me be. I need to find a way to board the shuttle."

"How?"

"I have to either settle in this city and make connections or get picked up by the Earth Federation government's manhunt."

"It'll take you ten years, you know? Earth Federation government officials are lazy, so the manhunt officers won't go after hopefuls. Somehow, they have a knack for choosing only those who are reluctant."

** tick! **

Finally, a loud sound burst inside Affranchi's head.

"Do you want me to go to space?"

"Affranchi!" Everly moaned.

"There's no way! That's ridiculous, isn't it?"

"Regrettably, we do desire that, young lady... However, we lack the resources and funds to secure a shuttle. We merely hold a passive interest in preserving the legacy left by our forebears."

"Passive?"

"For instance, this building is owned by a company that has long since become a mere shell company. Yet, we maintain a structure that can preserve ownership, and I manage this company as a side business."

"No way! So you're really....!"

Everly seemed drained of all her strength.

"Are you offering us a place to stay for the night?"

"That's not the primary intention. The company's articles of incorporation state that when a man from the island returns, we must provide this building. I'm merely fulfilling that mandate. I don't know what will transpire."

"Please stop this, Mr. Baam Segen!"

Everly clasped her hands in front of the man.

"Young lady, now that we've confirmed that this Affranchi Char is the one we've been waiting for, there's nothing I can do about it. It's up to him to see if he can succeed. Behold this legacy..."

"The legacy building?"

"Yes, but... it's not the building itself that's the issue, is it?"

Baam Segen opened a door and said, "This way."

Miranda, who had been waiting in the room, stood up briskly and followed at the end of the group.

4

In a structure that seemed partially dilapidated, it appeared that certain sections were still employed by private companies like Baam Segen's.

"The redevelopment plan has been proposed many times, and there's a demolition plan for this area, but well, our charter says we should take the lead in destroying it. So, the true nature of this building won't leak outside. It was opportune timing."

"..."

When Affranchi offered no response, Baam Segen halted under the dim fluorescent light and pivoted.

"I mentioned it was fortunate timing that you arrived before we were compelled to demolish it ourselves."

"I see..."

Affranchi was bothered by the sweaty skin of Everly Key. He thought that he had to get away from this girl somehow.

There was a thick layer of dust on the floor's baseboards, and no indications of people walking there.

"Is this floor okay?"

Baam Segen asked Miranda.

"Yes, most likely..."

Miranda, too, responded ambiguously.

Her rueful smile at that moment appeared somewhat self-deprecating, and there was no remnant of the haughty demeanor she exhibited while driving the limousine.

"Well then..."

"Yes..."

Miranda retrieved a bundle of keys from her bag, examined the number engraved on the bow of the key and the number on the plate above the door, and then used the key.

Baam Segen entered the door and switched on the lights.

It was a small room.

"..."

"Come on, Affranchi!"

Everly tugged at Affranchi's arm.

"No... Eva."

Miranda opened the portable computer to match the numerals on the lock of the door, which resembled a safe.

"..."

In that interval, a tranquil moment ensued.

Everly Key persisted in kissing Affranchi's arm.

The stainless door opened.

"Now, will the lights turn on?"

In the darkness, Baam Segen reached out and felt along one wall, but the darkness in the back became slightly brighter.

"I'd like to say, 'please,' but it's my first time too."

Miranda gestured "forward" to Affranchi.

Affranchi pushed Everly's arm away with one hand and followed Baam Segen's back.

"...!"

Everly's breath grazed his neck, but he ignored it.

"This is yours."

The man revealed an object that was a black mass in the dimly lit backdrop.

It was a machine.

"A machine...?"

"Yes, a man-machine. Yes, indeed, Casval Rem Daikun."

"...?!"

Affranchi staggered at Baam Segen's words.

"What?"

He asked while regaining his footing, and Affranchi remembered the name he had heard.

"..."

The man gazed at Affranchi's face for a moment without answering and smiled. "It's up to you now. The shuttle to space launches tomorrow morning, but who knows when the next one will be. It's usually about once every three months..."

"Hey...!"

Affranchi couldn't articulate the questions surging within him and choked on his breath.

Baum Segen returned to the small room where Miranda was waiting.

"Affranchi!"

Everly sprang into Affranchi's arms as Miranda displayed the bunch of keys and then set them on the floor of the small room before stepping into the hallway. As Baum Segen trailed her into the hallway, he uttered, "Sieg Zeon," and closed the door.

"Sieg Zeon...?" Affranchi mulled over the words.

In the meantime, Everly peered down from the floor where they stood. Several floors below, in the darkness, there seemed to be a platform for the machine.

"It's the same machine that washed ashore on the island..."

"Is it? It seems different to me."

Everly, her voice trembling as she covered her face with both hands, was met with a composed response from Affranchi. The enclosed space was serene. Affranchi, aware of Everly's heartbeat even as it pounded within him, couldn't suppress the excitement coursing through his core.

1

Affranchi Char found himself poised at the brink of an edifice, its depth akin to the bowels of the earth, his gaze intent upon the monolithic machine before him. Yet, from his perch on the balcony, the entirety of the machine eluded him. In a rising tide of frustration, Affranchi attempted to glean an understanding of the whole from the scant fragment he could perceive. In doing so, his expression morphed into something terrifying. But Everly, clinging to Affranchi's arm, did not miss the change that came over Affranchi's face as she stared intently at it.

"Affranchi..." Everly's words were sharp with fear, feeling as though he had been standing there for an eternity.

"Just wait," Affranchi said, though his words belied a different meaning.

"What?"

As Affranchi released Everly's hand and ascended the gravity-defying staircase against the wall, the widening chasm between them felt like a symbol of despair.

"Affranchi..." With a hoarse voice, Everly followed.

"Everly...this is fate...so..."

Affranchi climbed the metallic stairs, casting fleeting glances at a small chamber resembling the entrance to a crypt where the secretary and the white man had disappeared.

"Is that man trying to incite me to shout 'Sieg Zeon'? Sieg Zeon... The glorious Zeon, the radiant Zeon..."

The handrail was thick with dust, marring his hands. Everly could only watch Affranchi's retreating form.

Fear— a visceral, inevitable response— surged within her as she watched the man she loved being steered by an invisible hand toward a world alien and cryptic.

"But," Everly thought.

Everly struggled to persuade herself that allowing Affranchi to follow his own path was the right course of action. She had intended to bid him farewell once they reached the port in Hong Kong.

Thus, she had spent their voyage on the ship, fervently engraving every aspect of Affranchi into her memory. She loved him with every fiber of her being. His physique, his words, his gestures, his entire essence—she endeavored to remember it all. That was why Everly hadn't slept on the ship.

Their brief honeymoon on the island had been but a brief chapter in their lives...

However, the opportunity to part from Affranchi never materialized due to the haughty woman who appeared to be concerned solely with business. Seeing that woman, Everly was seized with the dread that she might take Affranchi away.

And upon seeing the machine in this place, Everly thought, "This machine... it's capable of taking lives."

"Then! Perhaps it's better if I end Affranchi's life with my own hands." She couldn't comprehend how such a notion had arisen.

Yet those horrifying words sent shivers down Everly's spine.

Thus, she paused midway down the dimly lit staircase, leaning against the dust-laden handrail and catching her breath, her shoulders heaving.

Affranchi was now a figure seemingly oblivious to Everly's plight. She thought her heart might stop beating. Affranchi was ascending the stairs, getting swallowed by the darkness above.

Gazing up at Affranchi's receding form, Everly couldn't dispel the sensation that her impetuous thought wasn't entirely misguided. It was a truly horrifying impulse, yet...

"If I can end his life efficiently, Affranchi's body, his gestures, everything as it is now, would all belong to me!"

This warped logic appeared to Everly as an incontrovertible truth. There was no rationale for such thinking, but it felt undeniable.

"I should push him down." With that thought, and the intent to execute it, Everly peered below.

In the faint illumination emanating from an indiscernible source, she could see the floor at the base of the machine. It seemed unforgiving enough to shatter whatever plummeted onto it.

"...!"

Everly glanced back at Affranchi, then down at the floor again. But the sight on the floor caused her to shriek.

"Ah!"

She saw a figure staggering in the dim light filtering from the edge of the floor.

Then,
Brrrrrt!

The thunderous report of a machine gun echoed within the confined space. The staggering figure's limbs flailed wildly in the air like a marionette before collapsing. The face that looked up at Everly was the familiar one of Baam Segen, the middle-aged white man who had just been with them.

2

"Find the switch!"

"Hey! It's the machine! Isn't this the same one from before?!"

"In a place like this?!"

"Are you kidding me! Is he trying to stage a war single-handedly?"

"The rumors about him being a rebel were true!"

"?"

Amidst these voices, Affranchi heard a sound akin to a helicopter rotor reverberating throughout the building.

"There were only men! Three more should have entered this building! Find them!"

"Everly!"

Upon hearing Affranchi's muffled call, Everly lifted her gaze to the stairs, but he was nowhere in sight.

"Affranchi?"

She ascended the staircase, probing the near-darkness. Affranchi was standing atop the machine, but by the time Everly spotted him, he was attempting to descend.

A cloud of dust seemed to be whirling around him.

"Stay close to the wall!"

Only Affranchi's voice punctuated the silence.

"Affranchi?"

As Everly backed against the wall, she could just make out the faint sound of multiple footsteps drawing closer through the wall.

Whrrrrr

What was that noise?

It was a faint sound, like the grating of hard substances against each other.

"What!"

"The machine has booted up!"

A voice that seemed to well up from the very bowels of the earth abruptly vanished from Everly's immediate vicinity.

"..."

The fear of losing sight of Affranchi...

Everly held her breath.

Vrrrrn!

"Is that an eye?"

That shining object lit up a few meters above Everly in the darkness.

At the same time,

Whirrrrr...

A strange, mechanical sound filled the enclosed space.

The vibration created by that sound had the power to awaken every cell in her body. It was not a roar, but a low yet periodically high-frequency sound, evoking ecstasy.

"The machine is operational!"

That cry erupted from directly beneath Everly,

And a solitary shadow leapt into Everly's field of vision.

"Eek!"

The sound, caught in her throat, seemed to approach Everly.

"Found you!"

The man's voice struck her ears with a palpable force as if to drive away the fear. The man, having recoiled once, advanced towards Everly again, his body slamming into the handrail.

"Affranchi!"

In the darkness, Everly saw the rod in the man's hand emitting a glow.

3

Everly's primal reflexes sent her nimble body swerving to evade the man's initial assault. Caught in the tumult of his emotions, Affranchi grasped the reality of the situation as his feelings were severed by the psycho-wave emanating from Everly's reflexive action. Everly had reverted to her base instincts. It was a response both robust and pure. Driven by the simple need to protect herself, Everly sidestepped the man's baton and sprinted towards the handrail.

"Affranchi!"

In the square space filled with artificial light, Everly realized that Affranchi seemed to be seated.

"Jump, Eva!"

At the forceful command, Everly's mind went blank. She was sure that all she needed to do was obey that voice. Using the handrail as a pivot, Everly vaulted into the unseen expanse.

Her body sailed through the air unimpeded. No, only that euphoria-inducing noise seemed to envelop Everly.

"Affranchi!"

That single phrase detonated in Everly's mind, and she found herself thinking that even if she were to die in error, it would be fine. For at this moment, Everly's body was airborne, propelled by Affranchi's will! But reality was more solid and unforgiving. Her body tumbled onto another platform, raising a cloud of dust.

"Ouch!"

The impact taught her pain.

Whrrrrr

Whrrrrr

Whrrrrr

That noise seemed to solidify into a barrier against reality, distancing itself from the euphoria. It was a discordant bark.

"...!"

Artificial light surged towards Everly.

"We're getting out of here!"

In the hazy light, Affranchi appeared to be saying this. The ambiance of men scrambling along the surrounding walls rapidly receded.

"Eh? What?"

Everly couldn't comprehend Affranchi's words.

"This machine is their target. It seems it shouldn't be here."

"Is that so?"

"Let's go!"

The space from which the artificial light emanated didn't appear to be spacious.

Everly, grabbing Affranchi's hand, jumped from the foothold into that light.

Glancing back, Everly realized that what she had been standing on resembled a gigantic Buddha's hand.

Boom!

The frenzied maelstrom of light, dust, concrete, and bricks erupted abruptly.

Under the ensuing pressure, Everly's body was thrust against Affranchi's chest.

"Attack!"

For a moment, that word ran through Affranchi's mind.

Even so, that sound did not exist within Affranchi.

"Tch!"

Affranchi felt a spark ignite within him, his primitive side. This was a frustration experienced when a mind and senses attuned to the rhythms of nature - like the ebb and flow of the tide, the course of the wind, and the rise of the sun - were forced to adjust to jarring artificial alterations.

At that time, the mind may go mad, but if it is a mind that has definitively experienced and comprehended the violence of natural changes, it can possess the resilience to deal with these artificial changes.

"Those who try to destroy this man-machine are dangerous."

"Why?"

"Because there are those who have labeled this machine to be an enemy." Affranchi's response was blunt to Everly.

It was nothing more than an obvious logic and did not answer Everly's "Why?".

So, she stopped thinking.

"Are we going to die?"

"Many people live around this building. It's okay to let this machine be destroyed as it is, but then we would die too."

Affranchi was not yet able to accurately answer Everly's question with a replay of his memory. He had switched to explaining the situation.

With a thunderous BOOM! The vicinity was periodically illuminated by blinding flashes as cascades of debris mushroomed around. Despite this, Everly no longer felt the pressure.

Affranchi was in front of what appeared to Everly as a complicated instrument panel, manipulating what lay to his left and right.

"Why?" she questioned.

The scene was intensely violent, searing itself onto her vision as though it were scorched onto her skin. The confined space she inhabited trembled fiercely. Yet, oddly, her skin felt no sensation.

"We're surrounded as if we're inside a television screen," Affranchi stated, an expression on his face that Everly had never seen before.

"Affranchi? You are...." She continued her inquiry once the shaking subsided.

"Who are you?"

"?!".

Affranchi, engrossed in deciphering the myriad of numbers and symbols displayed on the surrounding screens, ignored her question.

"I seem to know nothing of the world, so I do not wish to die right now."

Affranchi placed Everly on his lap.

"That man... he referred to you as Casval Char..." she murmured.

"We're breaking out! If we reach the sea, we should be able to minimize the damage!"

Ignoring Everly, Affranchi manipulated the machines to his left and right.

"Ah!"

Everly's weight settled onto Affranchi's knees. Finally, it seemed the machine had begun to move.

A deep groan escaped Everly's throat.

The cacophony of mangled sounds echoed from outside, surreal and distorted.

"Affranchi?"

Before she could steady her breath, the torrent of debris vanished as if by some cosmic sleight of hand.

A nocturnal panorama unfolded before her - Hong Kong's glittering jewels scattered across the dark canvas of the sea, with island silhouettes darting past.

But then, a searing, fiery apparition streaked across the sky, faster than any seagull's shadow.

As Everly found herself nestled between Affranchi's elbows, he deftly manipulated the levers on either side of him.

Her body, caught in the dance of their flight, leapt in all directions.

In her disarray, Everly reached back for the backrest, careful not to impede Affranchi's sight.

Affranchi's growl reverberated in her ears.

The relentless THUD THUD THUD!

As she pressed herself against Affranchi, the world outside shifted with dizzying speed.

The silhouettes of sinister, artificial birds flitted left and right, their pursuit relentless.

"A helicopter?"

"It's not just a helicopter! It's a Minovsky Craft," Affranchi replied.

Once more, the craft spewed forth a geyser of flames, exploding in a thunderous roar. The fire streaks etched their fury onto the heavens.

That was...

"Savage!" Everly murmured.

Even amidst the afterglow of the inferno, she glimpsed the hues of insanity.

The scintillating pattern of lights from Hong Kong's underbelly seemed to mock her from below.

"Ah!!"

The black sea surged towards them, a wall of darkness threatening to swallow them whole.

"Affranchi!" she cried out, her voice trembling with terror.

4

"Hold on!" Affranchi's voice chilled Everly to the core.

She could scarcely believe that he was operating the machine, let alone fathom why he would do so.

"How can you control it?!"

THUMP!

The black veil of the sea sped past them, and abruptly, a wall of white waves rose, their foamy tendrils streaking in curtains to either side.

CRASH!

Suddenly, the illumination from a sightseeing ship that had appeared in her field of vision sped away as if making a sound.

"I'm not confident in my piloting. Everly, I'm having you get off! You need to return to the island!"

"What about you, Affranchi?"

"I will escape. It seems like this world brands those involved with this machine as dangerous. I will definitely come to pick you up, so until then, don't leave the island!"

Clearing the silhouette of Hong Kong Island, Affranchi steered them northward to a smaller island shadow. It seemed they had temporarily evaded their pursuers, but their discovery was an inevitability waiting in the wings.

"Will you really come back for me?"

Everly's question hung in the air, heavy and fraught.

"Of course, Everly."

His voice, for that fleeting moment, was the familiar cadence she clung to. His breath brushed her ear, becoming one with the wind. By that time, the island loomed before them.

"Why can you operate this... thing?"

"I have memories... just fragments. That's all."

His words carried the weight of despair.

"That's right... I'm not the son of Gaba Suu..."

This truth dawned on him.

But wasn't that exactly why Everly loved Affranchi Char?

"I guess I have a weakness for that sort of thing..."

She sighed.

"From here, go back to Hong Kong and board a ship. Take this money with you."

Affranchi handed the small amount of money in a coin purse to Everly.

That was the last thing he could do for her. The machine he piloted descended amidst the trees and touched down. A gentle tremor dispelled the sensation of weightlessness in her body.

"Be careful where you step..."

Affranchi tilted the machine's body forward as far as it would go, extending his hand to the cockpit's edge.

"Just... one kiss."

"Everly."

With that, Affranchi offered his lips to Everly.

In that moment, a single tear traced its path down her cheek.

And so, Everly forgave Affranchi, stepping onto the machine's manipulator, which sprawled like an ancient Buddha's hand.

In her sight, Affranchi, a small figure bathed in a spectral glow within the square cockpit, seemed to recede into the distance.

"Affranchi..."

Affranchi didn't meet her gaze, pretending to be engrossed in the machine's controls. Everly knew it was a pretense.

"He can't bear to look... Can he?"

Affranchi's vision blurred with unshed tears as he studied the multiple displays. Some screens flickered with computer graphics, detailing the manipulator's movements, the intricate dance between the machine and the earth.

Absorbed in this, Affranchi's hand found the left arm lever.

"Ah..."

Everly's soft exclamation faded into silence. Affranchi's attention snapped to the left monitor.

An enemy helicopter was closing in.

"Goodbye, Everly!"

Affranchi's whisper was lost as the machine leapt skyward. Everly, now on her knees, looked up at the colossal figure ascending gently into the night.

Her dress fluttered wildly, tugged by the machine's gusty wake as if trying to tear itself from her. Everly folded into her sorrow.

As the machine began to tilt, Affranchi pushed the Minovsky motor to maximum output.

THUD, THUMP!

Tree branches splintered, making way for the towering figure of the machine carrying Affranchi heavenward.

CRACKLE!

Another fiery streak bisected Affranchi's display from left to right.

"What now?!"

Affranchi knew there was only one thing that could eclipse the torment of leaving Everly behind: madness. A welcome madness to drown sentimentality.

Indeed, the sight of four enemy helicopters sent his pulse racing.

In that moment,

FLASH!

A blinding flare – a homing missile. The thought of impending death threatened to consume him.

But,

BOOM!

In the midst of the roaring blaze and its blinding flash, Affranchi saw something peculiar on his display.

"A barrier?!"

Centered around the humanoid machine – his machine – a near-perfect dashed circle took shape, tracing the missile's path.

That was it.

The flash of the explosion ripped through the space around Affranchi, but the barrier held.

Even that dazzling light was dulled by the display's filter.

"Direct hit! Confirmed! But...!"

"The machine stood its ground! Looks like an antique mobile suit, yet it didn't falter!" Affranchi picked up these frantic voices.

"Hong Kong MHA! MHA! MHA! This is no error! Confirm it!"

"It's no error!"

Those were the desperate cries of the helicopter crew that had attacked Affranchi's machine.

"MHA?"

Affranchi, intrigued by the odd acronym, scanned the cockpit computer's data. He didn't ponder why he was able to navigate the system so effortlessly. Among several entries linked to "MHA,"

"Earth Federation government, Police Organization, Special Investigation Section 13, commonly referred to as the Manhunt Bureau—abbreviated as MHA."

He read aloud, comprehension dawning.

"I see..."

This revelation curbed Affranchi's budding insanity. Another reason to retain his sanity surfaced.

"They mentioned a shuttle launch tonight..."

Affranchi brought up a map on the display, located the shuttle's launch rail position, and nudged his machine onto the appropriate trajectory.

"But can this contraption even make it to space?"

His machine accelerated, leaving the pursuing helicopters trailing in its wake.

"Request the Earth Federation Forces Air Force to scramble! The enemy machine's objective is unknown. Its range is substantial!"

Such frantic calls from his pursuers were music to Affranchi's ears.

"I'll force the shuttle to launch."

Decision made, Affranchi passed an island and spotted the long rail of the shuttle launch site. He maneuvered his machine closer to the cluster of buildings and the hangar at the rail's starting point.

In front of the hangar, the imposing silhouette of a three-stage shuttle loomed, ready for launch. Affranchi landed his machine alongside the shuttle, peering into its cockpit window.

Inside, two crew members were engaged in their final pre-flight checks.

"Captain! I'm commandeering this shuttle."

The crew member, caught off-guard, gawked at Affranchi's machine, momentarily forgetting to flee. "Take this machine into space!"

Affranchi's voice resounded directly in the shuttle's cockpit through his machine's communicator.

"Impossible! We can't load such massive cargo this close to launch!"

Regaining his senses, the captain yelled back.

"Even if we could, it would take time to prep. By then, MHA would have you cornered!"

"Then don't use the final stage. Use the first two stages to reach geosynchronous orbit!"

"What?!"

"I'll rip your cockpit apart with this machine's hand if I must!"

Affranchi maneuvered the machine's manipulator, making a flicking gesture towards the cockpit window.

"W-wait!"

The captain's plea was almost pitiful. Affranchi, observing his reaction, was struck by an unsettling feeling.

Chapter.08

WITH LAND AND SEA TO HIS BACK

1

The shuttle...

It stands as our solitary instrument capable of breaking free from Earth's gravitational clutches. Yet, waxing poetic about it feels oddly outdated, as overcoming gravity is not the significant challenge it once was.

Still, in Affranchi's era, sentimentality became almost inevitable, given how shuttles have long been monopolized by the privileged few.

On Earth, at this time, those who could board a shuttle were either part of the bureaucratic structure that upheld the Earth Federation government or those who had the skill to maintain a positive relationship with these bureaucrats. Exceptions existed, of course, but these were people deemed extraordinarily safe or otherwise indifferent by the Earth Federation government. Yes, in any era, indifference becomes a talent for survival. And strangely enough, those who can overcome gravity generally return to Earth.

They didn't desire to live in space.

In such a time, the shuttle was rarely utilized for anything else. Paradoxically, those who wanted to truly exploit its capabilities couldn't board it. Perhaps humans are inherently contradictory beings.

This habit hadn't been remedied yet.

In the shuttle's cockpit, the two crew members wouldn't easily bow to Affranchi's demands, he could see that, and it shook him. Any further push and Affranchi could potentially destroy the shuttle with his enigmatic machine. If that happened, he would never ascend to the stars.

This would render his actions meaningless.

Power, indeed, often strips away freedom.

Therefore, the shuttle crew didn't readily obey Affranchi's commands even with pitiable expressions.

"How do you want me to do it? Tell me!"

"Tell me how to get this machine into space!"

"I want specifics. I don't know how to do it!"

"I don't know how to do it!"

"You're the professional, what are you talking about?"

Agitated, Affranchi scrutinized their expressions on one of the displays.

"Did they figure out I'm a total novice when it comes to shuttles?!"

He didn't miss that the two adults in the cockpit seemed to be observing his machine.

"Adults are cunning... Do I have to use force?"

"Then, disconnect that shuttle and just use the booster!"

Affranchi was prepared to inspect the connection between the shuttle and the booster. But he felt if he showed this opening, even using the shuttle as a shield, he could be shot down by a helicopter.

Suddenly,

"Don't make any unnecessary moves! Listen to the man-machine!"

That woman, the career woman who had guided Affranchi and Everly Key, appeared in the shuttle cockpit.

Affranchi's eyes shifted from the multi-screen showing the crew's faces to the panoramic display.

"That woman... Miranda, did she say?"

He was taken aback at the sight of the career woman, standing with the door separating the shuttle cockpit and the passenger cabin behind her.

She stood firm, dressed in a crisp jacket and a tight skirt, a small handgun gripped in her hand.

"Stay ready for launch! Get permission from the control tower to disconnect the cargo!"

She pressed the barrel of her gun against the captain's temple. As Affranchi's first impressions suggested, she was indeed a career woman. Or rather, like a soldier...

"Impressive..." Affranchi felt he understood how to intimidate people from her actions.

"What do you intend to do?"

"Our task is to secure that machine. A matter of logistics, yes? We'll decouple the excess cargo and hitch up the machine. No more, no less."

"Don't be ridiculous! There's no way we can go into space with such a bulky object causing air resistance!"

"Is that supposed to be a joke? Look, I'm an expert. The machine and the shuttle have been mapped, each variable meticulously factored in. We are not playing a fool's game here."

"You and your ilk!"

Unmoved by the co-pilot's fiery outburst, she bit back, "If you seek labels, we are Neo Zeon. That should satisfy you, right? If it's Neo Zeon, there's no helping it. They're that kind of people, aren't they?"

"Sly!"

While the captain spoke, understanding that she wasn't joking, he requested the control tower to detach the cargo. Affranchi watched their interaction with keen eyes, tracking the arrival of the MHA helicopter. But, as he'd predicted, they dared not approach Affranchi's mechanical titan too closely.

Finally regaining his composure, Affranchi gently swayed his machine's top section side-to-side – a symbol of caution. This was his role in this moment of chaos. If he slipped in his vigilance, he would undoubtedly be bested by the formidable career woman.

"Baam Segen claimed I lack the qualifications for this shuttle ride?"

Affranchi's memory was playing tricks on him.

The career woman seemed to glance at the movement of the machine operated by Affranchi. Then she said to the captain, "Depending on the circumstances, we should both be prepared to die here, got it?"

"I understand! Tower! Hurry up!"

Fear echoed in the shuttle captain's voice.

2

Affranchi pondered. The fact that she was able to board the shuttle with a handgun indicated that she was part of the privileged class. If she came from such a family, her kin would likely face severe punishment due to this incident.

However, she might have falsely claimed the name of a family belonging to that class. Perhaps she had originally planned such an act and infiltrated the bureaucratic structure of the Earth Federation government. Sure, anyone who dreams of the resurgence of Neo Zeon would likely do so.

The cargo removal was quick, but to Affranchi, entrenched in battle, each passing second seemed an agonizing eternity. The passage of time, different in quality, was difficult to endure. Miranda's endurance through this ordeal was commendable, and in contrast, he found his resolve pitifully fragile.

"Recognition..." he mulled over the concept, his mind wandering as he eyed the audacious press helicopter approaching.

Upon reflection, the noise in his head was no longer audible. And Affranchi looked around calmly inside the cockpit and was once again astonished at his understanding of this structure.

"I know this..." Even when thinking calmly, he understood what the digital display on the console panel meant, how to operate the spherical control ball, the arm rakers, and what the buttons in the indentations where his fingers pushed meant.

There were minor discrepancies between this knowledge and his memory, which irked him. Yet, they were trivial. His understanding was as if he'd studied it meticulously. This was not knowledge gained from his upbringing nor an innate aptitude. He had no known knack for machinery.

He didn't know whether he had a sense for machines.

Even if it was a latent ability, it wouldn't surface so effortlessly. Human beings weren't designed for such convenience. He was no more pliable due to his humble island upbringing. That's why he wanted to get out. That was the first reason, and the second reason was that he felt that space might be calling him.

Yet, acknowledging such learning, utterly detached from conscious awareness, was far from pleasant. Human memory selectively retains acceptable experiences thanks to the merciful ability to forget unwanted recollections. This ability helps us to avoid the oppressive weight of painful learning. Experiencing life through the prism of our acquired knowledge reveals life's astonishing banality, often prompting us to renounce life. Hence, the ability to "forget" has been crucial to our survival as primates.

Nonetheless, Affranchi found himself acting on an understanding alien to him, evoking discomfort. Mere acknowledgment of this fact was not true understanding for him. He was, it seemed, being controlled by an unforgettably disturbing truth, one that could lead to madness. This makes people uncomfortable.

"Why am I piloting this machine? Why am I hijacking the shuttle by breaking the law? If I act without answering those questions, am I not a puppet? People should be fully accountable for their existence. If they can't, life loses its essence. Humanity's next evolutionary stage should be a society comprising individuals who understand this. But due to ignorance, people suffer, they struggle, they ravage the very Earth that sustains them, a planet that has long been gasping for survival..." Affranchi mulled over these thoughts.

However, Affranchi failed to notice an inherent paradox in his introspective ponderings. The notion of a "gasping Earth" is an understanding, a concept that would elude a young person like

Affranchi, raised as he was, isolated from civilization on a small island in the southern sea. The life he knew did not offer the "knowledge" or "imagination" to conceive a threatened natural world. Knowledge borrowed from books or television could only go so far. But paradoxically, both the beginning and the end of Affranchi's thoughts revolved around this very understanding of a "gasping Earth."

3

Affranchi plugged the manipulator of the man-machine into the cargo attachment of the shuttle and secured it. He did the same with the legs. As if designed by destiny, the proportions of the shuttle and the machine synced flawlessly.

He opened the machine's hatch and stepped onto the deck facing the shuttle.

The MHA guards on the rooftops of the buildings on both sides of the shuttle were on high alert with their guns, but there was no sign of them doing anything to Affranchi.

Instead, he could sense in them a weary reluctance, akin to a once fierce beast, now toothless.

"Could it be the hostages?" Affranchi paused, standing before the hatch that led into the shuttle's cabin.

Standing there were two soldiers, unarmed.

"Please go in. Your comrades are waiting."

Affranchi returned a noncommittal reply, his hands curling into fists as he approached the hatch, primed for combat.

"Sieg Zeon..."

A near whisper from the right-side soldier guarding the hatch.

Affranchi was startled, his gaze snapping at the man.

Yet, the man stared unblinkingly ahead, his gaze not meeting Affranchi's. He proceeded into the hatch.

Upon navigating the airlock, the stern visage of the career woman greeted him. The cabin was eerily vacant, devoid of the thirty-odd passengers this shuttle should have hosted.

"Seal the hatch!"

"Understood."

Affranchi responded instinctively to her sharp command, locking the shuttle and cradling the key. This, too, he found, was a task he could execute without contemplation.

"Quite an antiquated spacesuit, isn't it?"

Her words were as crisp as their first encounter. Affranchi promptly donned the normal suit (which is a spacesuit).

Yes, he was able to follow the initial procedure flawlessly. He connected the oxygen bubble attachment to the pipe in the backpack, then slipped on the helmet.

Simultaneously, an exchange ensued in the cockpit with the control tower, Miranda issuing a string of orders. Affranchi couldn't discern the specifics but inferred a trajectory towards Side 2.

He adjusted the gun-laden seat's backrest from body-use to spacesuit-use, a ubiquitous design in space vehicles.

"I'm familiar with things like this."

A sudden flash of memory, foreign yet known, left Affranchi astounded, but the feeling of unease persisted.

"Why do I know this? It's as if I'm not myself. A different personality is controlling me." Picking up the gun from the seat, he sank down.

"I'm utterly spent. Keep that weapon trained. We can't let our guard down with these people," Miranda instructed as she began suiting up. Affranchi, in turn, aimed his gun's muzzle at the captain's shoulder, visible diagonally through the hatch.

"Keep your eyes forward! Follow instructions!" Affranchi barked.

As Miranda pulled the zipper up her spacesuit, she leaned in close, her voice barely audible, "Was what Baam Segen said true?"

"What do you mean?"

"Because when I look at you, I can't believe this is your first time doing this."

"Oh!"

Affranchi couldn't help but detect the distinct scent of womanhood close to him, prompting his gaze to dart toward the cockpit.

"Just five more minutes! We need to adjust for Earth's rotation and our flight path," pleaded the captain, his shoulders twitching with unrest.

"Fine," Miranda retorted, her voice laced with exasperation.

"Affranchi, take that seat over there..."

As the space between them widened, Affranchi moved to a spot where he could keep an eye on the co-pilot.

"Right," he agreed, stealing a glance at the delicate outline of Miranda's ear under her hair before seating himself.

"Miranda, what should I call you?"

"You may call me Mueller or Myu, as my lover does. Miranda Howe. I have no baptismal name," she replied in a gentle whisper.

"Alright, it's time! Proceed."

Having issued her orders, Miranda cast a quick glance at Affranchi. In the sparkle of her eyes resided a gentle warmth and sweetness, the essence of being called Myu.

Affranchi gave a subtle nod; his body weighed down by the bulky spacesuit.

A faint vibration enveloped the spacecraft, quieter than anticipated. The shuttle's main body sat atop the first stage, its onboard engines idle for maritime operations.

The acceleration intensified; the lights of Hong Kong city streaked past the windows, their speed soaring.

The shuttle was now coursing along the colossal rail they had looked up at from the regular ship with Everly.

Then, the vibration.

A deafening roar hammered their backs, and the co-pilot's scream echoed from the open cockpit hatch.

"Vibration! Are we okay?"

"It's the air resistance! So brace yourselves!" the captain hollered.

"We're fine! We have simulated this!" Miranda's steadfast voice echoed.

At her assurance, the captain swung around, his face pressing into the seat. They were approaching a point where the rail curved upwards into the sky.

"Ugh!"

Voom!

The final surge of acceleration for lift-off.

The craft became lighter and began to swim against the air stream.

Grrr...

The rumble crawling up from behind was undeniably eerie.

The clatter of galley equipment echoed through the cabin.

For the first time, the word 'regret' flashed in Affranchi's mind.

"I'm scared... I'm scared of leaving Everly..." In an uncharacteristic moment of vulnerability, Affranchi voiced his fear. His reality, as he knew it, consisted of that island and the woman it had borne.

This acknowledgment released him from the shackles of foreign memories.

"I am not a man of dual personas."

This realization fortified Affranchi. His fear, genuine and unadulterated, felt right.

Affranchi's consciousness triggered a cold sweat to bead his forehead.

His face turned deathly pale, his body trembling as if in the grip of a profound chill.

"Sieg Zeon... The man Baam Segen said it, and so did the man standing at the hatch... Sieg Zeon..."

The question erupted in his mind, over and over.

What did it mean?

"I can't latch onto those words just yet. I'm still a man of the island. I am still a man of the island. I haven't been trained to carry those words. Above all, I lack the evidence that would make those words feel real for me..."

That was Affranchi's conviction.

His understanding was precise, each thought was carefully weighed.

"That's a killing machine, isn't it?"

"..."

He remembered Everly's words.

"When did she say that?"

Affranchi thought Everly Key had uttered those words in that cold, cavernous room where the man-machine rested.

But that was not the truth.

Affranchi's thoughts were manifesting as Everly's words.

"The man-machine is a machine of war, so... that can't be helped..."

This was what the truthful Afranci, who wanted to deny that false justification, was thinking.

And then, these thoughts spawned new words.

The actions of the man-machine produced the thought that people might die, which in turn led to the word "war."

That thought illuminated Affranchi's mind like a dazzling sunbeam.

"War."

It was an extension of politics, or maybe it was politics itself.

Moreover, it bred death, poverty, and chaos. Was it not ironic that politics, which should bring about unification, instead created division?

And furthermore,

"In the space age, the nature of war has evolved, adopting an aspect of the old times... The purpose of war did not become high-speed, much like how the nature of the state fundamentally changed after the French Revolution, the nature of war took on the aspect of civil war and more civilians than soldiers began to die.

And in the Space Age, the nature of war became more personal, perhaps because history was reversing.

Yet, the tendency for mass slaughter has intensified.

As civilization advanced, war became more repugnant because only science and technology advanced. Human will was left lagging behind the advancement of technology.

Humans clung to Earth because, although they had acquired the technology to possess the expanse of space, they did not have the spirit to correspond with that technology."

So, to instigate that revolutionary spirit,

War, then...?

"It's a leap, but I'm being asked to pilot the machine..."

To know the reason for that....

Perhaps that was why Affranchi was sitting in the cockpit of the man-machine. That was what Affranchi, who wanted to believe so, thought.

4

The shuttle shuddered under a relentless barrage of impacts, the world outside its window swallowed by an impenetrable darkness. Then, from the dense blue stratosphere, it leaped into the cosmic void in a heart-stopping instant.

"?!"

A final, jarring impact coincided with a curt "Thank you" from the captain. In that instant, the relentless assault ceased. It was as though the invisible hand pounding the shuttle from all sides had been banished to the abyss.

Affranchi felt a cold trickle of sweat trace a path down the collar of his normal suit. His gloved fingers made an ineffectual attempt to swipe it away, sliding over the surface of his suit.

His gaze sought Miranda, his lone companion in this precarious endeavor. Beads of perspiration clung to her stern visage, suggesting a battle against the same terror gnawing at him.

"Were it not for her, I'd still be in that fetid metropolis of Hong Kong," he mused.

His feelings towards this reality were mixed. A tinge of regret whispered of the untapped mysteries of Hong Kong. His thirst for knowledge ever present.

"I know nothing of the world..."

The thought echoed within him, a reflection of the desires that lay dormant within his heart. His innate yearning was to seize the world...

Miranda stood. Encased in her normal suit, she floated awkwardly in the zero-gravity cabin.

"Time to change our course?" She voiced her command with an air of authority, a pistol nestled in her hand. Outside the shuttle, the serene grandeur of space stood in sharp contrast to their inner turmoil.

"I'd like to think this is a joke?"

"I'm considering your lives. If you knew more, we'd have to kill you or wipe your memories. Our course is set for the shoal zone, the area where Side 4 used to be." Miranda Howe's tone was steady as she handed instructions on a piece of paper to the captain.

"That's too far!" the co-pilot protested.

"Is it? Originally, it had the thrust to make it to lunar orbit. Even if it slows down because of the man-machine onboard, we can get there."

"But, the shoal zone..."

The captain faltered, Miranda's paper slipping in his grasp.

"Shoal zone?"

The words knitted Affranci's brows. A strange term indeed, merging terrestrial jargon with celestial geographies.

1

The shuttle, occupied by Affranchi Char and Miranda Howe, traced an ephemeral orbit, dancing on the gossamer strands of gravitational forces woven by the celestial trio: the Earth, moon, and sun. A waltz of inertia, the sensation of velocity masked by the void.

During the flight, both Affranchi and Miranda shrugged off their normal suits. Subtly, Affranchi studied his suit's architecture, careful not to alert the ship's other occupants. Miranda, meanwhile, found solace in her practiced routine, her secretarial instincts kicking in amidst the brewing tension.

In an effort to ease the tension amongst their three male companions, she busied herself in the galley, brewing tea and arranging light meals. However, the two men in the cockpit didn't seem inclined to relax. Just as Affranchi had, the captains seemed to sense something or someone lurking in the shoal zone of Side 4 behind Miranda.

"This shuttle's being watched, isn't it?" asked the captain, turning towards Miranda, who brought the refreshments.

"As long as you cooperate, we have no intention to take your lives," Miranda answered, wheeling the cart into the cockpit, attempting to offer a tray.

"Is it poisoned?"

Returning the tray to the cart, Miranda dismissed the insinuation with a gesture, "Choose as you please; we aren't playing Russian Roulette here."

"Hmm... We'll see about that." scoffed the captain, nudging his co-pilot to choose first before taking his portion.

"Can we expect a rendezvous in the shoal zone?" He inquired.

"Whether it happens or not, even I can't tell. You know how vast the universe is..." Miranda replied, securing the cart next to Affranchi, both nibbling on sandwiches.

"I was hungry..." Affranchi realized, the cold sensation of his juice reminding him of something long forgotten.

Then silence took hold.

Navigating the balance point between Earth and the moon's gravitational pull—an area littered with the remnants of destroyed colonies and shards of meteorites—was like a paper balloon trying to navigate a rocky terrain. Affranchi would have to don his normal suit again.

By this time, he'd begun to think that his senses were inherently designed for life in space.

"I'm starting to forget the name Everly Key..."

It was a realization that solidified his perception of space.

Tick!

Tick, tick, tick...

Subtly, a pulsation began resonating somewhere in Affranchi's head, the rhythm of the sound stirring a revival of knowledge. It held the qualities of not just mere knowledge but a valuable experience. From the minor ongoing experiences, Affranchi was activating all his memories, bringing back to life the embedded experiences into his present body.

Affranchi found himself without words. His thoughts no longer had a flutter of words. Instead, every inch of Affranchi, down to his fingertips, was absorbing the reality he was experiencing and acquiring it as an undeniable realization.

"Affran? How's the normal suit?"

"Huh...? Ah, it's secure."

He was taken aback by being called by such a casual version of his name, but it wasn't egregious enough to reprimand. Smiling at Miranda, Affranchi checked the display on the panel attached to his suit's arm.

In that instant,

WHAM!

The shuttle trembled sharply. Affranchi found himself floating, hitting the ceiling. He hadn't put his helmet on yet. As he descended back to the floor, Affranchi swiveled the helmet attached to his backpack forward.

2

"Even though we're under radar surveillance!"

Miranda fluidly moved her body into the cockpit, all the while speaking in a difficult turn of phrase.

"It's bloody impossible to spot a five-centimeter rock!" The captain retorted. For the rapidly moving shuttle, colliding with a floating stone in space could deal as much damage as a direct hit from a cannon.

"We'll deploy the dummies," The co-pilot began the process of deploying dummies before he even finished his sentence. The enormous moon visible in the front view suddenly disappeared.

Defensive balloons unfolded around the shuttle. Dozens of these balloons, each wrapped in a flexible, durable plastic membrane, deployed several kilometers in every direction from the shuttle's front, protecting it. If a rock were to hit, the dummy would burst but also explode, scattering small meteorites and debris from the destroyed colonies.

This has been used even on the orbital track of artificial satellites around Earth. Countless minesweeping operations for the artificial satellites launched since the last century had been carried out, but there was no way they could be perfect. This was why there often arose situations necessitating defensive dummies. Such was space in the Earth's sphere.

"We've got an air leak!"

"No surprise there! It's a miracle we're not repairing the electrical system!" The captain's retort came as he scanned the damage to the shuttle.

"Is it easy to repair?" Miranda Howe glanced at the console panel's display and said.

"You know quite a bit, don't you, hijacker?"

"I'd be ill-prepared if I weren't," Miranda quipped back, a devilish smile playing on her lips. The captain released a defeated sigh.

"Why this? We could have been allies."

"Leave your wife and kids, and you're in," Miranda responded with an unsettling level of calm.

"With the Neo Zeon?"

"Well, yeah..."

"What are you trying to do?"

"I can't tell you that unless we're allies."

"You're going to keep us on this course?"

"No, up to this point. Can you read it?"

"Don't mock me. The asteroid belt map for the mining workers is the same as the flight map." The captain input the numbers from the handheld computer display that Miranda presented into the autopilot

computer and started discussing the course with the base computer of the shuttle.

"No good! No matter how we fly, we'll either die of starvation before reaching the moon or run out of oxygen. Warnia is screaming she can't keep up."

"Who's Warnia?"

"Warnia! Our computer is not the most adaptable."

"That's why, just until here," Miranda conceded.

The shuttle dropped to a whispering hum of subsonic speed as hours slipped away into the cold oblivion of space.

Bishh!

Once again, the spacecraft shook slightly. Things floating in the shoal zone are not fixed. The shuttle's forward dummy is effective only against objects in the direction of the shuttle's progression. Objects hurtling in from the sides could easily breach the thin dummies, causing further damage to the hull.

A hiss echoed, the unnerving sound of air escaping.

"Affranchi."

At his name, Affranchi activated the birdlime sprayer situated at the cabin's center. The adhesive substance snaked along the air stream, adhered to the cabin wall, and stiffened. Air leakage ceased.

On warships in combat, this was auto-set to plug the air leakage parts for the time being. Small, invisible damages could be perfectly patched with birdlime.

"Should we refill cabin air?"

"We've enough for now; we don't know how much time we have..." Miranda voiced her concern, and once more, time slipped by. Her eyelids fluttered closed as she floated beside Affranchi.

"Youngin."

Affranchi's weapon trained onto the voice in the cockpit.

"Hm... holding up, are you?" The captain's voice revealed his attempt to ascertain their situation.

"I'll have you know. I won't hesitate to shoot you both if circumstances call for it."

"The meal was good. Russian Roulette is a game played with a gun, isn't it?"

Knowing Miranda was asleep, the captain said, "We're both on edge, aren't we? The co-pilot says he wants to change the urine bag. Is that okay?" "No, it's not. You have a spare, right? I don't want to wake her now."

"Hmm...."

The captain snorted and looked forward, where nothing but darkness could be seen. Then, more time passed.

"...?!"

Affranchi noticed a subtle movement in the captain's shoulder. Surely, he couldn't be transmitting a signal. Affranchi looked up. Miranda's body bumped the ceiling and gently began to fall back.

"..."

Silent tension etched across the captain's face as he turned towards the co-pilot. Affranchi moved into the cockpit.

"....?"

The captain swiveled, forehead gleaming in the dim light, toward Affranchi.

"That radar! It's detecting something, isn't it?! Why didn't you tell me?"

Feeling the weight of his cowardice, Affranchi pressed the gun muzzle to the captain's temple and grabbed the co-pilot's receiver wire. It was challenging to restrain them both. He subtly shifted his lower body towards the cabin.

"I just found out it's not a rock. I couldn't identify it until now."

Soon, everyone was going to be in a state of hysteria.

"Enough with the excuses! If you ignore the dynamics and facts surrounding this shuttle, taking action without considering them, I will consider it an act of rebellion."

"That way of speaking is so outdated. I want to believe it's a relic of a bygone era," the co-pilot said, smirking.

"That just shows you don't understand others, doesn't it? While it's true that it's somewhat questionable for one person to judge another, unfortunately, humans have been judging others knowingly. And at that moment, in that situation, the one with power holds sway. Whether you call it a childish mindset or call it old-fashioned, I, for one, prioritize adhering strictly to the facts."

"I understand your youthful spirit, but are you aware of the backlash that will come?"

"My very existence is a reaction to the stagnation of the Earth Federation government over the past century. And I intend to prevent a reaction in the next era. You specialists probably don't understand that."

"I didn't expect to hear such a speech from a young man."

There was anger in the captain's voice.

"Rebellion is also good, isn't it? You two are no longer necessary. You should realize the time to beg for your lives has come."

Affranchi gambled.

If the approaching blip on the radar wasn't related to the Earth Federation Forces...

However, if it is and Affranchi becomes a prisoner, how should he explain what he just said?

Why did he talk like that? It wasn't because of Affranchi's self-consciousness. It was something like a fantasy to intimidate.

However, Affranchi was aware, to some extent, of the flaws in this reasoning, but explaining it now was difficult.

Beep, beep, beep.

"Affranchi, I'm sorry. It seems like our welcome party has arrived."

Miranda's voice came through the receiver of the normal suit's helmet. Miranda slipped past Affranchi and peered at the console panel, giving Affranchi a smile.

3

"What the...?!"

A shadow flickered on the starboard side of the shuttle, too fleeting to identify before it vanished from the viewport, concealed by the deployed decoy. Moments later, a shuddering impact sent a jolt through the shuttle's body.

"They're here!"

Affranchi, after ensuring the two in the cockpit wouldn't move, signaled to Miranda in the back.

Awaiting his signal, Miranda inserted the key to open the rear hatch.

"What's the plan?"

"Your lives are assured."

"And where do I send the bill for the shuttle repair?" The captain's tone wasn't purely for reassurance. His character was fundamentally honest.

"Rest assured, we'll discuss your return, and the shuttle's repairs, when the time comes."

Affranchi, his pistol primed, ensured the shuttle's surveillance was deactivated, heeding Miranda's caution about their imminent guests remaining unseen by the crew. Now it was his duty to surveil.

"Is it them?"

That voice crackled in his receiver.

However, Affranchi, anxious and unable to afford the crew any attention, couldn't turn around.

"Don't turn around!"

Seeing the captain's helmet shake violently, Affranchi touched helmets and shouted.

Conversations using the vibrations from touching helmets were colloquially known as "contact conversations."

Since it didn't use radio waves, it allowed for private communications.

As the radio of the two crew members was now sealed, shouting was necessary to keep them in check.

"But..."

"Hold it together! One slip up here could be fatal!"

His words served as a warning to the captain and, to some extent, a reminder to himself.

The fragility of human emotions was palpable.

Half a day of tense confinement in the small space had started to fray their nerves, spurring erratic actions. Affranchi was acutely aware that any lapse in his control could result in an unintended pull of the trigger. "Don't falter," he coached himself silently.

He fervently believed in the vast potential humans held. If one aspires to realize their ideals, one must confront obstacles and naysayers with unwavering resolve. If he couldn't do that, he might as well retreat back to his distant island, away from the grand ideals he espoused. "That's the normal way of life..."

However, having breached the barrier of Every Key, stepping into the boundless expanse of space, Affranchi had transcended 'normal.' He needed to stay true to his ideals.

If he couldn't do that, he would have to return to being 'normal.' But such a return would be different from normal people doing normal things - it would be a fall.

Choosing to fall with resolve is worse than being ignorant; it's a state of decay, a life spiraling directly toward death.

These swirling thoughts and fears were pushed aside as he faced the unknown figures lurking in his ambiguous reality.

He would just endure...

Perhaps he was becoming stolid in his dullness...

"Your Excellency Char Aznable!"

The formal moniker echoed in his receiver. Affranchi reacted instinctively to the sound, swinging around towards the source. His body tensed, ready for whatever might unfold. He yearned to escape the wearying role of being the watchman at the heart of the incident.

The trio of men approaching Miranda were outfitted in normal suits, pistols secured at their sides. Their faces were hidden behind dark visors... Actually, he wasn't certain they were all men.

"We'll take it from here."

The man in the lead gestured for Affranchi and Miranda to move aside. Uncertain, Affranchi moved past the man and made his way to the rear. He glimpsed a face behind the visor, a face that respected him yet was poised to fulfill its duty. Their movements were swift.

"Affranchi!"

Guided by Miranda, he approached the rear hatch, following the trail of her suit.

A jolt of surprise seized him.

He had been careless.

For a moment, Affranchi felt like he'd fallen into a pit.

He hadn't anticipated the spacecraft's armor in front of the hatch nor the gaping void below. Earth's gleaming crescent seemed perilously distant. A cold dread seemed to leak from his pores.

If he hadn't been holding onto the handrail by the hatch, he would have thought he was "falling." Affranchi's upper body floated away the length of his arm.

"Affranchi!!"

He heard Miranda's voice from the hatch on the other side.

"...?!"

"Grab the wire and make your way here! Are you okay? Can you manage?"

Miranda's normal suit floated back towards him.

"Yes, I..."

Affranchi vaguely answered.

Fear still clung to him, but he managed a response. Miranda's hand gripped his shoulder, and through her visor, he saw the determination in her eyes soften.

"..."

"Relax... you'll acclimatize soon. I apologize for the sudden situation. You were doing so well as a partner, I forgot that you're new to space... Come on!"

Miranda grabbed Affranchi's arm and helped him grab the wire.

Affranchi held onto Miranda's shoulder and drifted towards the opposite machine.

"..."

It was a ship equipped with a manipulator for mining minerals. Of course, it was something Affranchi didn't know about. It had equipment for minesweeping.

"Over here."

"Y-yes..."

Like a young boy, Affranchi responded and sat on a rather spacious bridge seat.

"Is that him?"

Another voice came through his headphones, and Affranchi turned towards the source. In the backseat, another normal suit was seated.

"Yes, this is Affranchi Char."

With Miranda's introduction, Affranchi turned his head to nod in acknowledgment. However, the normal suit stood and saluted Affranchi.

Just like in the military...

"...?"

Affranchi frowned.

"No, don't. He's not fully awake yet. Such formalities might be too stimulating."

"Right!"

The man raised his hands, a gesture of surrender, and sat back down. A chuckle, then a comment followed.

"Hard to believe this is the same man who piloted the suit in Hong Kong."

"Does he look like a trembling pigeon?"

Miranda, not intending to insult, said this as she made visor contact, "Affranchi... Your sensibility is... Yes, it's very likable."

"Ready!"

The voice signaled the return of the others.

"Great! Let's move out."

Miranda issued the cheerful command.

"Then..."

The two men sat in the seat in front of Affranchi.

"What happened to those pilots?"

"They're just taking a short nap. They will wake up in a few hours and can send a distress signal."

"I see..."

Affranchi glanced over and saw the humanoid suit he had operated detaching from the shuttle's cargo attachment.

"Well then!"

The man in the center seat offered a word of parting before accelerating the ship. The shuttle, and the past, were now behind them.

1

Through the glass shield before him, Affranchi Char watched as rocks coursed past, a strangely familiar tableau whose origins eluded him. Could it be mere coincidence that the rhythm of their motion echoed the pulsations of his own thoughts? In search of answers, his gaze fell upon Miranda Howe, seated beside him, hoping for an answer.

His body was slick with a fine sheen of sweat that refused to evaporate, a troubling sensation that he found both uncomfortable and potentially embarrassing should Miranda become aware. However, while clad in a normal suit, he couldn't wipe away the sweat. Normally, the suit would absorb the skin's moisture at a pace matching one's perspiration. However, Affranchi's skin, honed by the sea, wind, and sun until yesterday, was overly sensitive.

He knew comfort was a stranger here in such an artificial environment.

Miranda's gaze met his, a spark of curiosity flashing in her eyes.

"No..." He averted his eyes, focusing once more straight ahead as their ship navigated the shoal zone.

As the final rock loomed ominously overhead, the moon, like a spectral mirror, skimmed past, leaving only the vast emptiness of the cosmos in its wake. Affranchi found the abrupt transition from stark terrain to infinite void deeply unsettling.

"It's terrifying..."

"True. People of the past wrote texts comparing space to the sea, but those are lies, aren't they?"

Miranda's laugh punctuated his candid revelation.

"Yes... The sea is supported by the land, the earth, and in turn, it cradles the land. This symbiosis is what lends it its benevolence. Early humans may have romanticized space as nurturing, like a womb, but that's a misconception born of ignorance."

"Then, what is it?"

Miranda's question bore an impish undertone.

"Boundless... a realm without floors or ceilings..."

"I see. And how does it feel?"

"Those who find it mystical must lack depth of perception."

After articulating his response, Affranchi rose and pressed himself against the window, the cosmos stretching out before him. Miranda, observing the young man's silhouette, found his lucidity both stirring and reminiscent of Char Aznable, the legendary figure who had once sought to revive Zeon.

In her eyes, it was as if Char himself stood before her. She gently opened the folding panel on her lap, staring at a single photograph tucked inside the back cover. It was a photo of a blonde young man who looked just like Affranchi. But it was a picture of Char Aznable that she had clipped from a color gravure in a history book.

"However, having objects like the moon makes it clear that space is not empty, which provides some comfort... Humans are creatures that cannot live floating in space or the sea. It's an instinct acquired when our ancestors climbed up from the sea onto the land, isn't it?"

With Affranchi returning to his seat, Miranda hid the photo. She had often watched footage of Char. Through her observant gaze, Affranchi looked just like Char. Perhaps her acceptance of his presence fueled this perception.

Affranchi, under Miranda's intense gaze, asked her a candid question for the first time as he took his seat next to her.

"I cannot provide any answers right now. I do not know to what extent you are aware of the truth about Zeon..."

Miranda began, breaking the silence.

"You know I don't know anything, right?" Affranchi gently replied to Miranda's sudden answer.

"However, having observed you since Hong Kong, I can't believe that you don't know. You seem like Char Aznable himself."

"I know that name from history books. Baam Segen also mentioned him, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"What is the relationship?"

"You are Char himself."

Miranda seemed to have genuinely let her guard down. She was answering things she shouldn't be able to answer.

"Haha... I am aware of the level of biotechnology, but I am me. I'm not like Char, who harbored ambitions of a Neo Zeon resurgence."

"Are you sure?"

"If I accept what you are saying, I would have a split personality," Affranchi tried to articulate, realizing how nonsensical his words sounded. He was already aware of that. Otherwise, he would not have left the island, and recalling the incidents since Hong Kong, Miranda's assertion was correct.

"I understand that you fear becoming a split personality, so I won't explain. I think you need time to understand yourself. For now, all we need to do is support you, Affranchi, the young man who felt a pull toward space. Please just know that there are people around you who do that."

"But I can't offer anything in return for such actions. Will you still help me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"For Char Aznable..."

"..."

Affranchi lost his words and looked outside. Miranda, gazing at Affranchi's profile, liked him more and more. Affranchi, who said nothing, seemed only like a young man trying to calmly accept his fate. He wasn't a person who couldn't feel anything, just overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events before him.

Miranda felt as though Affranchi was enveloped in an indescribable composure.

"You've done well, considering you lived on an island..."

She felt a profound sentiment. When Miranda first saw Affranchi in Hong Kong, accompanied by Everly Key, she believed that Baam Segen's expectation was mistaken. That was because Miranda, while cautious by nature, also had a careless side.

However, now she thought, "What makes a person this resilient? Even if one has good innate qualities, I know that the environment in which one grows can make a person weak. It's not as simple as thinking that the natural environment of the island toughens people, but the authenticity and naturalness might indeed empower people."

Miranda was aware of something stirring within her.

"Perhaps, the woman by his side is his source of strength," Miranda mused, a vision of Everly Key, slender and beautiful, filled her thoughts, accompanied by an unexpected pang of envy.

2

The Spasias, an ordinary mineral transport vessel, was a functional beast of burden carrying two passengers. Equipped with several container arms for the purpose of tethering expandable containers, it gave the appearance of a tugboat dragging inflated balloons when observed from a distance.

Both the bridge and the dining area, which also served as the sleeping quarters, bore evidence of substantial wear and tear, manifesting its age. However, thanks to the container arms, it was possible to make contact with the shuttle. The cargo containers, with their flexible plastic armor, proved to be incredibly useful for the current "operation."

The humanoid machine that Affranchi had used in Hong Kong was camouflaged and contained within one of these containers. Miranda and her companions had foreseen this day and had secured the necessary staff to carry out such operations.

"Dinner is ready. Anyone who's free can start eating," a voice, female and youthful, broke through the silence. It drew Affranchi's attention towards the hatch at the center of the bridge floor, revealing a pair of sharp eyes set in a tanned, teenage face.

"Shall we eat here?"

"No, let's head down."

Liberating himself from the suit's fastening feature, Affranchi floated toward the hatch. Unfamiliar with zero gravity's fickle nature, his trajectory ended in a clumsy collision with the ceiling, the subsequent recoil shooting him back toward the hatch.

"Heh," the black-haired girl mused from the hatch's shadows, a playful smile on her lips. Affranchi made a clumsy descent, gripping the handrails and flanking the hatch, to no assistance from the crew, including Miranda.

"Even though everyone seems to respect me, why won't they help me?" Such thoughts crossed Affranchi's mind, indicating he was growing comfortable.

The so-called dining area consisted of a table that could barely accommodate ten people and a miniature kitchen set on one wall. Zero-gravity bunks claimed two walls, while the final one was dotted with a pair of small, round windows.

"We don't have much, I'm afraid," the girl informed Affranchi, who had entered the room upside down relative to the sense of 'up' and 'down' in the room. She was dressed in jeans, a jumper with zero-

gravity fasteners, and her black hair was neatly tied in two braids – a convenient style when wearing a normal suit.

"Ah," was all Affranchi managed, his eyes still wide and exploring.

"Yes?" Krishna responded, a question in her simple response.

"Did you board with the shuttle too?"

"Yes..."

"I see... Thank you."

"You're welcome. My name is Krishna Pandent. Nice to meet you."

"Ah! I'm Affranchi Char. Nice to meet you."

Krishna's gratitude showed in her shy, awkward retrieval of a foil-wrapped meal from the oven, her movements revealing a rigid nervousness. Affranchi noticed a strange reaction from the girl... This Krishna Pandent.

"She seems overly conscious of my presence..."

"P-please..."

"Thank you."

Affranchi took the cup of pure tea that Krishna offered him and began sipping through the straw. The slightly sweet and warm liquid trickled down Affranchi's throat, into his stomach, making a pleasant gurgling sound.

"Delicious!" Affranchi expressed his admiration quietly.

"I'm glad!" Krishna's voice was filled with relief, and their eyes met.

But the moment was short-lived. Miranda and two other crew members arrived.

"Allow me to introduce myself properly. I am Madras Caria, the captain of the ship Spasias."

"I'm the navigator, Michel Aiken."

"Nice to meet you both. Thank you for taking such a risk for me today. I'm truly grateful."

Affranchi cordially shook hands with both men.

"Not at all! It's an honor, Your Excellency."

Affranchi was left speechless once again. Seeing his disconcertion, Miranda chimed in, "Captain Madras, such formalities might be too much for him right now. After all, his capabilities are still unknown."

"Well, when I look at him, I can't help but want to believe..."

"I understand, but sometimes flattery can ruin a person, you know?"

"I guess you're right, but..."

All of their conversations revolved around Affranchi, yet he couldn't grasp the crux of the matter, leaving him with a strange feeling. However, it wasn't an unpleasant one. He could see that they

acknowledged his existence and were genuinely concerned about him.

Affranchi unwrapped one of the meals and took a bite of scrambled eggs. Generally, the food on these space-faring vessels is paste-like. However, the sausages remained solid and could be eaten just like in a gravity environment.

"This is some good sauce. We didn't have such a quality one on the island."

"Really?" Krishna's pleasure was evident as she offered tea to Madras and the others.

"Indeed... Absolutely..."

The captain, appearing to be deep in thought, took a sip of his pure tea and said, "Affranchi Char."

"Yes?"

"If you screw up, you'll have to pay for my words, you know?"

"Pay for your words?"

"I paid you respect in my greeting, but if you disappoint me, it won't go unpunished. That's what I mean."

The captain's final words were delivered with a theatrical flair.

"Huh, y-yes..."

Affranchi was too dumbstruck to respond. Miranda, Krishna, and Michel, the navigator, burst out laughing.

"Ha! Hahaha!"

The captain, who appeared to be around forty, let out a chuckle.

Stroking the beard tucked under his nose, he looked at the three men rolling in laughter, their lips curled down in amusement. Just like the captain, Affranchi had no choice but to endure it, watching the two men, also watching the laughing trio, with a glum expression.

The laughter seemed to go on endlessly, making Affranchi feel like joining in. But every time he saw the captain's twisted mouth, he couldn't.

"What a circus," thought Affranchi, as he reached for another piece of bread. Yet, the laughter of the three men wouldn't stop.

A sudden realization dawned on him. He was the axis around which this bizarrely joyful environment spun. It wasn't the simple fact of being the center of attention.

Of course, the start of the laughter was due to Affranchi's story, so this was only natural. But Affranchi was struck by a more distinct sensation. In other words, all the laughter and glumness of those present was due to the reassuring power of Affranchi's very existence.

This wasn't some vague concept like being the center of attention. Rather, it was a concrete sensation of being the "leader."

"Is it that funny?"

Having lost his patience, the captain reproached the sailors and began eating. He tore the bread apart and threw it into his mouth, casually inhaling the crumbs that floated in the air. His manners might have seemed poor, but his actions were characteristic of someone accustomed to eating in zero gravity.

"Please don't be mad," said the captain to Affranchi when their eyes met for the umpteenth time.

"Mad about what?"

"Just because I said such a thing doesn't mean I don't trust you. To us, you're a godsend."

His words prompted another round of uncontrollable laughter from the crew, echoing around the cabin once more.

3

Such was the nature of their meal that Affranchi had no opportunity to gather further information. But he bore no frustrations. The mere possibility of coexisting with these individuals offered him solace. Conversely, one might say that when reassurances and understanding of one's situation are absent, one is prone to continual misjudgments regarding new circumstances and environments. Affranchi had deftly laid the groundwork of collaboration with those soon to be his comrades. Was it the allure of his charisma or the rhythmic throb that resonated within his core that captivated them? One might deduce it was the pulse, perhaps stirring his homing instincts.

Once more, he found himself on the bridge; eyes affixed on the cosmic panorama. Time seemed to stand still, yet the stellar tableau subtly transformed with each moment as the ship altered its orientation toward the sun. Simultaneously, while his gaze absorbed the near emptiness of the scene, he could not help but sense something else seeping into his consciousness.

"Eva, it really is goodbye... I may never see your face again. Destiny has decided a more unusual path for me than I had imagined. Gaba Su knew all along, it seems. The great father is now merely a spirit dancing among the stars..." His voice echoed with melancholic undertones.

"But Eva, I will return to you. I promise, okay? For your skin is the only one that feels right on mine..." He desperately wanted to believe that the gloom hanging over him was merely ephemeral.

Human beings are innately stubborn. It's that obstinacy that propels us into uncharted worlds. Even if they carry guiding memories within them, like Affranchi, people are often ruled by their surface consciousness. As his thoughts wandered off and his hunger subsided, a wave of exhaustion rolled over Affranchi.

A veil of sleep began to descend, the remnants of exhaustion still echoing within his frame. For an instance, Everly's form flowed through him as if he had been doused in bubbles and the azure of the southern sea.

"Affranchi!"

Everly Key, laughing, was in his dreams. Affranchi, caught in the twilight of sleep and wakefulness, could sense a faint stirring within himself. However, the dream-Everly, nested between her stretching legs, remained elusive. Bubbles formed a barrier, and another voice interrupted his reverie...

"Affranchi, please wake up... Affranchi!" The urgent summons hammered his ears repeatedly, and before Affranchi's eyes was Miranda's face.

"?!"

Clad in his normal suit, Affranchi was relieved to find his arousal unnoticed by Miranda. He tried to sit upright.

"We're at the colony. Side 2."

"Colony?"

The word barely registered in Affranchi's groggy mind.

"Right ahead."

As Affranchi rose, the soles of his suit contacted the floor. It was then that he saw the massive cylindrical shape rotating in front of him.

"So that's a colony...?"

Towards the bottom of the cylinder, two large plates were visible, rotating and blending in with the space around them. These colossal mirrors channeled sunlight into the cylinder's core, making its vast interior—three kilometers in diameter and thirty-two kilometers in length—livable.

There wasn't just one such cylindrical colony. There were over a hundred, each positioned tens of kilometers apart from one another. The area in space where a group of colonies existed was referred to as a 'Side.'

The ship carrying Affranchi was getting closer to the colony right in front of them. The vacuum of space amplified the details of the objects despite their vast distances, granting Affranchi a perception of the colossal structures within the seemingly minuscule colony.

"So this is what it means for humans to live in space..."

Affranchi's words, devoid of any profound intent, nonetheless resonated deeply with the crew members on the bridge.

To the crew, who were themselves Spacenoids, Affranchi's innocent remark echoed with a chorus of emotions. No one bore any animosity towards Affranchi's knack for verbalizing such universal sentiments. Even when his words were not intended to carry such significance, he gleaned their impact from the reactions of others.

With his ability to learn and adapt, Affranchi was a young man who could endure any situation. His thoughts, ever-branching and deepening, showcasing his potential to lead. Had it not been so, he would not find himself in this position.

"Whir... Hum... Whirr..."

To Affranchi's ears, the sound of the rotating colony seemed audible. The cylindrical structure turned on its axis, creating an artificial gravitational pull through centrifugal force.

In truth, no such sound existed, but to Affranchi, it felt as though the spin of the colony was echoing the rhythmic pulse within him...

Sunlight draped over the head of the gleaming white cylinder, illuminating various structures in detail. Beside it, lines of light twinkled against the deep black canvas of the cylinder.

The grandeur of the colony, slowly unfolding before Affranchi, was simply awe-inspiring. The lights streaking across its expanse were likely the glowing exhausts of spaceships. The colony's surrounding buzzed with activity, reminiscent of the outskirts of a metropolis.

"Are we going to that colony?"

"Yes. Although MHA's reach probably hasn't extended there yet, we're taking precautions and entering illegally."

"Illegally...? That sounds risky..."

"Yes... we're breaking the law. But we have no choice," Miranda said, her words like a stimulating jolt to Affranchi.

"Ah..."

"However, Affranchi, as members of modern society, we must respect the law, regardless of its nature. But when a law doesn't serve us, we have the power to draft a new one."

"Draft a new law?"

"Yes. So for now, we'll comply with the laws of the Earth Federation government," Miranda said. Affranchi could sense a tinge of venom hidden in her quiet words.

Chapter.11

MONOLOGUE IN DARKNESS

1

Emerging from the hatch below, Krishna Pandent's tan skin was visible above the collar of her bulky suit. Despite her previously carefree laughter, her present gravitas only heightened her innate charm. Was it prejudiced to think that her unique beauty was a gift from the various bloodlines she bore? Mixed heritage often lends strength to an individual in many ways. Her appearance made Affranchi momentarily forget the weight of the word "law" that Miranda had spoken earlier. Yet, he likely wouldn't forget that command.

While Miranda inspected her normal suit, Krishna circled behind Affranchi and examined the pack on his suit.

"I'll swap out the oxygen for you," she remarked.

"Thank you," Miranda responded on Affranchi's behalf.

Krishna fetched a solid oxygen compound from within the storage in the bridge and swapped it out. Even through the thick material of the normal suit, an illusory warmth from Krishna's hand seemed to make Affranchi forget his lingering concerns. Those final reservations... about Earth, Every Key, and the like.

"Your helmet..." she began.

"Ah, yes..." Affranchi, prompted by her words, pulled the helmet from atop his backpack and donned it. Reluctant to be encapsulated in a sealed environment again, he refrained from lowering the visor. But the normal suit would act on its own accord, closing the visor automatically upon detecting a vacuum.

"As we venture into space, do we truly need such suits?" Affranchi mused aloud, caught between acceptance and skepticism.

"The real question is..."

Affranchi trailed in his thoughts, "There's a purpose to this alternate reality. It must have meaning."

The very atmosphere clinging to the Earth is classified as a unique gas in the cosmic environment. Humans, after all, are but creatures

who can only thrive under such rarefied gases. Whether it's good or bad, a right or a wrong for humans to journey into space, which answer resonates more truthfully with nature? To many, this endeavor might seem like an expression of the human frontier spirit. But is it genuinely progress for humanity? A question that remained nebulous.

Now, Affranchi finally stood at the threshold of a profound contemplation: "What's the meaning behind this alternate existence we're stepping into?"

Krishna's voice interrupted his reflections, saying, "Over here."

On the other side, Miranda had already suited up.

"Krishna and Affranchi..."

"Right."

Krishna moved ahead of Affranchi and entered the airlock. Her normal suit was considerably shorter than Affranchi's by almost half a head. She pressed the button to depressurize the airlock.

A swift whooshing sound filled the space.

Sensors detecting the vacuum lowered Affranchi's visor automatically. The sealed space enveloped him. As the airlock's pressure dropped to zero, their suits expanded from the internal pressure, but they weren't made of old materials. The joints, even in cheaper normal suits, were embedded with shape-memory fibers to assist movement, ensuring no discomfort.

However, being encased within the helmet, Affranchi could hear Krishna's regular breathing tickling his ears. This sensation could be aggravating if the breath was unusual or if one simply disliked it. Yet, shutting off the all-range radio of a normal suit was inherently dangerous. Such was the environment within a normal suit.

2

"I'll go first," declared Krishna.

"Lead on."

As Krishna approached the space-side door, she unfurled a tether from the storage mechanism at her waist. With methodical grace, she attached the tip of the tether to an anchor near the airlock and then floated into the void. Mere meters ahead, a container loomed.

Grasping onto the supporting bar of the container, she secured herself and turned her attention towards Affranchi.

"Hold onto the tether and come," she instructed.

"Right!" Affranchi complied.

"Eyes on me! Avoid looking anywhere else."

Krishna's voice, tinged with urgency, pierced through the silence.

Though Krishna, as viewed through the visor in her normal suit, appeared calm and composed – almost indistinguishable from how Affranchi remembered seeing her on the shuttle. The normal suit was designed to erase individuality. Therefore, people often adorned their suits with symbols or wore different colors. The era when a normal suit had to be white felt like ancient history. Krishna's tension was palpable; new spacefarers like Affranchi were most prone to space-induced panic. That's why she tried so hard to keep his focus solely on her.

Affranchi clumsily sidled along the tether, holding it with both hands. To an onlooker, his movement might have seemed comical. Yet, at that moment, his determination to follow instructions, no matter how challenging, was evident. Not merely submission but trained obedience that would serve him well if roles were reversed.

Such intuition was paramount in monumental endeavors. Stubbornness and self-centeredness would only lead to failure, as history has repeatedly shown. Krishna, sensing his trepidation, steadied Affranchi's elbow.

"I wouldn't have known what to do without you. Thanks," he murmured.

"It's your guidance that makes this bearable," she replied. "We're almost there."

As she said this, Miranda's voice caught their attention. She emerged from the airlock in her normal suit, pushing herself gracefully towards the container.

"Krishna, which one?"

"That one," Krishna gestured exaggeratedly, a necessity given the suits' bulk.

As Krishna floated atop the container, Affranchi followed with the help of the tether.

"Here."

Opening a small hatch, minerals were visible. But beneath, a hidden compartment was revealed. Krishna's smaller statured normal suit slid underneath it.

The light mounted on her helmet searched the void. Affranchi, in the meantime, surveyed the vastness of space. The stars shone brilliantly through his visor, with the Earth and the Moon standing side by side in the distance. The majestic view evoked a yearning in him to witness it without the constraints of his suit, even if such an act meant certain death. What did it mean to be alive, scavenging space, amidst such vastness?

Interrupting his contemplation, Krishna's urgent voice and strong breaths echoed as she exerted herself, pressing a portion of the loaded minerals. A wall slid to the side, revealing the dummy hatch they had discussed.

"I see..." Miranda mumbled, resonating in Affranchi's ears.

"The weight's deceptive. Scanners won't detect any anomaly," Krishna explained.

"I see..." Affranchi responded.

"All good then?"

"Oh, yes. No need for such meticulous planning; stowaways can be managed easily," Krishna's carefree expression became visible through her visor as they touched, sharing a moment.

"Turn on your light, please."

"Uh, okay?" Fumbling, Affranchi activated the light on his helmet, as instructed by Krishna.

Miranda quickly embedded herself within the gap between the minerals. Following her lead, so did Affranchi. On the island, being led around by a woman might have been seen as somewhat emasculating. But such cultural notions held no bearing on him now. Especially when, without following, he wouldn't be able to breathe. The space was tight, just enough for two.

"It won't be more than an hour," Krishna assured as she closed the hatch. In the confined space, with just the company of each other, they plunged into darkness.

It was a profound blackness, almost tangible in its weight.

"...?"

Affranchi felt Miranda's hesitation, sensing she wanted to say something.

"What is it?"

"No, not now." Her voice resonated, helmet to helmet, vibrating the very material.

"I see..."

Again, silence.

The ship's movement remained serene.

3

The silence was first broken by Affranchi.

"Why, Miranda, would a learned woman like yourself choose to aid me?"

"Learned, you say..."

A prolonged pause held the space between them.

"Perhaps I was enamored by Char Aznable..."

"I wish you'd elucidate on that sentiment."

"The late Zeon Zum Deikun, Char's father, had revolutionary aspirations for mankind. Char, in carrying on his father's legacy, became the tragic hero... Perhaps there's a hint of a young girl's infatuation in my admiration."

"You genuinely feel so?"

"Yes..."

After this, a faint chuckle seemed to escape from Miranda Howe.

"Why choose to reside in Hong Kong?"

"It was my aspiration towards the Zi Zeon."

"Not Neo Zeon?"

The term Neo Zeon referred to the organization Char formed after the fall of the Principality of Zeon to continue Deikun's vision.

"It's merely a codename, never meant to align with Neo Zeon. I chanced upon the role of Baam Segen's secretary. Through it, I uncovered the Hong Kong building's secrets. As for Baam's true objective, I'm not privy to it."

"Sounds scarcely credible..."

Affranchi gave a wry smile.

"I suppose."

A touch of humor was evident in Miranda's words.

"I think the same of myself. But if I may defend myself just once, you must understand reality and rekindle those memories on your own accord..."

"I'm all ears."

"Yes..."

Miranda then seemed to chuckle once again.

"Why did you stay in Hong Kong?"

She had yet to answer this query.

"Ah, that. I managed to secure a shuttle ticket in urgency. Can you deduce why? My father serves the Earth Federation government. A privilege, is it not?"

"I assume your family remains unaware of your profession?"

"Wouldn't they?"

Miranda's statement made Affranchi reflect that her life wasn't without its tribulations. He closed his eyes lest he be overcome by the weight of the darkness and his urge to delve into her past. But, in true darkness, can one really discern whether one's eyes are shut or open?

Opening his eyes, Affranchi could not tell. A darkness deeper than that of closed eyes was etched there, urging him to close them once more. It felt lighter that way...

He could now see himself with a few islander friends, rowing a canoe. Yet, waves that had turned muddy brown loomed ominously. They rowed desperately, even in the water...

"If Eva had been with us, she'd have panicked!"

The tide's whirlpool tore the canoe, Affranchi, and his companions apart.

"Ah...! They're here! But where's Eva?! Why?!"

Amidst the turbid tidal waves, his scream sounded haunting.

Mechanical sounds echoed, perhaps in response to his cries. There were clanks and clatters, all caused by his helmet making contact with a forming gap.

From outside the Spasias' container came thudding and the hum of a low electrical motor.

The vessel trembled.

Although Affranchi opened his eyes in the darkness, doubting their function, he blinked. From the receiver, Miranda's breathing resonated, resembling the whispers of waves.

"Miranda?"

"Yes?"

In the consuming void, her voice added a touch of color.

4

"Just a little longer, and we'll be free," Miranda reassured.

Affranchi felt a tether of tension snap within him. The silence that followed seemed eternal.

Miranda's helmet light flashed on, briefly illuminating her checking an air sensor on her wrist. The hiss of her visor lifting punctuated the silence.

"Still feeling the strain?" she asked.

The voice didn't come over any comms; it seemed to emanate directly from the front of her visor. Affranchi, in response, lifted his visor too. Stale air enveloped them.

"Do you know what kind of land this 'colony' is?"

"Well," Affranchi began cautiously, drawing from snippets he'd gathered about the colonies from news, "one might hope they'd be orderly, given they're entirely man-made constructs."

"Yes, this colony, Hellas, it's sheer human chaos."

"Chaos, you say?"

"A fitting word indeed... Such a myriad of races, all clustered here. I can't quite understand why such a colony was founded, but it began as a base camp during the construction of Side 2. Perhaps that tradition has simply lingered?"

"Much like Hong Kong's bustling streets?"

"Yes... but it's a more intense version."

"I see. What of the other colonies?"

"They've been selective about the races they admit during immigration," she began, but Affranchi interrupted, "Isn't that just a bias from the governing body?"

"Perhaps. Those who have left their lands may promote mixed blood, but in essence, governing a populace of a single race or religion is more... efficient. Like Japan, Mongolia, or Ireland."

"Is that so?"

"Don't you recall the conflicts in the Middle East, Indian subcontinent, and Eutether where races mingled? They've erupted all too often in modern times."

"Yes, if you put it that way..." Affranchi acknowledged, though the reality of these problems was still murky to him. On his island, racial differences had never caused any issues. He had always believed that to be the world's way.

Suddenly, the darkness of the container shuddered, and all machinery fell silent.

Miranda motioned for Affranchi to remain quiet, attaching a device to her helmet. She connected a cord to the container's wall.

"It seems no one is around this ship anymore... We'll wait a bit longer."

Miranda seemed relieved, offering a faint smile. But due to the backlight, Affranchi could only discern her teeth.

"Yet, beyond racial issues, the class distinctions that have become apparent in the colonial era... they're far more significant for humanity," she continued.

"What do you mean?"

"There's a growing class consciousness among the intellectuals. Long ago, in Britain, there was an investor group called 'class.' It's a similar trend. This societal structure is surely progressing. A 'modern caste system' is taking root, subtly fostering discrimination."

"The bureaucratic class?"

"That's one aspect. But it's more than that which makes it problematic."

"Why do you think it's not an issue?"

"If it's a construct borne of knowledge, it's not about race. A solution should be possible."

"On the contrary," she countered, a hint of anger seeping into her voice.

Affranchi, having grown up believing in the hierarchy of his island, had become numb to the concept of class. The leader of his island, Gaba Suu, had preserved the island's way of life more than any government official. Gaba Suu would often say,

"Some love to work. Some can only laze around. Some find contentment just gazing at the sea. But that doesn't mean they're useless. The idle ones possess the art of passing the time effortlessly, a treasure for the weary. Those who watch the sea can predict the coming of storms or fish better than any machine. Everyone is different. The world's notion that everyone should be equal is selfish and fails to appreciate these unique colors."

For Affranchi, this worldview, watching the bureaucrats from Earth's Federation government lazily catching fish or sunbathing, was his understanding of class.

1

KONG, KONG...

The sound of something being tapped echoed through, followed by a brief pause before a hatch swung open.

"Wha-?!"

Affranchi, through a piercing brightness, glimpsed the figure of Krishna Bendett. Astonishingly, she wasn't donning a normal suit.

"Thank you for your efforts," Miranda Howe sighed in relief, her suit appearing more pronounced against the light. Affranchi, too, got to his feet.

"Watch out!"

"Huh?"

As Affranchi's eyes adjusted to the blinding surroundings, a breathtaking scene unfolded before him. Behind Krishna's agile form, the vast expanse of clouds and Earth stretched out.

"Where... Where are we?" Affranchi questioned, half wondering if it was all a dream.

Indeed, such drastic changes could make one question even their own eyesight. It was unmistakably the Earth. Fields painted in verdant green, cultivated land patterns, and forest clusters flowed languidly below. Above it all, white clouds reminiscent of foamy clusters floated lazily, casting shadows upon the earth.

Just an hour ago, Affranchi was in space. For that very reason, he'd worn his normal suit, breath held, ever alert. Yet now, the land stretched out before him like a wall.

Could he be tilting? He wondered.

Suddenly, a silvery river snaked its way through the clouds, shimmering darkly. Over the river, a bridge with moving vehicle silhouettes came into view.

Krishna, having clipped herself to Affranchi's suit, threaded a rope through her belt.

"If you drift away," Krishna began with a playful tone, "This ship wouldn't be able to rescue you."

"Oh, right..." Affranchi realized the absence of gravity, the sensation he took for granted. Perhaps gravity felt faint because the Spasias was sailing among the clouds. Or maybe the land seen through the gaps wasn't below but rather above and to the right. The sunlight didn't come from one direction but rather seemed to permeate from all around.

"Keep your feet firmly against the armor when moving," Krishna instructed, tugging at the rope and making her way toward the bridge.

Suddenly, the bucolic scene transformed. A meticulously planned city, divided like a chessboard, sprawled on both sides of the river.

From this altitude, Affranchi could discern the intricate details of the city. High-rises created patterns with roads swarming with countless vehicles below.

"How far does this city stretch?"

"Up to the industrial block, so about twenty kilometers," she replied.

It was hard for Affranchi to fathom; possibly, the city was even larger than the island he lived on.

"What's the name of this city?"

"Grenze."

"What kind of city is Grenze? Names usually carry the essence of a place."

"You're curious about the name?" Krishna teased, pushing him gently towards the bridge. She unclipped the carabiner as she spoke, "This is one of the early colonies of Side 2. Built to house a burgeoning population, the city is vertically expansive. To many, the entire colony resembles a sprawling slum."

Affranchi sensed a hint of embarrassment in her tone.

As he removed his normal suit, the view outside the bridge's window, all white and clouded, filled him with unease.

"How is the ship navigating?"

Miranda, seated in the rear seat of the bridge, explained, "We're in the central portion of the colony cylinder. We're moving from the port opposite the sun towards the industrial block. The colony cylinder rotates to generate artificial gravity, so this central area is in zero gravity, allowing ships to navigate."

"So, how big is this colony cylinder?"

"It's three kilometers in diameter and thirty-three kilometers long."

"And this entire colony... floats in space?"

"Of course. It orbits Earth ahead of the moon," Krishna explained cheekily, stowing away Affranchi's suit.

Inside a space colony cylinder... ahead of the moon? In the airspace of Side 2?

"Yes..." Miranda confirmed.

Affranchi tried to envision the colony's layout, but as he did, he realized he already knew the entire blueprint of the space colony. This newfound knowledge startled him. It felt like an answer provided by that faint, ticking noise.

"I-I understand," Affranchi smiled warmly at Miranda and Krishna.

2

"Miranda!"

At the call from Captain Madras Caria, Miranda slid into the captain's chair. "Take a look at this."

The captain shifted, allowing Miranda a view of the radar.

"Might be overthinking it, but following us or not, this one's flying too erratically to be lost, don't you think?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Looks like a light aircraft maneuvering through the clouds. If they were in distress, they'd drop below the clouds."

"Perhaps it's a rookie?"

"Damn, it might be a distressed aircraft. Look!" At the captain's directive, two bridge crew members rose, stepping onto platforms equipped at the ends of manipulators and extending out from the ship's frame.

"Whoa!"

Immediately, a shout echoed from the left. It was the navigator, Michel Eiken. Everyone turned to witness a fleeting shadow glide past the window.

"What?"

Affranchi, wide-eyed, followed the shadow as it rounded toward the front window. Although it appeared to be slowing down, the vessel was anything but stable. The desperate attempts of a figure dangling beneath a fabric wing to maintain balance were evident even to an untrained eye.

"Is he trying to collide with us?!" Captain Madras roared, directing the ship downward. It was a hang glider. It slipped out of sight above the window.

"You've got to be kidding! He's coming!"

"What now?"

Another shout from Michel, distorted by the wind, reached them. As Affranchi and Krishna leaned out from the left hatch, Affranchi spotted the hang glider soaring directly above where Michel stood.

"Watch out! He's going to fall!"

The hang glider lingered above Michel's head, its pilot reaching out to him.

"Help me!" The young pilot screamed.

"Bloody hell!" Though initially hesitant, Michel reached out to the man.

Remembering the bundle of ropes Krishna had used earlier, stored beside the hatch, Affranchi grabbed its end and hurled himself atop the manipulator supporting the platform.

"Affranchi!"

"I've got this!" He advanced, biting into the manipulator. But the wind's force trying to wrench away the rope was more daunting than he had anticipated. A break in the clouds revealed dazzling sunlight below.

"Damn...!" The sight's sheer terror paralyzed Affranchi, rendering him unable to retreat.

"What?!"

Though Michel had managed to grab the young pilot's wrist, the force and lack of gravity left them in a precarious balance. The pilot released his grip from the hang glider's harness.

"Hey!"

Michel, in a bid to set the young pilot onto the platform, wrapped his arm around him. But the absence of gravity and the wind's pressure threw them off balance. Just before they could stabilize, the pilot slipped out of reach, stretching Michel's arm to its limit.

"No!"

Having advanced almost two-thirds on the manipulator, Affranchi quickly reeled in and threw the rope. Though it flew as he had anticipated, the rope wildly snaked and curled around the platform. The young hang glider pilot, relying solely on Michel's arm, did not miss this chance, grabbing the flailing rope with one hand.

"Release me!"

The young man cried out to Michel, his hands gripping the rope. Swiftly, his body was pulled towards the aft of the Spasias, nearly colliding with the stern. The young man latched onto the ship's hull using his legs as a cushion. The rest was straightforward. He began to pull himself slowly towards the bridge.

Affranchi, eyes fixed on the young man's every move, remained glued to the manipulator. A strange distaste flitted through him. "Who is he?"

"Affranchi, step back! Secure the manipulator!" Michel's command made Affranchi finally begin to retreat. With no rope binding his hands, he could easily move back.

"What happened?" asked Krishna, extending her hand through the hatch.

"What do you mean?" Affranchi genuinely didn't understand her intent. Behind him, Miranda cast a displeased look.

"Do you understand, Affranchi?"

"Oh, yes... My apologies. Perhaps it's better to avoid danger, right?"

"But Miranda, the princess, was too forceful."

"It's not just that," Michel, having descended from the platform, peered behind, then remarked.

The hang-glider, now on the hatch, expressed with an unburdened face, "It was my first time hang-gliding. I couldn't control it. Thank you. I am Ul Urian."

"I'm Michel. It was close. Your arm nearly came off, didn't it?"

"I'm sorry. Were you the one who threw me the rope?"

"Yes. I'm Affranchi." Affranchi took Ul's extended hand, noticing how it felt soft, yet thick. He also didn't quite take to Ul's flamboyant checkered jacket.

"Thanks to you, I was saved."

"Just luck. Maybe thank the wind?"

"I might, but they've battered my body quite enough. No inclination to give thanks there." Ul grinned, revealing strikingly beautiful white teeth. At that moment, Miranda, seemingly ignoring Ul, took her place in the captain's chair.

"Is the bridge cold because of me? My apologies, everyone. I'll think of a way to express my gratitude. Please, allow me to accompany you till the industrial block."

There was a sincerity in Ul's words, devoid of any hint of malice. This made Affranchi wonder about the source of his

earlier distaste. Ul Urian, with his thick black hair, bright eyes, and tall, clean-cut figure, was by no means a bad-looking young man. Just a matter of differing tastes.

If there was anything that bothered Affranchi about names, it was perhaps the resonance in Ul's name that felt too straightforward. But it didn't seem strange in any particular way.

"But there are names that sound too straightforward... like mine, for instance."

3

The expansive front of the Spasias loomed, revealing a wall analogous to the entrance of an industrial block, its presence visible beyond the clouds.

"Remarkable..."

Affranchi found himself once again in awe.

"Keep quiet..."

Miranda whispered closely in Affranchi's ear.

"...?"

"We don't know that man's background. It's best you don't act like this is your first time here."

Affranchi understood her edginess.

"Oh? You reside in Kreuzberg?"

Krishna's voice bubbled with admiration.

"And you?"

"I don't divulge that to strangers."

That was Krishna, but she bore no malice towards Ul.

"So, you work on such a ship?"

"Yes. It pays better than what's below."

"Interesting. You're quite serious, aren't you?"

"I'm not of the class that leisurely soars around on hang gliders."

"You don't seem the type."

In the corner of his eye, Affranchi caught Ul Urian, the man making such remarks. Indeed, he seemed like a carefree young aristocrat. However, his too-obvious disposition was unsettling.

The audacity and skill Ul exhibited boarding the Spasias were far from ordinary.

"Could such a capable young man really face adversity with a hang glider?"

The industrial block's encompassing wall was thoroughly surrounded by rugged rock. In its center stood a reinforced plastic barrier, from which small booths extended with a few iron beams.

"Requesting docking!"

Responding to the Spasias' signal, one of the walls opened. Guiding lights lined the hatch's surroundings.

"Young man! Time to disembark. We have further duties," The ship's captain, Madras, spoke curtly. Obeying readily, UI leaned out of the hatch.

"Thank you!"

His friendly voice swiftly faded into the open.

"Take care!"

Krishna's cheerful voice echoed across the bridge.

The young man named UI floated towards one side of the hatch. To Affranchi, his silhouette radiated an odd strength.

"He's dangerous..."

Finally, the thought surfaced in Affranchi's mind. "He seemed to board as if pre-arranged..."

"Maybe he's with MHA? Though, do such types even exist?"

"You think yhe Hunting Bureau would employ someone so young?"

"Unbelievable. It could be a different organization. Or just a playboy, trying to impress Krishna."

Krishna smirked. "Well, men in such attire tend to let money do the talking."

"Well, as long as you're aware, be cautious," Miranda advised with a half-smile.

"It's in view."

Upon the navigator Michel's words, Affranchi looked ahead. A colony landscape unlike any he had seen before greeted him. Buildings stood tall in every direction within view, their proximity revealing.

A laser rail network in the center of the space, with dozens of beams in various colors, indicated ship routes.

"So, this industrial block... all factories?"

"Yes, there aren't vagrants living here. Fear of forced labor keeps ordinary people away."

"Is that how it is? On islands, those who don't work don't eat."

"There's comprehensive social security. However, it's not exactly for those who receive pensions."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a class that thrives by exploiting that social security."

"I see..."

Amid the industrial block's void, the Spasias shifted its course ninety degrees to the left and began its descent towards a corner building. Its grimy brown exterior might have been off-putting, but the plate near the top reading "Alexander Mineral Selection Industry" made its state understandable.

Affranchi could see the wall near the top unfolding.

"They have a dock?"

"Not like the ones on the ground, but something like that," Miranda explained as the Spasias smoothly docked onto the building's rooftop pier.

4

"Yet..."

Descending from the Spasias, Affranchi emerged at the building's dock gate.

"Yes?"

Miranda trailed behind, following Affranchi.

"We can assume we're being watched by that man."

"Why?"

Affranchi couldn't answer Miranda's question. He had carelessly peered below the building and shuddered at the sight.

Tens of stories below, a road sprawled out with moving vehicles. Although vehicles in the zero-gravity zones moved along guide rails, the view from above mirrored that of the surface.

Affranchi wasn't yet accustomed to such heights, struggling to balance his sight with the sensation of weightlessness.

"Oh, I'm sorry. My mistake."

"You'll get used to it quickly," Miranda said, forcing a wry smile while glancing in the direction they came from the Spasias. Affranchi verified the distance was no more than 300 meters in a straight line.

"You should avoid looking so tense. We never know who's watching."

"Right."

At Affranchi's words, Miranda smiled knowingly. Perhaps it was the training she received from Baam Segen.

"As you both sensed, he's suspicious. He's not someone we can let our guard down around," Affranchi said, still with a friendly expression.

"Why do you say that?"

Affranchi smirked, "Isn't it obvious? I suspect he's scouting our base... eager to see who's on the bridge."

Glancing around with a lingering smile, he added, "Do you believe in my intuition?"

"Why do you ask?"

"For no reason. Just because you said so."

"That's simple enough. We have some information, but you... you only observe people. That might be the right thing to do. It reminds me of Char Aznable," Miranda pondered, looking towards the massive hatch where the Spasias entered. Surrounding it were not only control blocks for ship management but also residential and commercial areas.

That carefree young man might be observing from one of those windows. Otherwise, he wouldn't have approached the Spasias in such an unnatural manner.

Affranchi found it curious that Miranda mentioned that name again. "What are you suggesting? What about...?"

"Oh, I never believed the stories that legendary figures would be reborn. But seeing you, I'm awed by the insight of those who planned the Char Continuation Operation."

"The Char Continuation Operation?"

"I didn't believe the results of such an endeavor, even if one had identical genetics. It's improbable they'd be exactly the same, right? I was never in favor of cloning or copying beings beyond livestock levels..."

"The rebirth of Neo Zeon's Char?"

Affranchi felt as if the veins on his temples might pulse audibly.

"Yes..."

Miranda's response seemed to further stimulate those veins.

Tick!

Something in Affranchi had undoubtedly been set in motion.

"What kind of continuation operation?"

While peeking through a small door at the edge of the hatch up to the pier, he asked. From the Spasias' mineral cargo, the

humanoid machine Zorin Soul, which he had seized, was being pulled out.

"I'm not entirely sure... maybe experiments to divide and reactivate Char Aznable's very cells. I don't know the precise biotechnology."

"Division? Is that different from cloning?"

"I'm not familiar with the specifics... but you, you look just like Char Aznable himself," Miranda declared.

"I see... Miranda, we should either dismantle that machine or move it elsewhere quickly."

"Why?"

"Because I've determined this place has been compromised by the enemy."

"But... dismantling it?"

"That won't work?"

"It's not advisable. We can't predict the outcomes. We'll move it."

"Do you have another location in mind?"

"Yes."

"Then, do that. Have the captain expedite it."

"Yes."

With a faint smile, Miranda turned her back on Affranchi and melted into the dock's embrace.

At that moment, Affranchi was already aware of his commanding position. However, he couldn't believe that this confirmed he was Char Aznable. Accepting another personality within oneself was an entirely different matter.

"If I ventured into space with the will of Char Aznable, it would be preposterous," The conscious will of Affranchi thought so.

If that was the truth, he feared he might go mad.