



MACROSS DELTA

1. The Girl of Al Shahal

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Chapter One – The Girl of Al Shahal

“You’re fired.”

And those were the first words Hayate Immelmann heard on that fine spring day in the year 2067.

“Fired...?” He wasn’t terribly surprised, frankly.

“Of course you are! You take the day off when it rains, you take the day off when you’re not in the mood... How does an aimless kid like you even keep finding jobs? This is Al Shahal! People come here from all over the galaxy to get work,” the powerfully-built Zentradi foreman said in a lecturing tone.

Hayate sighed.

“I’ve paid you for today as well, so at least make it through your shift, all right?”

“I got it. Workroid Number Thirty-One, right?”

Hayate was used to this kind of scolding.

For some people, work gave meaning to their lives. For others, it was just earning one’s daily bread. Hayate had been all over the galaxy and tried every job he could find, and he had had no plans to be negative about any of them, but he sure hadn’t found anything he could be positive about.

So it was one day that, in the midst of his feelings of indecisiveness, he just happened to be outside a workroid hangar...

And now, in the blue sky above, he saw a hundred-thousand-ton-class space freighter preparing to land.

He had a mountain of work ahead of him...

*

Long ago, there had been a war.

A space battleship had crashed on earth, and whether humanity wanted to or not, they were engulfed in an alien battle that had been raging for hundreds of thousands of years.

The battleship was called the Alien Star Ship One, “Macross.”

And in order to survive, the young humankind had had to leave its nest of earth, and spread out across the galaxy.

As they expanded outward, they came across other species with the same ancestors. Sometimes they joined together in peace, sometimes with hostilities.

Historically, to humans, the inhabitants living on other worlds were thought of as merely “strange aliens” or even “invaders from space.”

For a young man like Hayate, who had grown up in this galactic milieu, the idea, still held by many people on earth, that *only* earth people had *real* intelligence was unthinkable.

*

With a thrilling little hum, the workroid’s superconducting actuators started up.

One of the many types of man-made giants that did not have a head, the workroid just had reinforced glass on its torso. This type of workroid, the Nighthorse, was modeled on

a small type of military-use humanoid tank (called “destroids” as a category), the Cheyenne II.

Belying its bulky and high-powered appearance, though, the Nighthorse was also fast and nimble, and an extremely popular machine for all kinds of work sites, and the less-affluent autonomous planets typically used these military types. With one hand, it lightly picked up a ten-ton container, demonstrating its abilities.

Since Hayate had gotten his license three years before, he hadn’t really had to worry much about making a living.

Stand up.

He checked the work schedule on his tablet and immediately committed it to memory.

Plenty of people called him lazy, but no one had ever said that he was incompetent.

And *that* was the problem, really.

“Container C-38 to the Green Area.”

He adroitly hoisted the designated container.

With a *vroom*, the Nighthorse accelerated forward on the coreless-motor wheels in the soles of its feet. It could go about sixty kilometers per hour at a stretch, although he was breaking probably all of the safety regulations in doing so.

But that’s Hayate for you.

(Right... Now left... Aaaaaaaaand, *spin!*)

Like an expert roller skater, the workroid tilted and whirled, slipping past the other workroids and industrial droids.

“Amazing!”

“He’s dancing!”

The other workers murmured their admiration. The computer-controlled machines couldn't hope to copy Hayate's "dance." It took his animal-like instinct to maneuver around the heavy boxes on the road. And moving at this speed increased his productivity twenty-three percent more than the average workroid.

So, no, this wasn't the reason that this kid, Hayate Immelmann, got fired today.

No... really looking at it, the only reason that anyone would get rid of someone of Hayate's ability was, well... basically because he was a real pain.

*

Away from the warehouse block, under the spreading sky.

There was a gleaming white spire, visible even from very far away. This was the control module for Al Shahal Spaceport.

It was a so-called "recently settled" world, on the edge of the Brisingr Globular Cluster. It was nothing but desert; however, it was an important point along the planetary trade routes, which meant that many people and goods passed through on their way to other worlds.

Every day, the spaceport was being expanded, but, just like the ones on earth, it was not entirely mechanized. The containers were still transported by hand, buildings were quickly erected, and the place had the rough, anything-goes character of a frontier town.

Still, it was an unusual sight for this area when a variable police workroid, called a "patroid," sped past, painted in classic black and white.

"...I repeat, a stowaway has been found! Every port authority..."

The high-tech, completely automated space ships were perfect for stowing away. It wasn't like the days at the dawn of space travel, where even one extra crewmember would destroy the delicate balance of a ship's "ecosystem." These days the giant cargo ships could easily hold extra people for at least a month or two. As long as they didn't leave the pressurized cabin, they wouldn't get snatched away by the vacuum. And if one were cautious, any crewmembers would never suspect. In addition, scan-and-search systems were usually too expensive for the budget of the average ship.

Rather, discovery was easiest once the containers were delivered. If any abnormality were discovered during the inspection process, there would be trouble.

For Hayate and the other workers, it was a big problem – or, more precisely, it was a problem for the others, since Hayate figured it was sure none of *his* business.

(So irresponsible...) he kept saying to himself.

Well... that was probably true, wasn't it?

He knew well enough that being serious and responsible was one of his weak points, after all.

(I just don't want to be weighed down by anything...) he thought.

He made a final elegant turn, and placed the container in its appointed spot. It looked like he had dropped it almost roughly, but the container barely jostled. The computer system wouldn't have been able to do it, but his intuition and maneuvering skill made such fine movements an easy task.

*

Well, that was the end. Just what he'd expected. Thank the stars he hadn't seen anything suspicious!

But Hayate ended up finding something anyway.

"Hmm...?"

The lid of the container next to his, containing, apparently, apples from the planet Windermere, was slightly open. Well... he *said* "slightly," but it was definitely a big enough crack for a person to climb into.

Why was Hayate suddenly reminded of Pandora's Box...?

He felt like ignoring it. After all, it should have already been checked by customs, so if they'd missed something, or if security hadn't examined it, then that was their problem.

And really, it'd be normal to overlook something like this. Not his job.

But then, he heard something. It sounded like someone... singing.

He *had* to be imagining things.

So he opened the container and looked inside.

There was a girl.

Sitting on top of a large volume of apples inside the container, there was a girl.

Nope. Didn't see her. Didn't see anything. Nothing at all.

On the other hand, he should probably report her...

But...

(Responsibility!)

Time to act like an adult.

But no, in the end, Hayate Immelmann was irresponsible.

He always clung to the idea that he was free. Or at least, he sure *wanted* to be.

“What are you doing?” He called out.

“Huh?”

The girl was a little strange. Her hair was a very odd orange color.

Her eyes began to well up with huge tears. She had a slight build, but somehow she didn't give the impression of being weak. Instead, there was something tough about her, like a small dandelion forcing its way up through a crack in a concrete road...

And anyway, what was she doing here, this girl sitting in the apple-filled container...?

Oh. Of course. She was the stowaway.

Had to be. What other explanation could there be?

If Hayate were Spaceport staff, he would be required to scan the girl's ID card. Even if she were clearly crew of the freighter, there could be no exceptions. But here... Well, for starters, he was definitely convinced that she was the stowaway. It was obvious, not just from where she was, but also by the huge overstuffed white duffel bag that she had with her.

Her clothes were dirty, but she didn't look like a disaster refugee or anything.

She stared hard at Hayate.

Hayate gazed back.

But this sure wasn't any blooming romance... They eyed each other warily, like wild beasts meeting in the jungle, trying to read the other's next move.

More or less, at least...

(Is she going to run?)

Leaping out of the container wouldn't be easy, and anyway, it would be simple for Hayate in his workroid to grab her. Half-reflexively, he switched the manipulator hand to "living being capture mode." In this mode, it could even pick up an egg without breaking it, if the operator were skilled. And for Hayate, it was a piece of cake.

(C'mon, don't run...)

At the end of the day, the workroid was just a hunk of metal. The thought of the girl colliding with the palm of its hand made Hayate feel uneasy. If he made a mistake or a miscalculation, or if she moved the wrong way, it would be just like a traffic accident. He didn't want to capture her in this kind of situation.

He didn't want to, but he had to.

(Well, this sucks...)

In his so-called lazy heart, he felt differently. If anything, it felt like his soul was telling him *not* to do it.

And from the time he was born, if he didn't want to do something, he just didn't do it. Serving in the military, being chewed out by a boss, going places he didn't want to go... he couldn't stand anything like that. He was like a hawk stuck on the ground. A hawk can't be a horse, nor can it be an ostrich.

And so, just like that, he had become a wandering vagabond. And even now, he still was.

He didn't want to capture the girl by force at all, so he decided then and there that he wouldn't.

However...

What was he going to do now?

If he wasn't going to grab her, he needed some kind of alternate plan... and his mind was totally drawing a blank. It's not like he could suavely hop down from the workroid and try to make a pass at the girl, right...?

And so their gaze stayed locked. A long time... Well, in reality, it was probably only about ten seconds, but it sure *felt* like forever.

Suddenly, there was the sound of a stomach rumbling, and it wasn't Hayate's.

The girl slumped over and cried out in a miserable voice, "Ah'm so *hungry*..."

*

Why had she done that? Hayate didn't really know what he had heard. Just blurting out that she had an empty stomach with such sorrow and loneliness... but, still, Hayate understood, since he too knew how it felt to be roaming through space for so long.

It's amazing how the spirit will weaken when the stomach is empty. Pride, courtesy, and moderation are luxuries for full bellies. So Hayate got out of the cockpit and offered her his boxed lunch ration.

She gasped in surprise. She looked like a dog, he thought – a puppy drenched in the rain, almost like a starving Chihuahua – as she looked at the lunchbox, then at Hayate, then back at the lunchbox (lingering on the lunchbox), then back to Hayate, finally settling her sights on the lunchbox. She bowed her head.

"Is it... is it okay?" she asked.

"Go on, eat. I'm sure you have your reasons, right?"

It was a pretty silly question, Hayate reflected. No one stowed away on a ship without having *some* kind of purpose.

Even long ago, when humanity was still merely crawling on the surface of the earth, traveling while hidden was a life-threatening business. If they were thrown off the ship, they'd land in the vastness of the ocean. Or they could even be thrown off a plane mid-air. Yet there was still, perhaps, a *slight* chance of survival. Space was a little different. If one was ejected into the vacuum, it was literally the end. Even the powerful Zentradi couldn't hold out for even a day in empty space.

“Aw, yeh, yeh! Gori-gori, Ah got a reason!”

(“Gori-gori”...?)

The girl had a strange accent.

In the Brisingr Globular Cluster, there were several species of aliens who had no connection to earth. Not just aliens that had traveled there, like the giant Zentradi and the marsupial Zolans, but about a billion natives of the system, each species with its own culture. There were many different accents, and Hayate, who had journeyed far and wide and heard them all, could never remember which accent was which.

“Yer right, Ah really do have a reason! ‘Yer already fourteen, Ah won't allow you to waste the rest of yer life! Yeh'll marry the apple farmer's second sonny-boy,’ said the Mayor...”

(Oh, make up your mind. Talk or eat... don't do both!)

He was about to say so, when the girl's face split into a huge smile.

And then... it moved.

Somewhere between a gesture and an expression, the heart-shaped ornament in her hair began to move and glow, and it conveyed emotion more eloquently than words. Besides, her talking with her mouth full somehow didn't seem coarse or vulgar. Neither spit nor pieces of food were flying out of her mouth, and she was still able to speak completely clearly and distinctly. Interesting talent...

(Look, galactic bananas are at bargain-basement prices right now... it's not like I'm breaking the bank by giving you one.)

“So Ah mustered up enough courage to sneak onboard a ship. Now mah butt hurts, and goin' to the bathroom, well...”

(I don't doubt it.)

Hayate nodded in deep sympathy.

It is often said that the most accurate model of the human body is a tube: a tube which ingests organic matter and oxygen and then expels organic matter and carbon dioxide. What to do with the excreted matter, once it's flushed down the toilet, is the most serious problem in space. Generally, whatever recyclable biomass is there is retrieved, as is its water content, and the leftover substances are compressed and frozen, and disposed of when the ship arrives at the next port. However, if such a system fails or simply can't be used, life on the ship becomes a living hell.

Hayate himself had undergone such severe hardships, traveling in third class on a budget (and *old*) spaceliner. Even now, he never talks about it.

Heedless of whether Hayate did or didn't really understand, tears streamed down the girl's cheeks as she single-mindedly shoveled food into her mouth.

“Yer good! Yer a really good person!” she sobbed while gorging herself.

Suddenly, all the vitality drained out of her. Though eating and escaping seemed lucky, it was as though, under some complex directions, her throat simply clenched up, leaving her for a moment unable to speak or even think coherently.

“...So, you stowed away just because you refused to be married off, huh?”

Enforced marriage? And at fourteen, no less? It wasn't outside the realm of possibility, but she shouldn't have had to flee the whole *planet* to get out of it. Pretty much all the colonized worlds were roughly the same size as earth, and even the emigration fleets were as large as New York or Tokyo. If you wanted to hide away, you could.

(Maybe it was some rural world where there was only one colonized town...?)

“Oh, there's more to it than *that!*” she answered quickly, giving Hayate a hard stare, a look filled with earnestness.

In her hand, she clasped an old-looking music player as though it were a good luck charm. It was a type whose only real virtues were being sturdy and inexpensive, not good for much besides accessing the network, but used a lot by soldiers in remote regions and frontiersmen.

“Look!”

With an air of pride, she flipped a switch, and the sound of female vocals poured out from the player's external speakers.

Heart-throbbing rhythm. A melody that made him want to start tapping his toes.

Hayate didn't know much about this type of music, but he thought it sounded pretty cool.

“This song... what is it?”

“Doncha know it? It’s ‘Forbidden Borderline,’ the newest number from the hottest group right now, the Tactical Sound Unit Walküre!”

“...Is this that song that everyone says suppresses the Vár or some nonsense?”

The Vár Syndrome was a strange disease that had been causing an uproar all over the galaxy for a number of years now. It could strike any intelligent being, regardless of species, and fill them with an urge towards violence and bloodshed, spurring them to riot. They didn’t simply run mindlessly amok, either. They became vicious, but retained any ability they had to use weapons. If soldiers on any planet’s military bases or reaction weapon control sites broke out with the disease, it invariably awakened disaster, ruin, and death.

“It ain’t nonsense, it’s true!” the girl insisted.

“Curing the Vár Syndrome with music? It sounds like some crappy B-movie to me...”

*

The distant past...

Earth was still an outlying world, and complacent, greedy humanity thought about nothing except itself. Then, almost sixty years ago, they encountered the Zentradi giants. This was Hayate’s father’s generation.

What finally saved humanity, in its terrified wandering throughout the solar system, was the application of a certain scientific technique.

Namely, singing.

On the space battleship Macross, there was a girl, Lynn Minmay, who sang, and brought culture to the Zentradi. She shook the souls of those who had lived only for perpetual war, and with them, opened the path to peace.

The first interstellar war fought by the humans was ended by a perfectly ordinary girl singing a love song that could have been from anywhere.

*

The power of “song” had awakened, and there were further miracles to come.

The rock singer, Basara Nekki, ended the war with the “Protodeviln,” invaders from subspace who absorbed life energy called “spiritia.”

Two singing divas, Sheryl Nome and Ranka Lee, had managed to open communications with the super dimension beings, the Vajra, a species that had been feared since the time before history.

These represented merely a small part of the countless legends that had grown up throughout the galaxy.

*

And yet, in the end, legends were just legends.

It seemed to Hayate that if he sang before a mugger attacked him or something, he couldn't stop *all* muggings.

And even more so with the Vár Syndrome, which had been the biggest social problem for years now. He'd seen charms and herbs that were supposed to cure the Vár, as well as religious ceremonies in which some girl was declared to be the avatar of Lynn Minmay, who would sing at the Vár to defeat it, and he'd seen all of these fail miserably.

This "Walküre," he figured, were cut from the same cloth.

(There's no way that singing, however wonderful, can cure a disease. I've heard the legend of Basara Nekki, and the Galaxy Network is always buzzing with strange stories like that, but I don't buy any of it.)

This was Hayate Immelmann's way of thinking, and it was common in this age. If one hasn't actually witnessed a miracle, it's hard to believe that it happened.

All the same...

The music continued to pour out from the old music player.

(It might be possible...) he thought. There sure was *something* to it...

The girl searched around in her pocket and pulled out a crumpled flyer. "They're holdin' auditions here on Ragna next week!" she said with pride, beaming with joy and excitement.

Indeed. The flyer said "WALKÜRE AUDITION ON RAGNA!" on it.

Her words and expression showed no bashfulness or shame.

It felt kind of refreshing to be around someone chasing a dream, single-mindedly pursuing it, and showing total fearlessness.

"And that's why you stowed away?"

"Yeh betcha!"

"But, this..." Hayate grimaced and scratched his head.

A flicker of distaste briefly touched her expression. Probably Hayate's question seemed a little stupid to her, like asking "Why do flowers bloom?" Such a strange girl had probably formed some grand sense of destiny inside herself, and had erased any feelings of doubt.

"When Ah sing, Ah feel so alive! It even makes mah rune shine bright!"

"Rune" wasn't an official word, as far as Hayate knew, and he couldn't grasp what she meant. Whatever, it was obvious that she was deadly serious right now and wouldn't be dissuaded.

What was it about this smile with no trace of sadness that irritated Hayate so?

"Nonsense," he said. "There's no way you'd make the cut."

Why was he being so nasty? Even he himself didn't get it. It was like a thorn pricking his heart.

The girl didn't seem hurt by his words. Probably, *he* was the one who was hurt.

"Yeh, Ah will!" the girl said, not fazed by Hayate's ridicule. She seemed just to brush off any nervousness she felt.

"You so sure about that?"

"That stage is *definitely* where Ah belong!"

Why was she even saying all this? Hayate didn't understand it.

She wasn't just being silly, and she wasn't just dreaming. She was absolutely confident.

Hayate had seen that expression before...

"I'm leaving again, Hayate."

“It’ll be for a long time again. Ask your mom if you need anything.”

His father had always had that same look.

“You’ve got it easy, kid.”

Looking irritated, his father had slipped a good-luck pendant attached to a necklace over Hayate’s neck and then patted his head. Hayate unconsciously rubbed it whenever he remembered him.

“Ride the wind an’ you’ll fly! Doncha have somethin’ as important to you?”

“Nope,” he said truthfully.

“No hobbies or girlfriend?”

“Nada!” he replied, also truthfully. He didn’t have anything like that. There just wasn’t anything he was terribly interested in. At least, nothing that held his attention for long. Once he got good at something, he tired of it.

“How ‘bout work?”

“Pfft. As if anyone actually *likes* work.”

“Wow... is that kinda life any fun?”

The girl peered at Hayate’s face, and he saw that there was no malice in her eyes. He saw mystery deep in her heart. Aside from that, there appeared to be only a desire to be helpful.

“Who asked you?” he almost shouted, then felt embarrassed about raising his voice. No, he didn’t think life itself was very much fun.

It’s just life.

And so...

“Hayate, some day you’ll understand it.”

Understand what?

“The meaning of life.”

But he still didn’t.

“Look, I–” he started, but was interrupted by other voices.

“Here she is!”

“It’s the girl!”

Running in from behind the container came two guards, shouting and determined to get the stowaway.

The girl cried out and ran away. “Oh! Thanks for sharing your lunch!” she shouted, leaving a breezy echo ringing in the air.

“...What the hell is up with her anyways...?”

*

As she ran, the girl cared nothing about Hayate’s troubles, she was focused solely upon escaping her pursuers.

She pushed and shoved her way through the throngs of tourists who had never seen the capital city before, running, running, running.

“Ah’m sorry! Excuse me!” she called out. Waves of people, as though they had been pouring out of some kind of human production factory, filled the place with colors and lights. Passing through, she saw skin and hair of every shade and hue, and physiques of every type. She saw a Zolan man walking, with his child poking out of the pouch on his stomach. She saw a Meltran couple with shining optic fibers in their hair at an ice cream stand, their eyes bright. She saw an old war veteran, a cyborg with at least half his body mechanized, holding hands with his grandson as they watched spaceships taking off and landing.

So many different people, living so many different lives.

The whole area seemed like it was glittering like a kaleidoscope.

Then she heard it.

“A rainbow-colored... sound...”

A young woman passed the girl, singing softly. The woman was wearing sunglasses and her hair was a very unusual color. And that wasn’t all that was unusual... her voice sounded like a soul freed from its body of flesh.

Her humming, though quiet, could somehow be heard even over the noise and clamor of the spaceport.

It was a voice that sounded like it could transform a person’s soul utterly, and that if it did, that change would create perfection.

*

On the monitor from the Workroid's camera eye, Hayate watched the girl run away from the guards.

“What's she gonna do...?”

It wasn't like he was stalking her. All of the workroids were connected by remote datalink to the surveillance cameras on the droids, and could be used in emergencies, like facilitating catching a trespasser... or, at least, that's what they said.

So what he did wasn't out of any sense of duty. Really, there wasn't any reason.

The girl's words, her smile, her eyes... they all made Hayate's heart beat faster. That was all.

Her eye color was the same as that man's. That was all.

“This is a real pain in the ass...”

He cut the datalink. A warning screeched out from the support AI. He shut *that* off, too.

Emergency mode, full manual.

The workroid started off, avoiding the main route.

The steel legs, obeying Hayate's will, kicked off from the ground.

Why was he doing this? How could he explain?

I just don't want to ignore it.

(And if I don't want to, I sure as hell *won't!*)

He rushed after her.

*

The girl gasped as she was picked up by a steel arm.

A giant, gleaming, yellow metal body. Hayate's workroid.

"I've caught you! Don't struggle and you won't get crushed!" Hayate shouted as he opened the cockpit.

The fear vanished from the girl's face.

"Okay!" she called, "but Ah'm trustin' you!"

*

Running.

Running.

Running.

For the person in the cockpit, driving a workroid with its datalink cut should have been next to impossible. Its lack made the workroid extremely unstable, since things like its center of gravity and adjustments based on road condition were controlled by the auto-drive AI from the spaceport host computer and the datalinks.

With the computer still connected, though, there would have been no way for him to take the stowaway girl off. His position would be instantly available to her pursuers. And so he was running without computer support, relying only on the pedals and levers.

The ground was shaking.

His view was bouncing up and down.

Without the computer's support, the autobalancer shrieked.

His innards were jostling and jumping and his stomach gave a twist.

Still, he didn't fall over. He kept speeding forward, and the balance issues were converted into forward motion energy.

And that wasn't all.

As he leapt over full containers and wire fences, he also finely moved the workroid's arm so that the girl felt the shock of landing as little as possible. He was heedless of his own condition, but made sure not to hurt the girl even slightly.

This was the boy's kindness showing through behind his brusque attitude, and he continued to put his driving skill to the task of keeping the girl comfortable.

Run.

Jump.

Land.

Shake.

Recover.

Run.

And more running.

"Hey!" the girl called, "they're comin'!"

Hayate looked around in shock. She was pointing up at two police type VTOLs that were rapidly descending upon them. The sound of whirring rotors filled the air.

Next to the bulging hatch of each riot-suppression type patroid, human-like arms emerged.

They descended to the street ahead of the workroid, blocking it exactly like a couple of defense players guarding a goal.

"Do they really expect me to stop?"

Hayate was ready, seeming to predict their moves far ahead of time.

He accelerated.

He pushed forward, flanked by buildings. He kicked at a wall and suddenly the workroid was “flying.”

Of course, an industrial-use workroid was not programmed for this, but it was just one of many emergency maneuvers that Hayate improvised and pulled off.

If the workroid’s designer could see what Hayate was doing with it...

(Day in, day out, rushing containers around, who knew it could move like *this?*)

...he would’ve been completely floored.

In any case, whether or not any of this seemed possible, the first patroid moved in, trying to catch Hayate in a triangle formation, but Hayate flew over the second patroid’s head, neatly evading the trap.

At that move, even some of the pursuing patrolmen were astonished at Hayate’s incredible skill, and much later they were still talking about it with wonder.

*

When the pursuit reached the redeveloped area of the map, it was over. There was no arrest. They weren’t even sure if the battery would be dead yet on a fully-charged workroid.

Furthermore, Hayate had estimated which area would have the least amount of security presence, and based his escape route around the idea that the workroid would

stall out soon. He also had the foresight to open the cockpit just in case the workroid ran out of electricity, including the reserve supply.

The girl seemed a little frightened as Hayate looked down at her from the cockpit.

“Uh... hey...” she asked, “why did you, y’know... do that f’r me?”

There was no reason.

She clung to the workroid and looked around where it had brought her.

“Aw, no way!”

She clutched her small chest and turned bright red after a few steps.

“An’ this city is *scary*... Are, are you gonna sell me off or somethin’?”

Well if that’s what she thought would happen, Hayate wasn’t going to press anything.

Can’t stop her from jumping to conclusions.

“You were in trouble, right?”

“Heh?”

“If I hadn’t shown up, they would’ve caught you.”

“Yeh, I reckon, but...”

“Don’t you get it?” He affected a cold tone. “If you can’t do things, you just can’t.

Even if you try to fly, you can’t.”

“Where’s this all comin’ from...?”

Hayate firmly kept after the girl.

“What planet are you from? Or are you from one of the emigration fleets? If you need a ride, I know a guy on a freighter who won’t ask questions, so you can go home...”

“No, Ah ain’t goin’ home!”

“What, you’re gonna somehow ‘fly’ to Ragna then? Just hop on another ship and stow away again?”

“Ah *will* fly!” she insisted, sounding like a spoiled child.

“It’s not something you can do *twice*...”

“Ride the wind, an’ you’ll fly! Ah’ll fly, even if it means riskin’ mah life!”

If Newton had heard her say that, he would’ve passed out from shock...

“Risking your life? It’s just an audition. Is it really worth risking your life over?”

He thought it a natural question that anyone would ask, but her response didn’t change.

“Of course!”

“It’s not.”

“It *is!*” The girl marched right up to Hayate’s face. There was a fragrance of apples around her, a little too sweet but not unpleasant, after all those days hiding out in the container. Or maybe that’s the way she always smelled...

“Why do you keep sayin’ that?” she demanded.

Hayate answered plainly and honestly.

“Because I’ve never had anything like that. I’ve been to a lot of places, tried a lot of things... but nothing ever really interested me. I thought that, somewhere, there would be something for me. But...”

“Well, Ah ain’t surprised!” Her face was completely calm, but she sounded irritated with Hayate. “You can’t jes’ go *anywhere*. You hafta go somewhere you really wanna be!”

“Huh...?”

“Ah wanna sing songs Ah love! For as long as Ah possibly can!” She abruptly turned around. “So that’s why Ah’m never ever goin’ home!”

It looked like the girl might run, so Hayate quickly seized her arm. That wasn't the complete reason he did so, but he didn't quite realize that and couldn't explain why he would do so. He just did it.

And in holding her slender arm, he felt as if he had stepped out of the darkness and into a blinding ray of light.

And the girl swayed a bit and then tripped and fell, and then Hayate immediately collapsed on top of her.

Hayate generally had an excellent sense of balance, so he didn't do this kind of falling very often. It was entirely involuntary.

“Ow...”

He almost blacked out for an instant, and when he opened his eyes, he found himself nose to nose with the red-faced, frantically struggling girl, who was clearly misconstruing Hayate's intentions.

He noticed that her hair ornament, by some process he didn't understand, had changed color to a bright pink.

“Um... wait... I...” he spluttered, but the girl started screaming.

Then their eyes locked, and they both stopped, silent.

And then...

“Freeze, rapist!” a severe voice yelled. Both Hayate and the girl swiftly came back to themselves.

Hayate looked up and found himself staring into the barrel of a gun, which was being held by a young woman.

Her hair was the color of fire, and she was terribly beautiful.

Her eyes looked down on Hayate, burning with rage and flashing white.

Chapter Two – Fire and Wings

“I’m terribly sorry! Please forgive me!” Mirage Fallyna Jenius bowed deeply as she introduced herself.

She was still young.

She seemed prim and well-ordered, and definitely had some Zentradi or perhaps Zolan ancestry, since she had pointed “elf-ears.” She was probably about the same age as Hayate and the girl.

Still, by her demeanor, it seemed as though she was bursting with energy and vitality.

And there was no doubt that the clothes she was wearing were some kind of uniform.

“I was positive that anyone guilty of stowing away would be capable of other crimes against civilians.”

“Well, I guess I can see that, but still...”

The misconception – that Hayate was a dangerous criminal on the run – had been dispelled when the girl confessed loudly, “Ma’am! *Ah ’m* the stowaway!”

If she hadn’t, Mirage probably would’ve shot to kill, no questions asked. It had looked like a situation in which there was no room for anything *but* swift judgment. What else could she have thought was going on, coming across a man pushing a girl down in a deserted redeveloped area? Anyone would think it was rape, plain and simple.

“So, anyway...”

“Excuse me! Chaos^{*}, Ragna Third Fighter Wing, First Command Unit Delta Flight, Second Lieutenant Mirage Fallyna Jenius. If you would like to file a complaint, please contact our Public Relations.”

“Uh... okay...” Hayate looked at the girl with a quizzical expression, but it looked like she hadn’t understood anything, either. This young woman appeared to belong to some kind of military organization, but the fact that she had mentioned PR made it sound like an independent firm. Perhaps it was some kind of civilian contracting provider operating under some agreement with the Ragnan government? That much he could guess, but the rest seemed like some kind of magic incantation for all the sense it made, as his face showed.

But then the girl seemed to realize something and she gave a little cry.

“Err, perhaps... ain’t that *the* Delta Flight? The one that flies with Walküre?”

“Y... yes, that’s correct.”

All at once, the girl’s expression changed, and she looked like she was back in dreamland.

(Uh-oh...)

She didn’t notice Hayate’s frown. She couldn’t notice it.

“Fwahhhhh! Delta Flight! The real McCoy!”

Mirage flinched before this girl who seemed so enthusiastic that she was about to eat her. “Wh... what’s wrong with her?”

“Apparently, she’s a fan of yours.”

“A fan?”

* Pronounced “Chaos,” from Greek mythology, one of the oldest of the gods.
– Translator’s note.

The red-haired officer wasn't used to this kind of reaction and broke out in a clammy sweat. Well, that wasn't unreasonable. The girl's forcefulness even made Hayate shrink back.

He had heard something about Delta Flight on in the news. Because this Walküre actually performed on battlefields in order to try to quell Vár Syndrome outbreaks, they found themselves often in serious danger.

If the outbreak happened among an unarmed populace, a police escort was enough, but the problem was when those infected had Valkyries or Destroids at hand. It was a frequent occurrence. Because of this, a special team, called "Delta" protected Walküre.

It wasn't an extravagant idea.

Long ago, during Space War I, Hikaru Ichijo of Skull Team made his promise, so famous from movies and TV dramas, to protect Lynn Minmay. Later, the ace team Diamond Force defended the rock band Fire Bomber against the Protodeviln. And just a few years before, the excellent ace pilots guarding "the Super Dimension Cinderella" Ranka Lee and "the Galactic Fairy" Sheryl Nome were much talked about.

(The media just eats stuff like this up, don't they?)

Speaking frankly, though, Hayate wasn't very interested in the topic. To him, it was pretty clear that having their own personal Valkyrie team was just a way for this idol group to get publicity.

(Whatever...)

Really, the important thing is that this Mirage person who had tracked the girl down for stowing away was not connected to the spaceport authorities. Probably the only

reason she had even come was just because of the clamor. Some other territory's military wouldn't be called in, and might even be *forbidden*, to deal with a situation like this.

In short, this Mirage probably knew nothing about his aiding and abetting the girl's escape in his workroid.

That is, unless in her artless way, she just blurted it all out, in which case Hayate would either have to talk his way out of it as smoothly as possible, or else he'd end up having to flee, just like the girl.

Then, that instant...

A shiver ran down his back.

Faintly... So faintly...

It was a prayer or a wish...

Or a curse or a resentment...

Good and evil mingled, order and confusion brought together the very essence of some achievement... not just calling out for something, but echoing inside his very soul.

It was like a phrase of a song, a recitation of a poem, an intoned prayer... but it sounded as if he could hear it well up from a pit of darkness, and it felt freezing cold.

"What's this...?" Hayate wasn't the only one who felt it. The girl obviously did, too.

"Roger that."

It looked like the girl named Mirage was communicating with someone elsewhere.

She finished her call, and looked at the other two gravely.

An air raid siren started blaring.

"Both of you need to leave here immediately," she said. "This is about to become a warzone."

“Huh?”

“The Vár is here.”

And there was nothing to reply to that.

The red-haired soldier rushed off the way she had come with no word of parting. Just a sense of the world of death and gunpowder smoke that she lived in, and that Hayate and the girl knew nothing about.

*

The battle in the streets of Shahal City hadn't even started fifteen minutes before.

The giant Zentradi, the very ones who were supposed to be protecting the city, had been infected by the Vár, and had turned their guns on the city itself.

For those stricken with Vár Syndrome, the primary symptom was an instinct for battle building up from inside oneself. One would become consumed by hate, Satan's doll of pure destruction. Even if the fighting stayed within the area, with the infected fighting each other, they were still attacking to the bitter end, and many non-infected would be killed in the wholesale, bestial devastation.

The giants came driving the two-legged capsule-style machines called “Regulds,” firing charged-particle beams over the heads of Hayate and the girl, who ran along beside him, clutching his hand.

“Those are New Unified Forces weapons!” he shouted. “They can be stopped remotely!”

But his words rang hollow.

Yes, the Regulds, like Hayate's workroid, were controlled from a centralized computer system that could be shut down. And yet the New Unified Forces, facing constant threats throughout the galaxy from Zentradi and other beings, had to be prepared at all times.

Especially, some years previously, when the Macross Frontier fleet encountered the super dimension lifeform, the Vajra, the New Unified Forces' network was easily infiltrated, and control was seized of all their unmanned fighters and missiles. People were terrified that these techniques could one day be aimed at manned weapons as well. A centralized system for shutting down groups of weapons could more easily be targeted by hacking from outside, and could fall under enemy control. To avoid this result necessarily involved taking the risk that weapons taken during Vár outbreaks could not be recovered.

But the threat of the Vár was still relatively new, and the massive bureaucracy of the government couldn't respond to it quickly enough. And as is usual for humanity, the menaces from space, from living weapons like the Vajra, and seizing control of weapons through hacking, seemed overall more pressing.

Hayate had nothing to do with the so-called "wisdom" of such adults.

That is to say, he had nothing to do with the decisions made by a far-off military, but he was now the one running through the city, looking for shelter, and trying to avoid shrapnel that was falling like rain all around him.

The girl screamed.

A New Unified Forces “Cheyenne II” destroid was hit by a volley from one of the Regulds and it toppled over into a nearby building. From the chest up to the head, there was nothing. It had been completely destroyed.

(The cockpit’s in the same place as it would be on a workroid... the pilot’s dead. Really dead...)

But he could only afford a fraction of a second in sympathy.

He needed to protect the girl from falling debris, and most of all run.

But... to where...?

(That old question again...)

He felt like he was just running blind through the burning city.

Where can I go if there’s no place I’m looking for?

Still, the girl had talked about “flying.”

But that was just words.

Somewhere, I wanna fly somewhere! ...Is that really gonna help?

He felt like he was falling into a deep well of despair.

And yet, if he stood still, he would certainly die, both he and the girl. Not the optimal outcome... so he kept running.

Solely focused on running.

As he ran, his muscles began to scream in protest and his lungs wheezed and ached, but that was just proof that he was still alive.

*

So... which way to run?

Hayate, still pulling the girl along with him, ran through the streets and alleyways of Shahal City.

His heart felt about to explode and his muscles about to tear, but he had to run.

The road directly out of the spaceport was blocked, so any shelter around there would already be full.

Luckily, the Vár-infected giants were occupied with fighting the New Unified Forces pouring out of the nearby military installation, and hadn't yet started on full-scale genocide of the citizens, which let Hayate and the girl survive. For now, at least. Still, he wasn't exactly comforted, since all throughout the city, people with Vár Syndrome were running wild and grabbing any weapons they could find.

“Dammit! This street is blocked, too!”

Looking back, he could see a surging wave of people, carrying lead pipes, baseball bats, even some billiard cues.

There were some automated patrol drones trying to suppress the attack, but they seemed to barely be able to hold the rioters in check.

“Wait,” the girl said in an especially loud voice, “doncha hear it?” He had taken his eyes off of her, and when he looked over at her, she looked almost corpse-like. There was fear in her eyes, too.

“Is it a voice...?” she mused, looking at the sky.

“Huh?”

The area no longer felt like a battlefield, but like a place filled with enchantment.

“The rainbow-colored... voice...”

She shook off Hayate's hand and ran towards where the sound was coming from.

Hayate gasped. What the hell was she *doing*?

Nothing to do but go after her...

Maybe he had heard something, but it didn't seem to be the same as what the girl had heard. Or was he just pretending that he hadn't heard anything?

He felt it deep inside him, a voice that couldn't be denied, awakening something within.

*

And thus...

The two were about to meet goddesses.

The main street was enveloped in flame, but a fearless, smiling young woman stood there with her feet set apart. The same beautiful woman who had passed the girl in the crowd at the spaceport earlier.

"Looks like things are finally heating up," she said. "Well, then...!"

As she spoke, spotlights hit the sky above the battlefield.

"Music is mystery!"

Three beautiful girls descended and landed gently. Each one spoke.

"Music is love!"

"Music is power!"

"Music is life!"

The first woman cried, "Listen to the songs of goddesses!"

And then all four shouted, “Super Dimension Venus, Walküre!”

Their forms appeared as if in a dream. It simply *had* to be an illusion. Their apparent power must just be a dazzling fabrication.

Four divas, dolled up on the battlefield, with drones like sparkling wings descending around them, and still singing. If this had been happening in a story or a movie, no one would’ve believed it.

But if things that can’t be real appear in reality, reality itself will decidedly smash them into oblivion.

Dreams cannot destroy actuality.

*

Walküre’s singing echoed out over the battlefield with no pause. It wasn’t a miracle or magic, it was a product of technology.

“Pinpoint barriers formed. Deploy SWW* smoke, continue the Vaccine Concert!”

Sitting in the cockpit of a variable fighter, the VF-31C Siegfried, was Mirage. Other pilots were working with her. Delta Flight was Walküre’s close guard, as many had gossiped about.

These Valkyries had many special additions, such as speaker pods to amplify singing, smoke that helped spread the music, and a power supply for charging the Multi-Plate Drones that protected Walküre. Along with its prowess as an interceptor, it really was a super-machine.

* “Schwungwohl”

“Delta Leader to all units. Alpha, Beta, and Gamma Flights, give us upper-air support. I’m guessing we’re going to have to stay in close,” the strong voice of Delta Flight’s commander, Arad Mölders, could be heard saying over the comm.

“Roger!”

Four Valkyries banked wide and descended towards the burning city.

It was just like the old Norse legends, where Valkyries, beautiful goddesses, would fetch the souls of those killed in war, and escort them to an eternal battlefield.

It was taken for granted that everlasting warfare was a desirable thing.

*

“Amazin’!”

“That’s... Walküre...?”

Hayate and the girl watched the spectacle with pure astonishment.

There was no denying the beauty of Walküre and Delta Flight’s combat styles. A dream given shape and lovingly protected against cold, hard reality will always be beautiful, and so it was here.

Delta Flight weren’t just fighting, though. In formation, they released trails of smoke of various colors. It made them seem like an aerobatic team, except that they were cleverly using it to herd the infected soldiers together into one area.

Using such tactics also brightened and enhanced Walküre’s singing. The whole operation was gorgeous.

(One of them... is off...?)

Hayate knit his brows. It was only slightly, but it looked like one of the Delta fighters couldn't quite keep up with the other three in formation.

That would be Mirage Fallyna Jenius's fighter, but Hayate didn't know that, yet.

*

Diving.

Delta Flight's lead fighter swooped down to try to shepherd a rioting giant in a Queadluun-Rhea powersuit.

The fighter jumped, and then transformed.

Long ago, when humanity learned of the existence of the giant Zentradi, they developed new weapons to fight them, using the technology from the battleship Macross. These were the Valkyrie variable fighters.

This "transformation" wasn't merely something like landing gear folding up or wings sweeping back.

Arms emerged.

The engines became legs.

A camera eye equipped with a turret unit that looked like a head popped up.

Exactly. It was a giant.

Since earth people rarely stood much more than two meters tall, a way was needed to battle the giants, so they designed a "Giant Slayer." The variable fighter.

Having the ability to turn into the humanoid robot "battroid" form, the Valkyrie quickly took the leading role during Space War I.

And as humanity ventured out into the galaxy, in the cramped quarters of spaceships where every square inch was at a premium, having a super weapon that could perform in air, in space, on land, and even inside the ships or underwater, was necessary.

The silver giant landed, shaking the ground, and stood blocking the Queadluun-Rhea.

The powersuit clenched its fist and lashed out.

Inside his cockpit, Arad Mölders grinned fearlessly. “Nice punch... but too slow!”

He shifted his weight, and missed the blow by a hair’s breadth. But he didn’t just avoid it, he also made sure it didn’t damage anything around them in this besieged city. None of his movements were wasted.

It was a move called “mikiri” by martial arts masters, meaning “abandonment.” And needless to say, Arad was definitely an ace pilot for being able to pilot the Valkyrie with such agility.

The Valkyrie grasped a knife made of a special alloy in its hand. It had appeared as if by magic, since Arad had drawn it while he was evading the powersuit’s attack. It was just like an ancient swordsman’s ability to draw a sword from a sitting position and attack in one fluid motion.

With a flash, the knife neatly sliced off both of the Queadluun’s arms. Naturally, the Zentradi pilot’s arms were not inside them, since the powersuit operated on a master/slave model.

“Now!”

Through the explosions, wrapped in a glowing barrier, Walküre’s center, Mikumo Guynemer, came flying in.

To Hayate and the girl, she looked like a goddess.

Spurred on by the Vár contamination, and even with its arms gone, the Queadluun blasted its secondary cannons at Mikumo , but her smiling face was soon right in front of its monitor, and her voice echoed inside it.

*

“Aaa... aaahhhh...”

The severity disappeared from the giant’s face.

He looked like a child now, as tears flowed down his cheeks and he just listened to Mikumo’s singing.

“*Deculture...*”

*

As this was going on, all over Shahal City, people were waking up. The rioters, the giants, one after another, they stopped fighting and listened to Walküre’s music. If they had been suppressed or defeated by physical means, who knows how many days it would’ve taken. These were different from normal soldiers in that they would never get tired of fighting. If they ran out of bullets they would use their fists, and even when they had destroyed everything, they still wouldn’t stop.

And yet, Walküre had stopped them in a matter of minutes, just by singing. Their power was evident to Hayate – to anyone, really – who had witnessed it.

“Incredible...”

They had overpowered the Vár.

For people who had lost their powers of reason, for those struggling against misfortune, this took on the air of a festival. And indeed, since times long gone, people who wear afraid of plague or wanted evil driven from them would go to festivals.

At the Gion Festival in Kyoto, people would pray to drive pestilence out of the city. To send off plague victims with fireworks and pray for God’s protection, there was the Festa del Redentore of Venice. By singing and dancing, they would cleanse the soul, giving consolation for the dead and healing for the living. The shrine maidens of Mayan Island in the Pacific Ocean would drive out evil spirits, *Kadun*, with what they called the Song of the Wind.

It wasn’t just superstition, nor was it a fabrication to drive business.

There was definitely something to singing. Perhaps, as Mikumo Guynemer always said, “music is mystery.”

Like an ocean tide, the curse of the Vár receded. People’s faces became joyful again. Those who had been infected now sat silently, listening to Walküre.

Definitely, this was what hope looked like.

But...

(Wait, what...?)

The flames of war were beginning to rise again. Hayate looked up above, and in the far distance he saw a faint glittering and ominous ribbons of light.

Just as the celebration had started, an evil star rose over it.

*

“Delta 4, enemy fighters! Not sure how many... from Chuck’s observation, it looks like at least a half-dozen, together with some unmanned fighters. I think we’re facing a full squadron.”

Upon hearing Delta 1, Arad Mölder’s communication, Mirage Fallyna Jenius didn’t grasp its meaning for a moment.

“The unknowns have already broken through the New Unified Forces defense in orbit around the planet,” Arad continued. “They’re on a course towards Shahal City now.”

“Unknowns... are they Zentradi?”

The Zentradi had been manufactured by the ancient Protoculture as living weapons. Even though they had ended up destroying the Protoculture, they continued to fight, being known as “berserkers.”

Although many of them joined hands with humanity and became members of the New Unified Government, a few needed war to give them a purpose in life. Even though Lynn Minmay had once saved humanity, repeated encounters with other Zentradi would often leave plants and emigration fleets entirely destroyed.

While humans longed to become one society, they couldn’t throw away their weapons just yet.

“No, they’re Valkyries of some type. It’s hard to get a reading because of the effects of the Vár fold waves. But, probably...”

“They’re terrorists...!” Mirage gasped.

And so, they switched over to the second step of their battle.

*

“They” were coming to throw the now-pacified Shahal City back into hell.

The enigmatic variable fighters, visibly different from the New Unified Forces VF-171s or Delta Flight’s VF-31s, broke through all defence and were heading straight for the city.

Three VF-171 Nightmare Plus fighters launched from the New Unified Forces base in Shahal City, but immediately became nothing but balls of flame.

Ten or so years before, the VF-171 had been the newest fighter to be deployed. Using the stealth variable attack fighter VF-17 as a base, it was easy to handle, and was in an entirely different class than the old VF-11 Thunderbolts and VF-14 Vampires used on settled worlds. It was even said that its abilities were comparable to the VF-19E Excalibur.

And they were handily shot down by the enemy fighters. These fighters definitely weren’t just the old VF-1 Valkyries usually used by guerillas or terrorists on the fringes.

No, they weren’t being caught by the radar, so they clearly had speed and stealth ability.

But most of all, from their movements, it seemed like they were protecting those with the Vár... or else using them as cover...!

*

The battlefield suddenly became bewildering.

The New Unified Forces defense fleet in orbit seemed not to have been able to handle the assault. There would be no hope of reinforcements.

Mirage moved to intercept, leaving Chuck, the communications specialist, and Arad to handle the Vár on the ground. Against the cutting-edge VF-31, even five fighters wouldn't be too much for her to handle, she thought.

(I'm starting to break through the picket line... and... *aim!*)

She spurred her VF-31C on, flames gushing from its thermonuclear burst engines as it picked up speed.

She locked on to an enemy fighter. Dead center, no escape.

It was a gorgeous fighter. Golden-edged, but with no apparent identifiers of nationality, it looked more like an air race or demonstrator plane.

“Now!”

The VF-31C's hatches opened, and spit out torrents of missiles.

But then, right before her eyes, the enemy fighter seemed to blur.

(Active stealth!?)

The enemy fighter effortlessly slipped through the storm of missiles and ascended. It even deceived all of her sensors, proof that it had an extremely powerful stealth system indeed.

Mirage was close on its tail, but it vectored its thrusters and made a tight loop, and in an instant, it was behind her.

“If that's the way you want it...”

And the VF-31C's engines became "legs," to become what was called a "gerwalk."
She applied the brakes and ascended, and then was above the unknown fighter.

Or at least, that had been her plan.

Where the enemy should have been, there was nothing. The mysterious Valkyrie slid up behind her.

Completely instinctively, she pressed hard on one of the foot pedals and quickly dropped.

A mere dozen centimeters above her canopy, where she had been just a moment before, bolts of lights streaked past.

(No doubt about it... this enemy understands how we humans fly.)

*

In a flash, the festival had collapsed into turmoil.

Delta Flight's Valkyries were working with the New Unified Forces to mop up the last of the Vár-infected soldiers. The soldiers were still resisting, but their numerical inferiority was undeniable.

Or, more precisely, Delta Flight was focusing on the air battle with the unknown fighters, while on the ground, Walküre were helping to subdue the Vár-infected, allowing the New Unified Forces to take control of the situation again and defeat them.

And yet...

Or perhaps, *therefore...*

Walküre's song continued, undimmed, and the women refused to give up.

The voices reached the heavens, and, slowly but surely, the Vár was receding.

However, the energy in the pinpoint barrier shield of light that protected them was running out, almost at its limit.

Under the strain of countless waves of attack by the stricken soldiers, the barrier finally collapsed.

*

Hayate's whole body was trembling.

He wasn't just trying to protect his own life, but the girl's as well.

All the frail people were thinking only about Walküre's singing.

The voices continued endlessly, as though transparent.

(They're calling.)

That's what it felt like, at least.

And so, he continued running.

Now, since he had just found himself there by chance, and his throat was not yet dry, he simply followed the guidance of the wind.

He believed in it.

*

And then...

The girl, pressed next to him, was also running.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

She just laughed.

Just like a child trying to get attention from his mother, or a puppy let off his leash and running in a field for the first time ever. She seemed high-spirited, although there was still an awareness of how grave their situation was in her face, and she laughed again. It seemed as though she drew strength from it.

Missiles raining down, lasers burning through the air, they could lose their lives *at any moment*... and yet she was laughing.

It was a strong laugh, such as only people who have found their purpose have. And before his eyes, she started glittering and sparkling.

“It’s time to show some Windermere spirit!” she cried, raised her fist in the air, and began to sing along with Walküre’s song.

But who was she going to show?

Stupid question... the world, of course.

Artistic work needs to be experienced by other people, to communicate and mediate among them. Singing is no different.

And so, if the girl wanted to reveal her soul to the world, that was hardly surprising.

Her hair ornament straightened and stood up, and started creating ribbons of sparkling light particles.

(She’s... a Windermerean?)

In the middle of the flames, the girl was singing. Overflowing with the joy of being alive, she was singing.

Her expression said that even if she died in the next moment, right here, right now, she was fully living.

And the boy, who had searched but not found anything worthwhile, also felt his soul begin to shine.

Without a doubt, music is mystery, and love, and power, and life.

*

Kaname Buccaneer, Walküre's leader, couldn't believe her eyes. Her fold wave measuring device showed a sudden spike in activity. Someone who wasn't part of Walküre had joining in singing chorus, and that voice's power had to account for the increase.

The song gained in power, resounding across the flaming sky.

*

Before Hayate's eyes, the giants who had been fighting fiercely stopped moving, and the rioters let their weapons fall to the ground.

(Incredible...!)

There was an unmistakable correlation with the girl's singing.

(Or it sure *seems* like it...)

He looked around in desperation.

(I need to do *something*...)

And then he noticed a crashed and abandoned VF-171 Nightmare Plus, a giant human-shaped form the size of at least five people.

*

Getting into it was Hayate's will. No one forced him to. He didn't have to do it, he just decided that he would.

Perhaps this was the real beginning of his life. He didn't need to, and no one would've blamed him if he hadn't. No one asked him to, and it sure wasn't necessary. He could deal with it all afterwards.

And yet...

“So what next?”

He wanted to do it, and so he would.

He flipped the activation switch on the VF-171 without hesitation. Fortunately, in case it could be used quickly in this emergency, the locks weren't set and it stood up smoothly. The right arm was destroyed, and Hayate thought it couldn't withstand much more battle.

He ran.

The controls were essentially the same as the workroid's.

He had one goal: block the approaching Reguld from interrupting the girl's song.

He nailed it with a roundhouse kick, which not only knocked it over but pulverized one of its legs, leaving it unable to stand up.

A Nousjadeul-Ger powered suit came up behind the VF-171, but Hayate dropped and spun magnificently.

“Yo, to!” Hayate grunted as he made the battroid do a handstand and kick the Nousjadeul-Ger in the face.

He was splendid.

Listening to the girl singing, his machine was like a winged angel.

No restrictions. No limits.

Obedying his every command, the iron giant danced and leaped. In fact, he looked like a background dancer for the girl's singing.

“Hey!”

He stretched out his hand, and the metal hand picked the girl up.

“Can you still sing?”

The girl gave a sharp nod and a tough grin.

Missiles rushed towards them.

He jumped. Flames shot out of the nuclear burst engines in the Valkyrie's legs. There was no comparison with the workroid; the power here was dramatically increased.

And still, the girl continued singing. She must have tremendous stamina.

(But if I stay here, we'll be sitting ducks... Can't I fly...?)

The operating system's base logic wasn't any different than a workroid's. In spite of the heavy G forces they would have to endure, he desperately activated the transformation sequence. And the girl's singing was giving him strength.

Even so, as a boy who had never piloted a Valkyrie in his life, fleeing through a battlefield in a hailstorm of bullets, could he really pull off a transformation?

Steel wings opened out. The wind swelled under them.

A little "jump" with the thrusters and suddenly, he was airborne!

The machine, now in the shape of a fighter plane, rose up into the air of Al Shahal, dancing in the night sky.

And then...

Hayate's eyes, his skin, his ears, all were attuned to the color of the sky, the scent of the clouds, and the sound of the wind.

He looked out at the azure sky that seemed to continue forever. It twinkled and glittered, and the singing voice seemed likewise endless.

Hayate was the plane, and the plane was Hayate. The wind, the sky, the sun... Hayate felt like his whole being was shining.

He felt like he could spend eternity flying.

He had finally found it.

Something he *wanted* to do.

Flying in the sky, forever, forever...

He wanted to fly forever, holding the singing girl in the VF-171's hand.

*

Then, a laser from one of the oncoming golden Valkyries suddenly struck Hayate's fighter...!

Chapter Three – In Flight

The beginning of the Twenty-First Century.

During the war with the giant Zentradi, the human population dropped to under one hundred million. The surface of the planet had been seared completely, and nearly all plant and animal life had been destroyed.

Many world mythologies have stories about some kind of Armageddon, so the remnants of humanity had some inkling of their possible fate, and decided that the world's culture needed to be preserved.

And the first step was the Galactic Seeding Project. Regardless of public opinion, all industry was placed in the service of space emigration. Finding many uninhabited planets, the result was an explosive spreading of humanity throughout the galaxy.

During this process, humanity also made its second step, forging a “New Unified Government” in collaboration with the Zentradi with whom they had made peace. This was facilitated by the fact that the prehistoric civilization of the Protoculture had, through genetic engineering, created humanity and the Zentradi as compatible anthropoids.

And now, culture-bearing humans lived in every corner of the galaxy.

And about fifty years previously, humans arrived on the distant planet of Ragna.

*

No matter where you are in the galaxy, the fragrances of morning are always invigorating.

And where could that be more true than on a planet with an atmosphere that humans could breathe, as well as an ocean?

Well, except for that time when Hayate was working as a miner on Planet Barsalos, where the sea was made of sulfuric acid... that was pretty awful...

But, anyway, back to the topic...

Hayate was at the spaceport of Barrette City, the capitol of Ragna.

(Seems like a weird place...)

It was hot.

Intensely hot, like living near the equator. But at least it was a dry heat, rather than humid and sticky. He could see a huge rampart before him separating the land from the sea. According to the sightseeing pamphlet he had, long ago an evil god swept in from the ocean, and other giant gods built the wall to protect the Ragnan people. Hayate had no idea if that was true or not, but radiocarbon dating had shown the wall to be at least a hundred thousand years old, so it wasn't surprising that the locals considered it a holy place. In reality, not only was it a highly fortified seawall, but also the main section of the old city had been built upon it.

On the other side of the water, the newest parts of the city had been built around the emigration ship that had arrived fifty years prior, and that was an earth-like, highly advanced city.

Hayate was here because the girl – who had introduced herself as Freyja Wion – was going to the Walküre audition.

Her stowing away and his appropriation of the VF-171 had been swept under the rug.

“Because Walküre’s operation was covert, the local agencies were not informed of our extra staff presence,” the soldier called Mirage had said to the Al Shahal authorities. For the VF-171 incident, she explained that Hayate, to whom it had been traced back, was licensed by provisional Xaos staff who had been pressed into service to protect Walküre.

He was grateful for that, but of course, at the time, she’d given him a pretty thorough blasting, with a long, long, long, long, long, long sermon.

Now, naturally, he understood the rationale. Not only was it forbidden under galactic law for civilians to enter combat, but flying in combat airspace could wreck the military pilots’ formations and plans, and make it more dangerous for everyone. To say nothing of the fact that he’d been flying over a populated urban area, and an accident could conceivably have killed tens of thousands of innocent people.

To add to that even more, he fully comprehended that he and Freyja would’ve crashed if it hadn’t been for Mirage and her VF-31C.

He knew and accepted all of this, and he’d *still* been preached at for what had felt like *forever*.

And so, he hadn’t been able to hold back and had flung “Well, what about *you*, huh? Your timing was totally off when you were all in formation!” at her.

It wasn’t a false accusation, just the plain (if unpleasant) truth, but the flight officer’s reaction to Hayate’s words was larger than he had been expecting.

She turned red and seemed unable to speak at first, and then slammed him with another exceedingly long, long lecture.

To be frank, he didn’t remember much of what she had said.

She seemed to be running on so much anger that he thought, and almost said, “What are you, my mom?” The anger was building up inside this beautiful young woman called Mirage, and it looked like the slightest jostle would make her explode... but he stopped.

He noticed a somewhat musical quality ringing through the sermon. This young woman had a nice voice. There was no malice in her tone; there was just a pure anger, as well as anxiousness for Hayate and Freyja’s well-being. Her voice was free of darkness.

But still, a sermon is a sermon, right?

Anyway, she eventually stopped scolding, saying “If you have any complaints, please contact public relations,” which may have been some kind of parting shot, and then Hayate and Freyja were released.

But...

(She turned a blind eye...)

was a realization that also dawned on him.

Certainly when he was in the falling Valkyrie, it was this angry Mirage who had delivered the fatal blow.

And in putting her life on the line so completely, it was clear that this red-headed officer was a good person, but that was beside the point, really.

He thought the enemy – he used the word with no deep or real feeling – Valkyries had also gotten off the hook, flying back off into the sky.

He hadn’t seen all the details of the battle, but he trusted his own eyes on what he did see. Even though Mirage’s slight lag had allowed the enemy to get away, he felt that he had really seen Valkyrie aerial combat.

The enemy fighters had been superior, and were breaking through Delta Flight's defense and seemed poised to kill Walküre.

(But they hadn't. I wonder why?)

The question bothered Hayate.

Not that he had wanted anyone to, you know, die... It's just that his competitive fighting spirit had been aroused. That was it.

That said, it wasn't just because of Freyja that he had come to Ragna. It just seemed a good idea to return to his carefree vagabond lifestyle.

A good idea, but...

"So that makes me wonder, why did yeh come along, anyway?" Freyja asked as she peered into Hayate's face with a mysterious expression.

"Huh?"

"Well, yeh made all the arrangements f'r comin' to Ragna, and don't think Ah ain't grateful... but Ah still dunno why yeh decided to tag along."

"Just putting theory into practice, despite what that Mirage girl said."

Well, I mean, he had to say *something*...

At any rate, since she had sung "with" Walküre in the battle, Freyja's energy had been climbing steeply, and even she seemed so excited about the audition that she practically broke down the walls of the spaceport when she arrived.

(Not only did they look past her stowing away, but she even got a free ticket out of the deal...)

At least, that was Hayate's strong suspicion.

“Why...” he said as he looked up at the sky. As far as he could see, the clear blue spread out forever. “I just figured I’d come and watch you fail the audition.”

Well, at least, that’s what he *said*...

*

The branch office of Xaos, which was serving as the audition hall, was accessible by a ropeway car.

Thoughts of hesitancy or worry had blown away the moment they had stepped out of the spaceport.

Anyhow, the massiveness of the Xaos branch office was several levels beyond what could be called ridiculous. An over eight-hundred meter tall “giant.” That is, the entire office was one of the enormous battleships called a “Macross.”

The entrance has to be a thousand meters up... no, even more than a kilometer, probably. This is no ordinary size... the entire top half of this giant is above the clouds.

It was human-shaped, but as they drew closer from the seaside, it looked more and more like a gray, looming mountain.

Obviously, Hayate had already often seen the mammoth battleships of the Zentradi, which were many kilometers in length, but seeing those moored at a large space port was one thing; seeing this cyclopean figure standing on top of a hill was a different experience entirely. This “Macross” was authentically intimidating.

(On earth, the original Macross is at the center of a large city... how do people feel about that?)

This ship seemed preposterous, if you could say that – no, if a nearly kilometer tall shapeship shaped like a human wasn't preposterous, what was? – but it had been constructed with specific and practical purposes in mind.

*

Nearly seventy years prior: Summer, 1999 AD.

Onto an earth that still had no knowledge of the existence of aliens, a space ship fell. As it fell, it caused great disasters on the surface of the planet. This falling star would become the model for the first Macross, and was called the “Alien Star Ship 1.” It was also a warship, and was horrendously damaged.

At this time, though, the ASS-1 was not human-shaped.

Humanity banded together to restore this wrecked ship. There was no need to explain why. Even now, among the nearby stars, a space war was being waged by aliens, and the realization of this sent shockwaves through humanity.

Understanding the necessity of military power if humanity were to survive, even if they had no wish to fight, the ASS-1 was rechristened the Super Dimension Fortress Macross. But as always, there was resistance. The earth's resources poured into restoring the ASS-1, depriving areas badly damaged by its fall of funds necessary to rebuild. And as humanity worked to create a unified world government, some nations balked, afraid of disappearing, and brush-fire wars sprung up around the world. Ironically, the planet was plunged into a war of man versus man.

However, at long last, work on the Macross was finally completed. Throughout all of this, the danger from space remained a pressing worry.

However, this idea itself seemed to summon terrible disaster.

At the launching ceremony for the Macross, on the very eve of its departure, its main cannon automatically fired, and two reconnaissance ships that had entered orbit from a newly-arrived Zentradi fleet were instantly vaporized. The Zentradi forces judged the earth forces' might from this attack, and far from giving humanity room for peace negotiations, it convinced the Zentradi to attack, and the earth was plunged into its first space war.

Yet why the cannon had fired was still a mystery.

A commonly held belief was that it was a "booby trap" set by the "Supervision Army," the mysterious race of giants who had originally built the ASS-1 and whose forces were engaged in battle against the Zentradi. Once repaired, the main cannon would inflict serious damage on any attacking fleet. Since the Zentradi could not repair their ships and had no knowledge of any type of "culture," humanity was at an advantage. However, whether this theory was true or not remained unknown.

At the time, the captain of the Macross (and later the first head of the New Unified Government) Admiral Bruno J. Global had decided upon this theory, and it became generally accepted, but no one truly knew if it was correct or not.

However, although the cannon on this ship created solely to fight the Zentradi should have been able to be used many times, a circuit in its firing mechanism had broken, rendering it inoperable.

And so, a desperate plan was implemented, which rearranged the modules of the Macross in what was termed a “transformation” in order to connect the cannon to power.

And thus, the Macross changed into its “human shape” form for the first time. At least, when the modules were rearranged, people thought that the resulting form of the alien ship looked like a human figure. It hadn’t been the crew’s plan; they were just glad they could once again fire the main cannon. However, the transformation also threw the gravity balance and thrust into disorder.

More advantages soon became apparent, though. In the “human shape,” not only could the cannon fire, but the thrust vectors were easy to control, and it was discovered that smaller ships attached to the “arms” and working as “hands” could be used to attack and destroy large numbers of the Zentradi ships.

It sounded like a joke, but it was real. And at that moment, a groundbreaking strategic doctrine in the development of spaceship design and configuration was born.

And thus this ship, which by chance also carried aboard it the legendary singer Lynn Minmay, managed to stand its ground through Space War I.

Afterwards, from the copies of the original Macross called the SDFN Class, to the sevenfold scaled-up New Macross Class, to the smaller four-hundred meter ships like the Macross Quarter, many different types of Macross ships had spread out to all parts of the galaxy.

*

Inside *this* Macross, Hayate and Freyja continued towards the audition hall on a moving walkway.

(Huh... a Macross ship really is an ideal place for a headquarters, isn't it?)

The interior of the ship was well-suited as a small-scale living environment. It wasn't luxurious by any stretch, but a normal human could even live for over a month in the small container where Freyja stayed for three days munching on nothing but apples.

Because of stingy and cheap shipowners, one's mental health during space travel could be under serious duress. Hayate had heard stories about many tragedies and had seen some with his own eyes, from people, yes, turning to drugs to cope, or sometimes having complete nervous breakdowns.

Under these circumstances, living space must be carefully prepared on a long-range space ship. There was a wealth of data on how to do this that came from the original Macross. For this reason, the large-scale emigration fleets always had a large city-spaceship in tow with its own complete ecosystem.

"Golly, it's big! It's the biggest thing Ah've ever seen! It's all like a big carnival!"

To Hayate, it was a familiar sight, but it must have been strange and new to Freyja, and she ran hither and thither gawking at everything she saw and heard, over and over.

"Wow, you're really from out in the sticks, aren't you?"

"Uhh... maybe... but special things're special, yeh know?"

"Aye aye!"

Anyway, the girl was fascinated by absolutely everything.

*

The audition hall seemed like a multi-ethnic trade fair or something. Girls of every skin color were there, the often seen pigments like white, beige, ebony, and green, but also seldom seen hues like blue and rainbow, and some red, an unusual color. Who knew what planet she came from? There was even a mostly metal cyborg girl.

There had to be at least a hundred people here.

“Golly... yeh mean gals are comin’ from all over the galaxy to audition for Walküre?”

“I guess they didn’t advertise the hell out of this on the Galaxy Network for nothing.”

Freyja’s thin chest convulsed slightly as she gulped. “Yep, yep,” she murmured.

“C’mon, let’s find the receptionist.” Hayate said, and noticed that Freyja’s discouragement had changed into a smile.

*

“I’m so very sorry.”

Freyja’s discouragement bounced off the receptionist’s practiced smile and hit her full in the chest again.

“But... but... wait...” she sputtered. She stared at the leaflet clutched in her hand. Sure enough, it said that these were the finals for the audition. “Oh. It’s true.”

Hayate peered closely at the paper. He had also missed the note. Humans, it is said, will bring their preconceived notions to bear when reading anything and will sometimes miss what is actually being said if it contradicts them. It’s the reason that when young people try to proofread their own writing, they will often miss typos and mistakes.

“You see, today is the second round of judging, and the contestants have come from all over the galaxy for this audition...”

Looking around, he noted that the number of applicants in the room, only a hundred or so, did seem rather small. And not only were the numbers small, but none of the contestants seemed to be country girls like Freyja. Privately, he felt a little embarrassed for her.

“Ain’t... ain’t there *nothin’* Ah c’n do?”

“I apologize, Miss.”

“Ah’m pleadin’ with yeh here! Ah don’t mind if Ah fail the audition, but Ah gotta at least *try!* It’s a whole nother year before the next one! What am Ah to *do?*” Freyja cried desperately.

However, there was no hope.

She had stowed away to be here; she literally had nowhere to return to. The next audition would be held the following year, and it wasn’t even clear if it would be held on Ragna.

“Again, I apologize,” the receptionist said, as was natural for someone whose job was to enforce the rules. Moreover, strictness was necessary, since Xaos was not simply representing a singing group, but was almost a military organization.

Then, it happened.

As Hayate looked across the thronging hall, he glimpsed one young woman who was just as beautiful as the others, but something about her seemed different...

“Isnt that...?”

He moved quickly.

“Hey, you!” he called. “Mirage Jenius, right?” He took hold of Freyja’s wrist and strode forward.

“Wha- what...?” Mirage spluttered in confusion and a little anger. “You actually came all this way just to file a complaint about me?” Still, she seemed somewhat aloof and indifferent.

Whatever. Here on a different planet where he didn’t know left from right, running into *anyone* he had met before was a great gift to Hayate.

“That’s not it at all! Hey, don’t you remember this girl?”

“...Freyja Wion, wasn’t it?” Mirage had a good memory, just as an officer should.

“She got messed up on the schedule for the audition. You’ve got some pull, right? Can you do anything?”

He knew he was being presumptuous, but one of the first lessons you learn as a vagabond is that you might as well ask. If no one opened their mouth, only the politicians and statesmen would get even the basic necessities. And this was even more true when traveling the sea of stars. The inviolable rule was, if you don’t ask, you don’t get.

“Um, well...” Mirage stammered as Hayate and Freyja both stared imploringly at her. Then, scowling at Hayate, she pulled out her tablet.

“All right,” she sighed, “let me see.”

Hayate tilted his head innocently, and Freyja’s eyes were filled with hope as she watched Mirage start talking to someone through the tablet.

*

A mountain of documents like a mountain of trash, or just a mountain of trash that looked like documents... inside this mountain, the woman awoke.

Her tablet was ringing.

She noticed that her non-prescription glasses were askew. She had fallen asleep in the middle of her research.

“Hello, this is the Ouroboros Lab...”

On the other end, the voice sounded annoyed. On the screen, she saw her old comrade-in-arms’ granddaughter, or else her friend’s niece, Mirage Fallyna Jenius.

“Professor Blanchette, I’m sorry to disturb you. Could you please check Subjects Alpha and Beta? You should be receiving them now.”

“Huh...?”

She woke up a little bit more.

“Okay. Send a message to Kaname and Arad from me. Use Process Theta.”

*

As she finished her conversation, Mirage turned to Freyja, looking uneasy. “Freyja Wion,” she announced, “sorry for the wait. You’ve been granted special approval to participate in the audition today.”

“F’r... f’r real...?”

“That’s correct.”

The printer next to the receptionist spat out a temporary ID card, which Mirage presented to Freyja. She was now officially eligible to compete.

“On Al Shahal previously, the numerical value of your singing was notable.”

“Numerical value? What’s that mean?” Hayate asked.

“As the definition falls under military jurisdiction, I’m afraid I cannot answer you,”

Mirage replied curtly.

“Ah’m *notable*...?” Freyja cried out with joy, and even the heart-shaped ornament in her hair started dancing.

“Stop this immediately,” commanded the red-haired officer, as though she were scolding a pet. “You are cleared for the finals, but the outcome of the audition hasn’t been decided yet. You haven’t won.”

“Oh, Ah know *that!* But Ah came all this way to join Walküre and Ah’m finally here! Ah’m gonna do it, f’r *sure!*”

(That’s it.)

Hayate didn’t understand the girl’s words at all.

Or possibly, he understood the words, but not her meaning.

Why didn’t she think this was all a mistake? Why did a dream still light up her eyes?

Because of that, Hayate looked away from her eyes, turning his back. “Well, that’s good for you,” he said. “You go off and take the test. I’ll stay here. You won’t pass.”

Still, he wanted to get away from this place. It wasn’t like there was something here he didn’t want to do, he just felt like he needed to get out of here.

Probably something to do with the way the girl seemed to be shining.

He moved to walk out of the hall, knowing he’d likely never see these people ever again.

The portable terminal in Mirage’s hand beeped.

“Wait a moment, Hayate Immelmann,” she commanded.

“Hmm?”

“Commander Arad, my superior officer, wishes to speak with you.”

It felt like Hayate’s fate was about to undergo a drastic shift... The sound of a knock upon a closed door, a bell announcing the rising of the curtain...

The arrow of fate, with this officer, and this girl, was definitely aimed at Hayate.

*

To his surprise, after having been given a visitor ID, he walked to this “commander’s” room, as instructed by Mirage.

Probably the whole scheme was this guy Arad’s idea. Although Mirage had seemed restless and fidgety, she’d also seemed too angry as she left to be able to work out any kind of plan.

(And yet, somehow...)

And she had done a favor for Freyja.

The aircraft carrier spread out before him, with nothing to return to behind him.

This Macross ship that held the headquarters of Xaos was called the *Macross Elysion*. This *Elysion* had two space aircraft carrier “arms” attached precisely at its “elbows.” These “forearms” were larger than previous century’s atomic-power carriers like the *Nimitz* and the *Enterprise* classes. Much, much larger.

Hayate walked through the passageway to the *Aether*, the carrier corresponding to the right arm.

(Military, huh?)

Hayate had no good memories regarding any military organization. All the profession did, as far as Hayate could see, was destroy people's bodies as though devouring them whole. But truthfully, when operating a workroid, he sometimes felt the lure of piloting a destroid far away on some frontier world.

What sort of work could someone like him do in the army? There probably wasn't anything satisfactory there.

Looking out the window at a gray sky.

A room with nobody in it.

A flight jacket, hung up.

Mother's tears.

The memory floated past.

An instant.

In the distance, at the huge window at the end of the corridor, a golden light shone.

(That's...)

And before he could name it, the glow grew brighter, and in the next instant a Valkyrie zoomed past the window. It had the emblem of the Grim Reaper. It was so close... how was it that the edge of the Valkyrie's wing didn't smash the window as it spun and ascended?

(Awesome...)

He was irrationally excited. Workroids and Valkyries were different, but the operator of one would have the basic skills to control the other. Follow the manual, and certainly one could drive it.

Hayate was sure that the pilot of that Valkyrie had the same eyes that Freyja did. Eyes like a cloudless sky, carrying conviction and a sense of achievement.

(And me...?)

Remembering.

That instant when Freyja sang in the middle of the fires, and he felt like he was flying. He had caught a glimpse of an illusory blue sky.

Somehow, his legs led him, not to the visiting room, but towards the flight deck.

*

The auditioning singers were all gather together in a large room that clearly was usually a briefing room of some type. It wasn't a flashy dressing room, but had a military sternness to it.

“Thanks, everyone, for coming today!” a voice rang out.

Freyja and the others looked back and saw the captain of the *Macross Elysion*, Ernest Johnson. He was intimidating, but not because he was a soldier.

He was a mass of pure muscle, at least three meters tall.

Many of the giant Zentradi were reduced to human size through a genetic treatment called the “miclone” process. Yet among them, there were still those like Captain Ernest whose genes were strong enough that he remained huge even after undergoing the process.

“I’m sure you’re surprised, but I really haven’t returned to being a giant. Well, they say that becoming a miclone is like becoming a child again, but since I’m a soldier, it’s probably for the best that I came out larger than average,” Ernest said and then laughed loudly at his own joke. It wasn’t the slightest bit funny, but Freyja felt her own nervousness draining away, so she was grateful to him.

“Our Walküre Vaccine Concerts are not a game. You’ll be performing military maneuvers on the battlefield, while singing,” said a woman next to Ernest. Naturally, everyone knew her: Kaname Buccaneer, the mature young woman who served as Walküre’s leader. “If you do not feel you are prepared for that, please leave. You will be given a moment to decide.”

Naturally, no one budged. The girls’ resolve was already firmly in place.

Kaname watched them with a look that said that their resolve was just a dream that had never touched reality. But the girls lined up all knew that if reality became an obstacle, they needed to grow wings and surpass it.

*

Freyja was confident about the voice test. She wouldn't lose to all these girls with the same expression on their faces in the other booths around her. At least, for as long as she could remember, she knew that she had always tried her very best.

Of course, her self-confidence had no foundation, but baseless confidence is a young person's greatest weapon. And because of it, Freyja showed no hesitation or reserve.

However, in the interview following the singing test, Freyja felt a different kind of anxiety overtake her.

(Oh my gosh, it's jes' me an' Kaname!)

"Let me ask frankly."

"Y-yeh bet!"

"You're Windermerean, correct?"

Freyja gasped, and cold sweat trickled down her back.

"Since Windermere's war of independence seven years ago, they've enforced an economic blockade against the New Unified Government. As such, it's forbidden for anyone to travel to or from the planet..."

*

In the galaxy as it currently stands, intelligent lifeforms govern themselves, but are attached to the New Unified Government, centered on Earth. Naturally, there were some uncivilized or frontier worlds that could not participate in the government, and in those cases the N.U.G. granted them semi-independence. That was what was publicly stated, at least.

Freyja's homeworld of Windermere had been a member of the New Unified Government from about thirty years prior. However, reports from visiting Earth people stated that Windermere had a civilization roughly equivalent to a Nineteenth-Century agricultural society, and that contact could change them too suddenly. So they introduced new things gradually: antibiotics, scientific knowledge, stellar navigation, computers... It built up endlessly.

Life expectancy increased, the disparity between the rich and the poor narrowed, and the people rejoiced in prosperity.

And yet, behind the scenes, the humans were eyeing the rare mineral "fold quartz," which could be found on Windermere. They created a government agency to regulate fold quartz and other precious metals, creating, in effect, a monopoly on these resources. Cycles of history have always shown that when two science-based civilizations enter business transactions, the more advanced culture is often tempted to take advantage of the situation. And in this case, Earth did just that.

After the war of independence, at a research committee meeting organized by the New Unified Government, committee member Magromm Diasco testified that, in his words, "Frankly speaking, the representatives of Earth acted in shameful bad faith from the very first."

Incidentally, three days after speaking at the meeting, Mr. Diasco was discovered drowned in a river, having apparently fallen in while highly intoxicated. However, he was never known to have even touched alcohol at any time in his life.

And so the situation continued, with the proud and boastful Windermereans being exploited mercilessly. Windermere's wealth was transported off-world and its people

were bound by the chains known as earth banknotes, and eventually the people decided to break the chains and seize their own future. After peaceful negotiations broke down a few times, the tenacious Windermereans created a new military group. The soldiers closest to the king of Windermere were dubbed the “Aerial Knights,” and they led a daring surprise attack on the New Unified Forces which cut off all contact between Earth and Windermere.

After six months of grueling war, Windermere declared victory and claimed their independence.

*

Yes.

From that moment on, Earth music became forbidden.

It was now against the law to listen to Basara Nekki, or Sheryl Nome, or Ranka Lee.

The traditional ballads of Windermere were praised extravagantly, and the decadent culture of Earth was swept away.

But still, the music from Earth had not been forgotten. When children gathered together and listened to the underground broadcasts from the Galaxy Network, it was human music they listened to.

Therefore...

*

“If you join Walküre, have you thought about the possibility that you might never be allowed to go home? It’s come to light that you smuggled yourself out from your planet. And so...”

“Ah know!” Freyja cried, and lightly slapped her own cheeks as if to ward off fear.

“But Ah still wanna join Walküre! Ah wanna sing mah songs!”

This was the girl’s determination. She had shrugged off fear many times. Sometimes it rushed forward and caught up with her, but then she just ran faster and left it behind.

From the minute she’d left her village.

When she reached the space port.

When she stowed away aboard a ship and left her homeworld.

When she thought she had arrived on Ragna, but had actually come to Al Shahal.

When she was alone in the pitch black container, holding her breath for fear of being found, and yet struggling to bear her loneliness and feelings of isolation.

All for her dream of joining Walküre. All for that.

*

Although...

“The result of the third Walküre audition is... no successful applicants.”

This was reality.

The ropeway car clattered its way down the mountainside.

First, she wanted to look for Hayate, but she reflected that she couldn't really face him right now. She had no idea what she should do next; her purpose was gone.

She looked backwards to the gigantic Macross.

(Hayate... Ah'm sure he's still there.)

*

At that moment, Hayate was on the deck, gawking at all the Valkyries. He'd gotten pretty good at hanging out in places where he wasn't welcome. He had an ID badge, so to the deck crew, he just seemed like a news cameraman or something, and they'd ignore him as long as he didn't get in their way.

Nevertheless, everyone gathered together here was a pro. The wind was terrific, here at 800 meters above sea level. Periodic updrafts would gust past the sides of the deck, creating strong turbulence and tiny but vicious whirls of air that spun over the tarmac. Because of this, take-offs and landings were difficult, and necessary parts for the aircraft were always being replaced. This was no place for slacking off.

(That's a nice rhythm...)

Everyone's feet stepped to same quick tempo.

Another Valkyrie made an approach for landing with impeccable skill.

It was the fighter with the Grim Reaper emblem on it.

And by the time he had noticed that, the plane had landed, showing no hesitation, no wavering.

Of course, the fighter's approach was guided by computer, but even then, getting the last bit of timing right was up to the pilot, and this landing showed a beautiful precision.

A gust blew past Hayate as this "Grim Reaper" landed splendidly.

"He's good, isn't he," said a voice. "That's Messer Ihlefeld. He's our top ace."

Startled, Hayate turned around and faced a sturdy man with a beard.

"You must be Hayate Immelmann," the man said, smiling. "I've been waiting for you."

"And, uh, you are...?"

"Arad Mölders, leader of Delta Flight. Nice to meet you."

"N-nice to meet you, too."

The man put out his hand and Hayate reflexively grasped it.

(It's feels like... my father's hand...)

It reminded him of his childhood.

The man's hand seemed rugged, but it felt warm and friendly. Later, he came to realize it was the hand of someone who had undergone serious flight training, breaking blood blisters and creating calluses from the controls, many hours at a time, day after day, for years.

"I saw how you flew the other day," the man said. "You were surrounded by Vár-infected Zentradi and took out two of them. That's pretty incredible."

"Yeah, right. I got shot down pretty quick."

“Don’t be so modest,” Arad said. He was smiling, but his eyes weren’t. They looked like a hawk’s as it was about to dive and grasp its prey.

“People affected by the Vár show a sharp increase in physical power. And those were Zentradi, bred for war. Even the Regulds; their only advantage is that they’re cheap, but in the hands of a Zentradi with the Vár, they’re more than a match for even the newest Cheyenne II destroid. Where did you learn to move like that?”

“I’ve driven a workroid before...”

Hey, it wasn’t a lie.

The humanoid “battroids” weren’t very different from a workroid. Several magnitudes higher in size and power, but their consoles were much the same. It was no accident that Hayate could pilot one.

“But it ended pretty crappy,” Hayate continued. “I mean, it was the first time I’ve ever flown a plane.”

“Your first time, and you flew and transformed in midair while evading anti-aircraft fire. That’s not something even many courageous people could do.”

“...I dunno, I just got lost in the moment or something.”

And that too was true.

And yet, even though Freyja’s singing had supported him, if could fly then, couldn’t he fly anytime? If that was the case, he didn’t really understand why he had been able to in the first place. And why had he been able to fly so *well*?

“Seems like you’re quite the drifter. Planet Barsalos, Planet Listania, Planet Airberl, Planet Gregorl, and then, Al Shahal.”

“What the hell’s this?”

So Mirage's investigation hadn't just been a lot of talk.

Because travel history was private information, there was no record of it on anyone's ID. Only entering a conflict zone stayed recorded on ID, as did getting involved in any disputes on an unfriendly world, in order to track potential terrorists.

"You'd be surprised how much sensitive information our company can purchase."

"You investigated me just so you could chew me out?" Hayate snapped, knowing it wasn't the case, but figuring he could guess Arad's reply.

"Always keep the pieces you want to use close at hand. Come on, won't you step back inside?"

Hayate was baffled and couldn't answer.

"Look, I'm not talking being a mechanic or a secretary. I'm talking about flying in Delta Flight with Messer and me. What do you say?"

The fighter with the Reaper emblem was there, so close that he could reach out and touch it.

It was beautiful.

It wasn't just a tool for killing, it was also beautiful.

"Come take a look at this," Arad said, beckoning Hayate to the edge of the deck. "If we fall, we die. We put our lives on the line... But even so, we choose to fly. Such is the fate of those who have felt the wind."

The sky and sea filled Hayate's field of vision completely. There was nothing before him but pure blue.

The city far below his eyes was a world of the safe and the conventional, but the sky and sea that spread out before him was different.

Arad said, “You felt it, too, didn’t you? So come along.”

He didn’t have an answer for that.

And therefore, he followed Arad.

*

All of a sudden, a spray of blood erupted before Freyja.

As though in a movie, there was a red splash, and that wasn’t all.

The air filled with the smell of iron, and there was the sound of dripping blood, as it fell into a thick, flowing puddle on the floor.

With this horrifying event, Freyja was yanked from her shock at losing the audition back into the real world.

A girl.

Collapsed on the floor in the growing pool of blood, there was a girl.

Why had she fallen?

A moment ago, the girl had just been a typical passenger, reading a typical newspaper, when suddenly a man had ripped her stomach open with his bare hands.

A normal person couldn’t do that...

“It’s the Vár!” one of the other passengers shouted.

Freyja had seen the Vár before. This wasn’t the first time. She had seen it not only on Al Shahal, but at other ports as well. However, this was the first time she had seen someone in such close proximity to her be murdered, and she cried out.

The man, his hands coated with blood, swung around to face her. His muscles bulged, making him look like a small gorilla. His hands shook uncontrollably.

With one blow, he knocked Freyja sprawling.

Her music player, her good-luck charm, skittered away from her across the floor.

“No!” she heard someone scream, “I don’t want to die!”

Death.

Her skin, her muscles, her bones, her whole body... all of it shrieked out.

But that was proof that she was alive. Still alive.

So many people had died, but she was still living.

Freyja looked into the man’s bloodshot eyes, locked with his murder-filled gaze.

And yet...

“A singing voice can give hope to the galaxy.”

Don’t forget it.

What do you dream of? What do you long for?

The thing that looked like an ornament in her hair began to shine. It was actually a nerve knot called a “rune,” and Windermereans believed that it housed their soul.

“Ah won’t lose... If Ah sing, Ah *can*’t lose!”

*

He felt like he could hear a song coming from somewhere.

The wind whirled around him.

Music, and the wind, and the sea.

Hayate sauntered right up to the edge of the deck, and then his body leapt.

“Ride the wind an’ you’ll fly”

For a moment, he was terrified. He couldn’t bring himself to open his eyes.

If he did nothing, he surely wouldn’t make any blunders. If he made no blunders, no one would ever laugh at him.

And yet, if he didn’t ride the wind, he’d never have the wings to soar in the sky.

And he would need to take that risk of falling.

And then he made his choice.

He would ride the wind.

*

A woman sat in darkness, staring at a monitor. The lights were off, not for any particular purpose, but just because the woman couldn’t be bothered to get up and turn them on. As a result, she looked like an average unrealistic hacker making her entrance in a movie.

“Confirmed: fold waves are increasing.”

On the monitor screen was Freyja.

From the starting point of Freyja's song, the fold receptor numeric value jumped to activity, and rose far higher than Walküre's average. Even allowing for fluctuations, it looked as though her talent were quite exceptional.

Above all else, it was a gorgeous song born from horrific emotions.

*

How long had she been singing?

A woman put her hand on Freyja's shoulder, and Freyja snapped back to herself.

It was Walküre's leader, Kaname Buccaneer.

"You passed!"

"Wha-?" She didn't understand the meaning of the words.

Sparkling, the holographic camouflage worn by all the people surrounding her fell away, like Cinderella's spell breaking at midnight, and standing around her were all four members of Walküre.

And looking closely, wasn't the girl who had fallen – now standing up and wiping the fake bio-blood off of herself – the receptionist she'd seen earlier?

And the man who had pretended to be infected by the Vár was now sheepishly removing his muscle suit.

"Ah... uh..." Freyja stammered.

"Freyja Wion, you were the only contestant to reach the final stage of the audition. And you passed," said a woman with a smile, revealed as Mikumo Guynemer.

“When one’s life is in danger,” Kaname said, “their singing often becomes more powerful, and when the Vár is right in front of one, they may fight harder. Especially directly after being told that they had failed the audition. This part was the *real* test.” She smiled and held out her hand, the hand Feryja had yearned for so long to clasp.

“Welcome to Walküre,” Kaname said. “You’re now officially our fifth member!”

*

Hayate leaped.

The wind wrapped itself around him.

(It worked!)

A literal gale blasted up from directly under him.

It wasn’t a sight ever seen on the deck before; he had read the timing of the air currents. And he was soaring.

It felt like all his restraints had been loosed and he could reach the sky.

Yes.

From now on, that sky would be there. That azure sky he had seen when he was with Freyja and she was singing.

He knew he could reach it.

His days of being among the living dead were over. He’d reach out and grab life as firmly and brightly as that girl’s eyes shone.

That was the value of flight.

“Wowwww...!”

He was floating.

His body had broken free from the restrictions of gravity and Hayate was truly flying.

Before Arad's astonished eyes, Hayate landed on the deck like a dragonfly.

"Y'know," Hayate said, "I'm sorry, I really don't like all the rules and regulations of the military. But even so, I'd love to join you guys."

"I hate the military, too," Arad replied.

"And I can't stand taking orders."

"Me neither."

Arad then flashed a wide grin and announced, "Hayate Immelmann, Xaos welcomes you."

Chapter Four – Immelmann Dance

Afterwards, Freyja had no recollection of how she was even able to move or walk. She barely remembered anything at all.

No, wait... that's not *precisely* true...

“Ah joined Walküre!”

was the only thing going through her mind, and any other thought simply didn't register with her.

It happens.

When everything the girl had been hoping for, dreaming of, and wishing had been granted, it was understandable that she couldn't see past it.

It doesn't mean that she ignored or forgot the contracts and confidentiality agreements she had to sign, but that they were trifling matters for her.

Pretty much all Freyja could actually say was “Warm-fuzzies, warm-fuzzies, warm-fuzzzzies!” Or that's sort of what she was saying. The translation of the Windermerean term used by ebullient girls has a somewhat deeper meaning than the Galactic Standard Language term would imply, and, moreover, is a little uncouth.

But for our purposes, “warm-fuzzies” works fine.

However, when she got back out into the evening air and found Hayate standing there, she returned to relative sanity.

“Oh! Hayate!” she said, surprised to see him.

“What am I, a ghost?” he retorted, scratching his head and showing a wry grin.

“*Eh-heh!* Ah passed the audition!” she announced, giving a V-sign. Wouldn’t Hayate be annoyed, after saying over and over that she was going to fail!

But Hayate didn’t seem particularly moved either way, nor was he visibly surprised.

“What? Ain’t yeh at all surprised?”

Hayate shrugged and turned away from her. “I kinda figured you’d make it somehow.”

He suddenly looked awkward.

“Uh…” he mumbled, “I made it, too.”

“Heh…?”

“I, uh, sort of ended up joining Delta Flight.”

*

Freyja (with Hayate tagging along) got a tour of the living quarters led by none other than Walküre’s leader, Kaname.

“Is it really okay, yeh doin’ this f’r me!?” she kept asking.

“We’re among the elite few now, so who else would explain everything?” Kaname replied patiently. “Anyway, I wear two hats: I’m manager as well as leader, so stuff like this is part of my job.”

“That just sounds like a shortage of labor…” Hayate muttered. He was being more than a little rude, but Kaname was a seasoned professional, and parried his quips using the smile on her face.

“You could say that,” she replied cheerfully. “We’re a civilian organization, so labor costs can get pretty high – but, looking at it another way, our salary is excellent.”

He had to admit that that was a pretty important point.

“Ah was jes’ *sure* that Walküre’s dormitory would’ve been inside the Macross...”

“Delta’s, too, I thought.”

“That’s how it was at first, but living on a space ship turns out to be pretty stressful. It’s now limited to the air force and Delta Flight. There are nicer places to live all over Barrette City, anyway.”

“Oh... I think I get it,” Hayate said, and looked up at the sky, almost overcome with emotion.

“Hayate? Whaddyeh get?”

“In the artificial gravity of a space ship, it’s hard to be completely calm. Your body slowly begins to atrophy, to the point where even the gravity pull when you’re climbing some stairs can pull all the blood from your head.”

Of course, the *Elysion* here on Ragna didn’t generally use its gravity control system. However, part of the necessary preparation for a transformation involved activating the artificial gravity, so it couldn’t be avoided, even in the living areas.

“Really?” Freyja asked.

“You should smile bigger, Freyja. You’ll need to when we’re doing photo shoots and things like that.”

Freyja giggled nervously.

“But Cadet Hayate,” Kaname said, “you seem awfully well-acquainted with mechanical things.”

“I’ve had plenty of different part-time work...”

Kaname seemed the epitome of an efficient manager as she read out holo data from her portable terminal while walking briskly. “Large vehicle driver’s license, B-class hazardous material certificate for handling types one through six, EX-Gear class one, large workroid, grade three navigation... a chef...? Wow, that’s a surprise... and grade two gravity furnace engineer.”

“And I got fired from all of those jobs.”

“Oh, hush.”

Hey, it was true...

“Well, we’re here,” Kaname said, stopping in front of an elegant-looking dormitory. “These are Walküre’s quarters. Although that said, Mikumo has her own place, so it’s just Reina, Makina, and me. As well as...”

“What are *you* doing here?” an annoyed voice interrupted.

Standing in the doorway, glaring at Hayate, was the red-haired officer, Mirage Fallyna Jenius.

“That’s my line. Aren’t you with Delta Flight?”

Kaname smiled. “Since Second Lieutenant Mirage is the only woman in Delta Flight, she does double duty as our bodyguard, and lives here with us.”

“Exactly,” said Mirage, still scowling. “And what about you?”

“Haven’t you heard? I’m gonna be joining you in Delta Flight.”

“*WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT!?*” Mirage screamed, her face frozen in horror.

*

“I won’t stand for this!” the angry voice yelled, shaking the walls of the *Aether*, and even causing the bag of jellyfish jerky in the man’s hand to sway.

“What is it *now*?” Surrounded by a huge volume of papers, Delta’s commander, Arad Mölders, stared back at “Miss By-the-Book” Mirage’s angrily burning eyes with an annoyed look on his face.

“No way, no how!”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Do I have to say it again? Cadet Hayate Immelmann!”

Arad sighed. “It’s been a week...”

“The longest week of my life!”

Mirage’s rage was incredible. The palms of her hands were pressed hard onto the surface of the table. She was only a quarter Zentran, but she sure acted like she was full-blooded.

“He doesn’t come to class! He doesn’t listen to orders! He doesn’t follow rules! And today, he tried to show off his acrobatic skills, and he... he *threw up*...! On... *me!*”

The look on her face said that this had been the last straw. She wouldn’t take any more.

“I seem to recall you making your own chowder, too, when you were a newbie.”

“*Once*. I’ve got more fiber than he does, easily.”

“Just as I’d expect of the granddaughter of Milia Fallyna.”

“My grandmother has nothing to do with this! Nothing!”

“Sorry, sorry...” Arad apologized frankly, having forgotten for a moment that bringing up Mirage’s noted family was kind of a sore point with her. Of course her

relatives had no connection to the topic at hand. No one was responsible for their own genetics.

“And *furthermore!* Training new cadets is the responsibility of the Fourth Aerial Attack Group.”

“Mirage... you know as well as I do that the Fourth Group only trains the New Unified Forces stationed on Ragna.”

Civilian military providers like Xaos were primarily employed for comparatively non-lucrative jobs, such as training soldiers on backwater worlds like Ragna.

It seems obvious that in order to teach, they need teachers. In other words, they need pilots that have already accumulated a lot of training and experience. However, on a developing world like Ragna, because there are no pilots to begin with, there's no one to even be taught, let alone to teach.

It would be easy to get bogged down in chicken or egg questions, but attacking the problem head on involved dispatching experienced pilots from earth, and waiting for the new pilots to rise up... which was all fine in theory, but it also meant being exposed to threats from Zentradi, space pirates, terrorists, you name it, until the new pilots were ready. That being the case, and in light of the large number of experienced pilots needed as instructors, it was far less expensive to outsource the training job to civilian military contractors.

“And anyway, our Delta Flight is pretty irregular, but make sure he gets through the training. I'm not going to do your job for you.”

“But, that's why I came to talk to you... why *me?*”

“I’ve got three subordinates under my command to do this work. Messer and Chuck, though, aren’t really the type for teaching Cadet Immelmann. Messer’s too harsh and Chuck’s too relaxed. I’m sure you’re the only suitable candidate for this.”

“But Alpha and Beta Flights have many pilots who are more qualified than he is!”

Arad looked surprised. “...Do you really think that?”

He projected a holo of Hayate’s personal data before her. Most of the numbers were in the red. The readings for “fold receptors” and “Vár resistance” were especially high. “With numbers like that, he’s far above the Third and Fourth Aerial Groups... no, not just them... you could search all of Xaos and not find anyone with these kind of readings. Understood?”

He leaned forward abruptly. “We’re not *just* an air force. We’re also Walküre’s bodyguards, an aerobatic team, and backup dancers. We also are involved with infiltration and spying operations, reconnaissance, and data analysis.”

Mirage paused before she replied. “I know, sir. And because of that, all of our pilots must have strong resistance to the Vár.”

“Exactly. And because of that, Delta Flight can’t just be satisfied with staying still. We have to keep on going. The original idea was that we’d need spares, so we kept about fifteen pilots in reserve, enough for an entire squadron.”

Arad didn’t need to add that Delta Flight had no substitute personnel anymore.

“I understand that, sir.”

“As well you should. And after all, the one who came to me with the report about the kid with the stellar readings on Al Shahal was *you*.”

“...Yes, sir.”

Arad suddenly flashed back to Al Shahal.

When Freyja's singing caused such massive readings, and even Walküre themselves were staring in disbelief. When the power of music was heightened, and the Vár was suppressed like a receding tide.

When the mysterious Valkyrie unit retreated, Arad reasoned, could it have been because of Freyja's singing? Probably, her singing had boosted Walküre's potential battle strength.

And he realized that the sudden spike in the readings hadn't *just* been Freyja.

"Fold bacteria lives inside our bodies," Mirage said. "Through singing, what we call "fold receptors" can make it possible to control super dimension communication. Fold receptors can also bring out and strengthen people's resistance to the Vár." She was stating the obvious. She had learned all of this on her own some time ago. She was a serious and methodical young woman, so sometimes she had to progress step-by-step through an idea before she could grasp it.

That was one of the human virtues, Arad mused, and also one of the reasons why human life was full of hardships.

"Study of receptors is still in its infancy," he said. "We're still searching pretty hard for *anyone* whose receptor readings increase in extreme situations. And since we go deliberately into areas affected by the Vár, a high resistance to it is of paramount importance."

"I know all that. But still!"

"I'd even use a serial killer if he tested high enough."

"Okay, I'll stop talking about throwing Immelmann into the brig..."

“Well, that’s something, I guess,” Arad sighed, rolling his eyes up to the ceiling in annoyance. Of course he always tried to accommodate Mirage, same as everyone else, but he also had to follow his own thinking. His own thinking, however, hadn’t foreseen Mirage’s stubbornness or Hayate’s eccentricity.

(If I can deal with this bunch of misfits, then I really *must* be a great team commander...)

“Please look at it objectively, sir. Cadet Immelmann’s best traits are solely his high receptor numbers and his skill piloting a battroid. If Xaos absolutely *has* to hire him, why not place him in a destroid platoon?”

“Come on, Mirage... Go along with me on this for at least a bit longer.”

“Is that an order, sir?”

Arad let out a tiny, almost imperceptible sigh.

“It’s an order, Second Lieutenant Mirage Fallyna Jenius.”

“Roger. Understood completely, Major Arad Mölders.”

*

A contrail flowed across the sky.

It was quite pleasant on Walküre’s personal deck on the *Aether*.

The abundant and varied lunch spread out on the tabletop was delectable. Kaname had even taken pains to make sure there were Windermerean apples, especially for Freyja.

“Hee hee, the VF-1EX is such a cutie!” Makina Nakajima, a young woman with a voluptuous body, said brightly. A popular girl, she had looks that gave the impression of a fluffy marshmallow, and she had a correspondingly unique way of talking.

“Vee-eff-wan-ee-ecks...?” Freyja asked.

“The one Hayate’s flying. It’s a updated and improved version of the first-ever variable fighter, the VF-1 Valkyrie. It uses the VF-1 Double Plus, which was developed on the Macross Frontier fleet, as its base, but it’s been equipped with a EX-Gear control system.”

“Wowie... so that’s Hayate flyin’ up there?” For Freyja, who was from a small rural village, all this was beyond her wildest imagination.

On developing worlds, Valkyries were often customized and used by hooligans in the same way that hot rods used to be, but on Freyja’s home world of Windermere, they were only used by the knighthood, with special authorization, and she had never heard of anyone else using them.

“AI support system,” the slender, green-haired girl sitting next to Makina, named Reina Prowler, murmured. With her boyish look, she was popular among a certain niche of Walküre’s fans, and was, with Kaname and Makina, one of Walküre’s original members. Makina’s partner, she had chosen the name “Prowler” for herself, her real birth date and identity unknown. Freyja was in a similar situation, really, so she hadn’t pressed Reina for any details.

“What’s that?” Freyja asked.

“It’s on every modern variable fighter. It assists the pilot with the optimum decisions for any situation.”

“And that’s not all!” Makina said. “It joins together with the cute li’l EX-Gear to extrapolate probabilities from the pilot’s actions, so even Hayate can fly, even though he’s only driven a workroid before.”

“Wowee... ain’t that somethin’!”

*

For Freyja, looking up into the distant sky, it may have looked graceful, but there definitely wasn’t any elegance in the cockpit, where Mirage in her role as instructor was sitting in the back seat behind Hayate.

“Wrong!” she shouted. “You’re using the airbrake too much. We’re stalling, we’re stalling!”

“Hey, it’s okay,” he said, “Let me just try this...” and then the fighter, shaking violently, suddenly lost much of its lift and pitched downward. Hayate gasped. The control stick he was clutching moved of its own accord, the rear thrusters flared, and the fighter adroitly righted itself back to horizontal flight.

“Change course with the vectored nozzle and the thrusters *now!*” Mirage barked. “Bank the fighter a little more, and match it to the yawing of the tail!”

“I don’t understand what that means!”

“Because you never showed up for your lessons! Look, check the monitor, and get the compass needle back to where it should be!”

“Aye aye,” Hayate answered, but his fighter started spinning in the wind, tossing around as though it were inside a washing machine.

“Wrong!” shouted Mirage. “Who told you it was time for a barrel roll?”

“I’m trying to get it back in line with the compass...? I can’t figure out how this damn thing moves!”

“It’s a fighter! It deliberately sacrifices stability in order to increase maneuverability. This is what happens if you try to fly in your sloppy way!” While she was yelling, the fighter dropped down and started diving down towards the ocean. Hayate’s field of vision was filled with the almost transparent blue of Ragna’s water.

“Damn!”

It dove like a flying fish with suicidal tendencies, but at the last moment, Mirage tilted the instructor’s control stick.

The main thrusters dropped down from the fighter’s body to become “feet” and acted as an emergency brake. The fighter was now skimming along the surface of the water.

The boundary between the sea and sky was beautiful as Hayate gazed it from the cockpit of the white airplane.

*

After Hayate had “made his own chowder” several times that day, Mirage had finally had enough.

As far as Hayate could see, the red-haired officer was simply angry *all the damn time*, and went way beyond rational anger into pure, blind emotional rage. Just boiling with fury, and that was a fact.

“On what planet is there a pilot who would actually *try* to crash their Valkyrie into the sea!? What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Hey, you said that as long as I followed the flight course, I was free to choose any altitude I wanted!” Hayate’s face looked ghastly, as though all moisture had been drained from his entire body. Mirage figured that he was having trouble talking because his stomach was so unsettled.

“The lowest altitude was already programmed for this airspace.”

“You should’ve said that before!”

“I would’ve if you’d come to class!”

“Just let me fly the way I want to!”

“And go for a little swim? Do you *want* to die or something?”

“If I switched the VF-1 to space battle mode, it could operate exactly like a submarine. I’ve heard that you can even use the thrusters underwater for a short time. The hero did it in that old movie, *BIRD HUMAN*.”

And why was something like that seemingly the *only* thing this guy could remember? Mirage felt almost dizzy with rage.

“Do you think Delta Flight is just playing around!?” She growled and grabbed him by the throat, heedless of the stink from his vomit.

“...All I want to do is fly however I like.”

“Delta Flight doesn’t exist solely to provide *you* with an expensive toy!”

“I know that.”

Even Hayate seemed to have a *little* self-awareness, but his irritated and impatient tone poured oil all over the fire of Mirage’s wrath.

“Understood, Cadet Immelmann,” she said, holding his gaze fiercely. “In three weeks – that’s three weeks from today – we will stage a mock dogfight. If you can’t land a hit on me, then I will be forced to accept your resignation.”

“Hey! You don’t have the authority for that!”

“I promised Commander Arad that I would get you battle-ready in a month. If you can’t even hit me once, that will mean that I’ve failed to do so. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Serious, determined eyes...

*

At dinner time, the Chinese restaurant “Rag-Nyan-Nyan” was about eighty percent full. Most of the customers, though, were members of Xaos, with only a small number of tourists. Until recently, the place had been overflowing with sightseers, but there was now talk of a Vár scare, and so customer traffic was low.

A human-shaped earthworm slunk up to one of the richly-colored tables.

“F-food...”

It spoke a human language... and at long last revealed itself to be a person.

“Wowie... are yeh okay there?”

Freyja, who had been stuffing her face with jellyfish and green pepper stir fry, clumsily picked up some dried jellyfish and a slice of bell pepper from her plate with her chopsticks (she still hadn’t *quite* gotten the hang of them), and offered them to the earthworm.

“Th-thank you...”

It was Hayate of course, and he scarfed down the jellyfish like a starving orphan. As though slowly regaining his strength, he got off the floor of the restaurant and stood up.

“Ah heard from Kaname that they were workin’ yeh pretty hard,” Freyja said, and offered him a glass of mineral water. On a world where land was as chalky as it was on Ragna – probably the result of ancient, dead coral – fresh spring water was a premium item. Ice water was no freebie here.

Hayate gulped down the water and then slumped into a chair, moving as sluggishly as a sea turtle on a sandy beach during egg-laying season.

“As Ah said, Kaname told me some of this, but Ah heard that if Mirage wins, yeh have to quit Delta Flight. Is that true?”

“Kinda... yeah...”

He picked up some chopsticks and started eating the complimentary fried food on the table, but turned a little pale when he almost choked trying to eat too much at once. His stomach gurgled loudly, showing its desire for more nutrition, so he shook his head and continued eating.

“Do yeh think she’s gonna win?”

“Uff...” Hayate thought back over the abusive language he’d endured. His vitality drained out of him, and he couldn’t speak.

“Oh, if it isn’t Freyja!” A man said as he plopped a large plate of seafood stir fry in front of them.

At first glance, he looked nearly obese, but under the fat, there was a lot a hidden muscle, a real “sumo wrestler” type body. His name was Chuck Mustang. He gave off the air of someone who worked at the restaurant, and although that was true, it was merely

this cheerful man's hobby. His real job was in Delta Flight, a pilot just like Mirage and Hayate. His webbed hands and the gills in his neck showed that he was one of Ragna's indigenous merpeople, but he was also an intellectual who had taken a job flying a Valkyrie in order to pay for his own education.

He along with his real family had started "Rag-Nyan-Nyan," a vigorously localized version of a Chinese restaurant – naturally, a Ragnan tourist attraction wouldn't be staffed by Chinese people from earth – and it was absolutely not licensed from the original Nyan-Nyan restaurant. It also served as the boarding house for all of Delta Flight except Mirage.

"It seems like Hayate is losin' and Mirage is winnin'."

"Still can't quite make it, huh, kid?"

"That woman... she has no mercy..."

Chuck didn't reply but Hayate understood what his silence meant: Delta Flight's combat performance is at an extremely high level. Hayate wasn't receiving a normal recruit's training – he also had to be able to protect Walküre in enemy territory as well as to dogfight.

At least in the battles with Mirage, Hayate had learned that he had a good "sense" for flying, as she'd let slip at one point. That was some consolation.

"Well, tell you what, I'll take the charge for Hayate's food off the bill. No reason you still can't enjoy yourselves!"

"Not much 'enjoyment' these days..." Hayate's lips moved, but no sound came out.

*

Still, Hayate finished his meal.

At the end of the day, he needed to replenish the calories that were lost in his harsh training, and he'd need protein for tomorrow's hell to feed his muscles as they grew and developed in new ways.

Being able to eat at any time was a talent, too.

Besides, Freyja was in the same boat, and *she* could certainly put it away at mealtime despite being absolutely worn out after her lessons.

An eating person is a strong person. And it wards off death.

“...Or so they say...”

He mixed together some Chinese soup stock with boiling water and added frozen onion and egg to make a cheap soup, and after enough of that filled his belly, he found himself able to talk again, at long last.

“And how are you getting along?” he asked Freyja.

“Ah...” Freyja's face fell into the same expression that Hayate had had. “Pretty so-so, yeh might say.”

“So-so, huh?” Hayate sure sympathized.

“But it's a gori-gori kinda so-so, I reckon!” As she always did when she felt down, Freyja made a little bump in the air with her fist and grinned widely, showing off her sparkling white teeth.

“What the...?” Hayate stifled a laugh.

Smiling is all it takes sometimes, so smiling is always a good thing to do.

*

Yep.

Just like Hayate's training from hell, Freyja's hard lessons were taking all her will and determination just to get through. Not just singing and dancing, but infiltration, intelligence gathering, how to use every kind of electronic device, how to avoid getting shot on the battlefield... the amount of stuff she had to learn just to be in Walküre seemed mountainous.

At the beginning were the first and second steps of the selection, with intelligence operatives checking her aptitude for such things. At first she had done well, but in the final stage, they said she would have potential if it weren't for her rune.

Runes... the peculiarity of Windermerean anatomy.

The races uplifted by the ancient civilization of the Protoculture were not all equal in ability. Even aside from the Zentradi, who could fight a battroid with their bare hands, everyone from the Ragnans, who could breathe underwater for a limited time, to the Gregorlians, who were strong enough to withstand tremendous gravitational forces in an emergency, they all had their own special characteristics.

Incidentally, earth's various races of humanity surpassed many other worlds' in hardiness and breeding ability. There's even a theory that earth fostered such a balanced immune system in order to make them fit to venture into space, and that the Protoculture designed humanity with some ability to specialize, to increase their versatility.

And yet, Windermereans tower above all others.

Their cardio-pulmonary functions, muscle density, reflexes, and skeletal structure were all enhanced, as well as vision, stamina, force... the list was seemingly endless. Even someone like Freyja, who hadn't done much physical training, could stand equal with earth's top athletes... which gives an idea of how much strength Windermereans have.

“Wouldn't it be better to put *Freyja* in the fighter?” was the running joke for a while.

But...

That was the joke, spoken sometimes in crowded halls, but just looking at her, there didn't seem to be any sign that she had any more strength than an ordinary human girl.

“Yet again... it wasn't showtime today.”

Throughout the Globular Cluster, here and there, there had been some small Vár outbreaks recently, but nothing that demanded one of Walküre's vaccine concerts, and so Freyja's voice remained so far unheard.

Walküre didn't always act with all their members in attendance. For the several recent Vár outbreaks, members would perform solo concerts, and Makina and Reina put in many appearances as a duo. If they weren't called to places they were needed, not all personnel would be sent. And if one or two members were gone for a month or so, that was just part of being in Walküre. Even Freyja understood all this.

However, her exhilaration at being chosen to join the group had faded. She wasn't in the rotation to be sent to outbreak zones yet, and her continued impatience was beginning unexpectedly to wear on her.

New circumstances like these are the hardest for a young person to overcome, or so they say.

And so while Freyja looked up to and envied the other girls who would hop onto space cruisers and venture across the sea of stars, today she was, as usual, singing by herself.

She was better than she had been yesterday, and she kept telling herself that that was all that mattered.

*

Hayate sat slumped on the bench in the locker room, the sweat pouring from his body forming a small puddle at his feet.

He wanted to scream, but had no voice.

Take off, combat, die.

Again he tried, and again he failed.

He'd repeated it all over and over and over.

Of course, it was just practice.

He still had time before his final exam.

But this time, even an hour afterwards, he felt that it was hopeless.

The amazing thing to him was that he could actually fly. But he could take no pride in it.

He thought of being in the Valkyrie, flying in the turbulent air around the Macross... and then of Mirage arriving out of nowhere and taking him down instantly.

He wasn't blessed with overwhelming physical ability like Freyja was. His greatest potential lay in his sense of rhythm, his eyesight, and the piloting skill he had honed when he drove the workroid.

Humans often come up with things to overcome the limitations of their bodies. At the beginning, it was fur pelts and clubs. These days, it's EX-Gears and Valkyries. This equipment should be thought of as part of oneself, but that can prove unexpectedly difficult. In *kendo*, there's the concept of "*ma-ai*," the distance between opponents. In the combat area, how far can the tip of one's bamboo sword thrust? How far can his opponent's? The only way to learn this is through practice.

Piloting sense works in a similar way.

It's easy to talk about making the equipment become like a part of one's body, but actually doing it requires many hours of repetition.

And Hayate had done it.

Not just like that, of course. But he'd gotten familiar with all three modes of the Valkyrie: the human-shaped battroid, the half-mode gerwalk, and the fighter.

It was nothing other than innate talent.

But still, Hayate didn't feel any pride.

"It's like flying around with a workroid," he grumbled. "I can't imagine any place where that would be useful..."

The truth is that he realized if Mirage won their upcoming contest, all of his talent would be useless.

And of course she continued to insult and berate him, getting harsher and meaner each time.

(Is it possible that her strong words to the boy were an attempt to conceal some other kind of feelings? Who knows...)

At least that's what a number of people witnessing all of this – Kaname Buccaneer, to cite just one example – were beginning to think.

“Dammit... Why...? *Can't* let her win...”

He tried to squeeze words out of his throat with all the energy he had left, and that was all that could dribble out.

In that way, if in no other, she inspired Hayate, but it wasn't hatred or rage or humiliation.

It was of almost no importance that Hayate didn't want to fight.

He wanted to fly.

He thirsted for it.

To quench that thirst, and for that reason only, he kept pushing his body forward. The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak... but he had that pure, strong thirst...

And his wish was that his soul could shine brightly in this brief season known as youth.

“You're not using your full power,” a voice said behind him. He started.

He looked up. *Stand up!* he ordered his body, but it wasn't listening to him.

The man who spoke was like a sword.

The glint in eye was sharp.

His muscles were sharp.

His words were sharp.

He was like the finest steel, forged and reforged and reforged again in the fires of the battlefield.

Messer Ihlefeld.

Delta Flight's ace pilot.

His name meant "blade" in ancient German, and Hayate couldn't think of one that fit him better.

He was none other than the one with the Grim Reaper emblem on his fighter.

"Not using... all my power...?"

"Right," he said, his words carrying not the slightest fragment of sympathy or mercy.

"In aerial combat, all means are permitted. It's not some medieval jousting ceremony.

Nearly all kills are made through surprise attack. Victory is not decided from strength.

It's said that only the victorious are strong, not the other way around."

"My... what..."

Please teach me! Hayate desperately wanted to say, but the words couldn't escape his throat.

He realized that he wanted this man's approval.

"See *everything*. If you don't, you will not win."

His steps clicking in precise (and ostentatious, Hayate thought) rhythm, Messer left the locker room.

In thinking about it, Hayate realized that Messer had had a mission today, protecting Walküre and fighting on some distant world, and after that had come back and completed the same training curriculum that Hayate was still struggling with. And yet, unlike

Hayate, who was bathed in sweat and fatigue, Messer's face hadn't had a single speck of dirt on it.

(We're different. So what?)

Still not understanding, Hayate used what little strength he had left to lift his eyes and look at Messer's back as he walked away.

He watched until Messer was out of sight.

*

At Rag-Nyan-Nyan, the charge for meals for Delta Flight members was quite reasonable. Technically, the charge was automatically taken out of the following month's wages, but in practice, the one overseeing that was Chuck, and he gave everyone a break, selling the food at cost. There were also cafeterias aboard both the *Aether* and the *Elysiion*, but they carried rather flavorless synthetic foods, and the price wasn't much less expensive than the town restaurants and diners.

At any rate, to set the stage, everyone was eating.

It was a few days after Hayate had desperately gulped down the stir-fry, and he thought he was beginning to get the hang of things. Now he was eating low-fat and high-protein foods. Nothing to lower his body temperature. Staying hydrated. And afterwards, for something more enjoyable, eating fruit that was high in fiber.

"You look hungry," Chuck laughed as he placed a large plate of steamed Ragna bream, its fragrance wafted up, in front of him. The gills on Chuck's neck quivered as he laughed, as comical as a sunfish or a *Rhincodon typus*.

“It looks great,” Hayate said.

“I’m glad!” Chuck beamed, and put fried chicken with jellyfish sauce down in front of him.

“I didn’t order that.”

“On the house. It’s authentic!”

“What for?” he asked as he unhesitatingly picked up a piece of fried chicken with his chopsticks and popped it into his mouth.

“Because the novice has cleared his first hurdle! Once training ends, take a breath and have a meal. That’s all there is to it.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it!”

Chuck’s expression cracked into a grin.

“You know,” he said, “eating’s a skill, too! The greatest hero in all of Ragnan history was famous for eating.”

Hayate didn’t reply, being too busy eating the chicken. He hadn’t even started the steamed dish that he’d ordered, and now he was finishing up the thickly sauced and heavy chicken. He didn’t think the heavy taste of the fish would go well with the chicken, so he should probably have it afterwards. As he was starting to think all the the time, “timing is vital.”

“No, it’s true!” protested Chuck. “once an argument broke out between two islands, so a banquet was held where whoever ate the most would win. They say that the winner ate so much that his stomach itself looked like a jellyfish. He was my ancestor, and

legend has it that he ate an entire whale. And that whale was seven by seven by seven by seven by seven times larger around than Ragna's moon, so...

"Hey, Chuck..."

"Wait I'm just getting to the good part..."

"Aa!" Hayate cried out. And, well, it wasn't like he could call the police or anything. Just as Messer had said, most kills in aerial combat are surprises, and a form as fast as a comet had bolted in through the window and landed on the table. It was a mercat with a scar over his eye, and he had Hayate's fish in its mouth.

"You little...!"

Mercats were carnivorous marine life. Their front half looked much like a domestic cat from earth, but their back half ended in a tail fin. They couldn't move very quickly on land, but were often seen sunbathing all over Barette City, and were like a mascot of the town. But this one's glare held no warmth or friendliness.

"Stop!" Hayate yelled, but the scar-eyed mercat, pure malice and contempt on his face, scampered away.

Hayate tried to shake off his "food fatigue" and chase after the mercat, but the mercat jumped up, fish still in his mouth, and delivered a flying slap with his tail to Hayate's face. And launching off from there, he was quickly at least ten meters away, and landed in the sea with a flashy plume of water.

"That jerk!" yelled Chuck. "Always, always! Well, today, it ends! Come on, Hayate!"

"Yeah!"

We often think of fish in the sea as being placid and calm, but there is no calmness in the pursuit of predators looking for food.

By the way, the steamed fish wouldn't be spoiled even underwater because of all the collagen used in special Ragnan fish sauce, but that's neither here nor there really.

Sorry for the digression. Back to the topic at hand.

Hayate and Chuck tore off their shirts, and plunged into the water to chase down the mercat.

*

Ragna's ocean was blue and clear.

Ragnans are known as being easy-going and friendly to others, especially earth people, but not when it comes to laws restricting water pollution. Thus, even close to the spaceport, the water is virtually transparent, which increases the amount of tourism.

And these were the waters that Hayate and Chuck dove into in pursuit of the mercat.

(Wow, there are a lot of sunken buildings down here...)

By the faint nighttime illumination, Hayate could see dozens of submerged structures here and there below him. He had heard from Chuck that they were ancient ruins, perhaps dating back to the age of the Protoculture. Because they were considered holy there had never been any excavation of them, but it was theorized that some of the ruins might be even larger than a Macross ship.

Chuck flashed a handsign at Hayate.

(We'll corner that mercat...)

Chuck, with his Ragnan speed at swimming, would pull ahead of the mercat and cut him off, a simple two-man formation. It even fit in with the kind of training Hayate had been doing recently.

Chuck read the mercat's plan, adjusted his course a bit, and got right in front of him.

(All right!)

The mercat thrashed around to escape the trap, and Hayate found himself directly in front of the mercat's tail.

(Almost got it...)

And then.

The mercat flapped his tail wide from left to right, and then, in an instant, he vanished from Hayate's sight.

Hayate looked up and down, left and right, but couldn't see him. Hayate had a lot of confidence in his eyesight, but there it was: the mercat was gone.

(How...?)

Then a powerful blow struck the back of his head and he almost gulped down seawater.

The tail.

The mercat had hit Hayate with his muscular tail.

Hayate turned around in a daze, and saw the mercat scarfing down what was left of the fish.

(Bastard!)

Then the beast lunged at him, and it happened again.

The mercat was gone. Instantly.

And again, he couldn't pursue. He needed to take a breath. He swam up to the surface. No... even if hadn't needed to breathe, he couldn't have chased after the mercat.

"You're not using your full power."

Why did he hear Messer's voice just now?

"All my power, huh...?"

Bobbing on the surface of the water, in the light on the moon, he looked over and saw Chuck's face in profile, his expression inscrutable.

*

Aboard the *Elysion*, the members of Delta Flight were provided with their own break room. Not only because the regular pilots were separate, but also because Delta's duties were often highly confidential.

In keeping with naval tradition, the break room was equipped and decorated in a suitably classic style. With a library along one wall, a billiard table, and other amenities, it had the flavor of a hotel lounge.

Arad was sitting there, seeking to avoid paperwork by working on a 3D crossword puzzle. He heard the door open, and scrambled to close the puzzle.

But his visitor was an unexpected one.

"Oh! Mirage! What's up?"

“It’s absolutely no good, sir,” she said with the same sour look on her face that she always seemed to have these days. She got a café au lait from the coffee maker and plunked herself down on the sofa.

“Hmm, I was expecting Kaname, but what it is? Hayate’s training? Recently, you were saying that he was actually beginning to listen to you a bit.”

“Yes, but in the next few days he’s got to get far beyond that bare minimum, or else he *must* go home.”

“Oh?” Arad said, his eyebrows raising.

Mirage eyed him warily, as though she were expecting an enemy ambush.

*

At that exact time, Hayate was swimming underwater in the ocean.

He was still searching for the one-eyed mercat – who was called “Don,” apparently – and was quickly learning that the little jerk was just toying with him.

When he looked up, it looked like the same ocean water that was all around him, but that wasn’t true; there were currents here, and waves.

Ships floated along above, schools of fish swarmed around.

The waxing and waning of the moon led to the ebb and flow of tides.

The gravitational pull of the sun also influenced the water.

As did the wind.

The winds that blew over the face of water always differed.

The world that surrounded Hayate was full of various colors and various sounds, and was always changing. And yet, it was also unchanging.

At long last, he was learning.

*

At that moment...

In Walküre's changing room, Mikumo Guynemer was removing her training wear, and changing into her bodysuit.

She displayed her naked body with as little shame as a Greek sculpture.

Makina gasped in fascination, and then Reina reached out and pinched her cheek.

"...Kaname. How are Freyja's receptor numbers?"

"Haven't gone up yet," Kaname said. Having finished changing, she checked her terminal and sighed.

Freyja wasn't in the dressing room, she was in the training room, continuing her voluntary practice.

Mikumo and the others respected Freyja's zeal, but unfortunately, that was about the *only* thing they could find in her to admire.

"I figured as much," Mikumo said.

"Mikumo, you knew?"

"She was always going to trip the rest of us up," Mikumo stated bluntly. "Just because you're always looking up doesn't mean you can fly. Soon, some drastic action will need to be taken."

“...You might be right.”

*

The sea at night was terribly silent.

It was as though the water had sucked down all tumult and activity.

This was completely different than the world of snow and trees that Freyja had grown up in. The darkness of the sky and the darkness of the sea greedily swallowed Freyja's loneliness.

“Mah rune-rune... doesn't work.”

More than anyone, she knew what Mikumo and the others must be saying about her.

Why couldn't she sing like she did when she passed the audition? Or when she was flying on Al Shahal?

Her rune wasn't reacting. That was more painful than anything else. She had left her home and risked her life to join Walküre, and now that she had, suddenly her rune wouldn't shine anymore?

“What's that?”

Feeling incredibly down, she thought she saw a star through her now-blurry vision. The star looked to her like a shooting star that had fallen to earth, but after staring at it a while, she realized that it was a bonfire.

Yet... it still looked like a star to her.

“Hayate...? What are yeh doin'?”

Hayate, who had been roasting a fish over the bonfire, nearly jumped. He was wearing only a pair of trunks, and he had been so intent that he hadn't noticed Freyja. His face reddened as he looked over at her. Trunks and shorts weren't, of course, common where Freyja came from. She walked over to him.

"How are your lessons going?" Hayate asked, as he offered her the fish he had on the stick. "Go on, eat," he seemed to be saying.

"Oh... Ah, it's go... gori-gori fun! Mah rune-rune gets tired from all the activity every day!"

Forcing a smile on her face, she took a bite of the fish to see how it was.

"Huh. I'm envious," Hayate replied in an earnest and heartfelt voice. "So they proved then that your singing can affect the Vár, right? I mean, that's why you passed the audition..."

"Umm... Yeh... Ah don't quite know yet..."

"Ah, aren't you the carefree one? Just like always."

Freyja drew back, feeling slightly upset. It was what she thought she had wanted, but she was learning that sometimes getting what you want can be somehow frustrating and disappointing as well.

"And yeh've got yer final exam comin' up, doncha? Is it okay for yeh to be playin' around on the beach?"

"Ah, it'll all work out somehow," Hayate said.

He ate the rest of the fish, then threw himself back onto the sand. "That one time was excellent, though."

"Heh?"

“That first time flying... the stars were out, the wind was blowing... the sound of the engine... and your singing.”

“Aa...”

She couldn't forget it, either.

That time, she had sung wonderfully. Her voice had seemed like it reached to heaven, to beyond the edge of the stars.

“It *really* felt excellent,” he said

“Aa...” Her rune flickered alight, for a moment.

“And I knew then that it wouldn't be the last time... so I'm gonna *crush* that ogre of an instructor!”

Freyja started giggling, and for some reason, she suddenly felt really happy.

Happiness.

This was how she should sing... looking up at the sky, feeling the wind, and filled to the brim with happiness.

Yes.

That and that alone was it.

“And what are *you* chuckling about?”

“Jes' thinkin' about how Ah'm gonna watch yeh fail your exam!”

“I'm not gonna fail!” Hayate yelled, but he was laughing now, too.

The stars were there, and the sea. And the boundary between them became less distinct, as the jellyfish in the water glowed, twinkling like stars in the ocean.

And the boundary between the boy and girl also grew indistinct, as their laughter blended together.

And everything was all right.

*

Finally, the day came.

The VF-1 rose on the deck elevator.

Hayate was in the cockpit.

“Hayate, can you hear me?” Arad, who was monitoring the test, called over the com.

“I can hear you. Finished the final check, and everything’s okay.”

“That’s good. The time limit is five minutes. Stay inside the designated airspace. If you manage to land even a single hit on Mirage, you pass. As a handicap, any hits taken by you won’t count against you. That’s pretty much it. You can use any lasers or your gunpod, but no missile. Do you understand?”

“Got it. And we can transform, right?”

“Yes, you can use all three modes however you see fit. However, while a one-on-one battroid ground fight is acceptable, remember that the real purpose here is to test your ability with a variable fighter in the air. And remember that both fighters have been fitted with safeties, and trying to do anything outside of what the software allows won’t work.”

“That’s so annoying...”

“Moving on, Messer will be the referee.”

(Him again...)

The VF-31 with the Grim Reaper emblem was floating calmly in the sky. But right now, that man wasn't the one Hayate needed to catch up to.

“I'm gonna do it now... *full power!*”

Launch order.

Behind the VF-1, a giant jet blast deflector wall rose into place.

Jets activated.

The nuclear burst turbine engines started to roar.

Too late to back out now.

“Three... two... one... go!”

The electromagnetic catapult launched the VF-1, which instantly found itself going from a state of rest to flying high above the ground. Hayate's muscles shrieked against the tremendous sudden G-force, and without his EX-Gear, which protected against G-forces, he certainly would've passed out.

Azure sky.

The azure sky that his VF-1's wings were slicing through.

“And now, launch Mirage's fighter,” Arad commanded. “When you reach an altitude of three thousand, the battle will begin.”

“Even though I'm higher up than she is? Is that okay?”

“It was her request, actually. It's part of the handicap.”

In aerial combat, holding the higher altitude was perhaps the biggest advantage one could have. If one's attacking from below, one expends a lot of wasted energy in moving upwards against gravity, but if one is attacking from above, in contrast, gravity gives you

speed and power, for the easily understood reason that it takes less energy to fall than it does to climb. First of all, gain altitude. That's the fundamental rule of air combat.

A red VF-1 launched from the *Aether's* catapult.

No more time for words.

Mirage's fighter was coming.

“Start!”

At the order, the two Valkyries charged at each other like hawks sighting their prey.

“There she is!” Hayate cried. He had been given a handicap, and planned to use it to its fullest advantage. He dove at full speed and started shooting. His shells rained down where he estimated that she would be.

But Mirage wasn't there.

(She's... standing...?)

Pugachev's Cobra. The maneuver in which a horizontally-moving plane tilts upward until it's oriented vertically, using thrust and aerodynamics to come to a halt mid-air. In other words, she had stopped briefly, and thus was far behind where Hayate had predicted she would be if she had just gone straight on.

So... what to do now?

Hayate continued charging forward, and the vanished Mirage, having slipped away from her “future location,” swooped up behind him. But she couldn't aim at him immediately, since her fighter was still “standing.” And yet, she suddenly flipped around at high speed.

Now on Hayate's tail, she fired a short rapid-fire burst from her gunpod, and then soared high up into the sky.

All of this had taken about ten seconds.

“Dammit!”

Hayate’s altitude advantage had now evaporated, and he was an easy target.

He dove to the water’s surface, and dashed towards a nearby island for cover and to regroup, sending out a trail a seaspray behind him.

But Mirage had already figured out his plan.

(She’s right next to me!?)

Suddenly, the red VF-1 slid up beside him. He could see Mirage in the cockpit, glaring at him. The difference in their relative speeds was close to zero. The master showing off her technique.

And in the next instant, Mirage again vanished

Hayate refused to slow down. He was getting ever closer to the island. But then, Mirage was back, climbing, rotating, diving, and running circles around Hayate’s fighter like a waterspout. She was toying with him.

She was changing the angle of her wings, and using the vertical vectored nozzles, which were part of the unique abilities of the VF-1.

“D...dammit!” Hayate grimaced. Mirage was keeping him pinned to the water’s surface, unable to ascend.

She fired off some practice-type shock charges at him. Enough of them hit to make him briefly lose control of the fighter. If she kept hitting him, it’d all be over for him.

*

At that moment...

Freyja's numeric values were, as expected, still awful.

(I figured that she was that type of girl...)

With a sigh, Kaname secretly pressed a button on her remote control.

"Eh...?" The walls of the training room changed, and Freyja gulped.

"What's wrong, Freyja? Don't stop!"

"Yeh... yeh betcha!"

The room no longer appeared normally, but now showed the outside, and the sight of Mirage firing on Hayate over and over again.

*

The VF-1 tossed around like a dinghy in the middle of a huge storm.

Mirage's attack continued mercilessly.

Indeed...

(If I was really on a battlefield, I'm so inexperienced that I'd be dead meat...)

He thought grimly, steeling himself.

And yet...

Taking advantage of a momentary gap in her assault, he tilted up and rocketed towards the sky. Mirage, however, was right behind him. Always right behind him as he soared up above the clouds again.

(Just as I thought... It's all because of this!)

He quickly made his decision, and yanked off his helmet. And that wasn't all. He also pressed some keys on the console keyboard, cutting off the fighter's AI support.

Of course, this didn't just shut down the computer control of the fighter, but also the flying assistance. As the fighter abruptly switched to full manual control, it immediately started falling.

*

Mirage was shocked.

Up until now, it hadn't really been combat. And now Hayate's fighter had gone into a stall... and worse, it was falling in a tailspin.

He seemed to be headed right for the *Aether's* deck. Hayate would certainly be killed.

(At this speed, the transformation system has to be locked...)

There was no way to stop.

She knew it was against procedure, but she spoke over the open communications line. She'd get punished for it, definitely, but she didn't want Hayate to be killed.

“Cadet Immelmann! Eject immediately! Use your EX-Gear!”

“...If I lose, I won't be able to fly,” was his response, however.

It was the voice of a man willing to lose his life. And it was stupid. *Deeply* stupid. To Mirage, it sounded like a wild animal. A *male* wild animal.

“Mirage, force eject him.”

“Commander Arad!”

Mirage swiftly input the code.

“What? It’s not working! The AI support and the remote controls are all completely shut down!”

He’d pulled off the stunt completely. Is this what he’d been planning to do from the start? Perhaps he’d learned to do such things back when he was driving a workroid, since Mirage, with her strict and traditional training, would have had no idea how to perform such an underhanded trick.

And even Arad looked up to the heavens.

*

Freyja was watching the same scene unfold before her.

She tossed her mike aside and ran. Or at least, she started to run, but Mikumo restrained her by calling out, “Where are you going, Freyja Wion? You’re in the middle of a lesson.”

“But... Hayate...!”

Mikumo held her gaze on Freyja. Her eyes were severe, the eyes of one who lives in a warzone.

“He’s fighting on his own battlefield right now. Where is *your* battlefield?”

Freyja gasped.

(That’s right.)

Hayate still wasn’t giving up.

Hayate still was fighting.

Even now, as his plane was falling, she could clearly feel Hayate's determination to succeed.

"Ah see... Hayate is still fightin'..." she murmured, and she could *feel* it!

In her throat, in her belly, the song was returning.

And her rune began to shine brightly.

That's right.

This was her battlefield.

*

He could hear her singing.

There was no way he should've been able to hear it, but somehow, he could.

He was falling rights towards the deck of the *Aether*. He saw fire engines and an ambulance rush onto it.

Mirage was yelling something.

It seemed as though she was worried about something or other.

"Don't do this, Cadet Immelmann! Winning or losing here isn't worth your life!"

And just like diving through the ruins chasing after the mercat, Hayate dove through one of the gaps in the *Aether*'s overhanging gunwale, barely making it.

Mirage tried to follow, but because of the AI correction, her fighter wasn't as agile as Hayate's had been.

In the air turbulence under the aircraft carrier, Hayate's plane soared like a leaf in the wind.

“I’m flying... in the space between... the sea and the shore!”

Riding on music, riding on the wind, riding on the ocean.

His VF-1 was dancing.

He was combining his grasp of moving in three-dimensional space with his innate sense of rhythm, and reveling in the winds of Ragna. This would always stand out in his memory.

For an instant, just an instant, Mirage couldn’t tell where Hayate’s fighter was...

And then a shock charge struck Mirage’s engine.

Hayate had won.

That amateur kid had seized a victory, and anyone watching could see that it hadn’t been merely by chance.

Hayate kept climbing higher in the sky.

And it looked like his Valkyrie was dancing and leaping about.

“Immelmann Dance...” Mikumo murmured to herself.

*

He could hear Freyja’s singing.

The sky spread out before him in every direction.

The was the sensation he longed to taste, he wanted to become one with the wind, this was the path he was choosing.

At long last, Hayate felt pure conviction.

And then, his fighter shook violently, startling him.

A paint pellet struck his cockpit.

One shot, one kill.

If it were a real battlefield, he'd be dead.

“Wait, that's...”

The Grim Reaper emblem.

Messer's fighter.

He had instantly approached in Hayate's blind spot and had instantly retreated, entirely without Hayate realizing it, thanks to the VF-31 Siegfried's stealth capabilities.

“I told you before. The majority of hits in aerial combat are entirely unexpected.”

“But you're in a cutting-edge fighter! It's not fair!”

“Do you plan only to fight handicapped matches against fighters inferior to yours, Hayate Immelmann?”

There really wasn't anything he could say to refute that, so he said nothing, but silently vowed to himself that someday, he would surpass Messer.

*

After landing, Mirage felt such humiliation that she couldn't even leave her cockpit.

The Jenius family had long been distinguished as excellent pilots.

She was always burdened by her family name when she flew, and now, to be defeated by that rookie...!

And so, when a knock sounded on her canopy, she didn't even hear it at first.

However, as the knocks persisted, she simply couldn't stand it.

Finally she lifted her head, opened the canopy, and shouted, “Shut up!”

“Ah, sorry!” it was Hayate.

She thought he’d have a big victorious sneer on his face, but instead, he looked earnest and serious.

“I’m sorry. It’s like you said; just flying isn’t good enough.”

“Hmm?” She didn’t understand his words at all, but she recognized the look in his eyes.

“But I don’t like shooting and fighting and all that, so I’m still gonna fly the way I want. See you tomorrow, Instructor!”

“Huh...?” She didn’t understand. Why was her heart beating a little faster than usual?

“Okay, have a good day!”

“Er... uh... you too...”

One thing she did understand: she wasn’t going to let this Hayate Immelmann out of her sight if she could help it.

That was all.

Interlude – Karcha Lekarn (The Power to Believe)

On the hill, the entire cemetery was full.

Everywhere the eye could see, it was crowded with white stone grave markers.

It was close to the royal palace, this hill over which the wind was always gusting, and was easily viewable from the capital city of Darwent.

Among the grave markers, with flowers and other tributes at their bases, stood the lone figure of a *Hildis*, a knight.

His hair was shining and golden, his muscles were honed and forged, and he wore a magnificent surcoat. Anyone who saw him would know instantly that this man came from a noble lineage.

This gorgeous man gave the impression of concealing within his soul the tragedies of what we call war, and offering only his deeds of arms and his honor to his gods.

“I thought I’d find you here, Keith,” came a voice from behind the knight, and he slowly turned around.

Standing there was a young man with hair of silver. He was clad in a fine but not ostentatious outfit of silk and dragonbird bone, which made him look like a high-level minister or judge that others would give homage to. Unusually for this planet, he wore an elegant pair of eyeglasses, imported from earth, which gave him an air of sophistication and refinement. The current metalworking skill of the world’s inhabitants would not have been enough to craft such glasses.

“Our rage towards them,” he said, “has begun. We do not forget.”

“Indeed,” the knight replied to the silver-haired man with a nod. “Is the Tribunal pressuring you at all?”

“Yes. I need your assistance, Keith. The Tribunal members are still skeptical about our operation on Al Shahal. It would be worthwhile to open their eyes.”

“Those defeatists...”

“I wouldn’t call them that, exactly. It’s possible that they are defeatists, yes, or they could just be concerned for our homeland.”

The knight didn’t reply, but ground his teeth in fury.

His fighting spirit was overflowing, but he kept it bottled up, showing rare restraint, like a golden dragon that merely sighs when its breath could unleash an inferno.

He finally said, “I will – we will – never forget that Black Wind. Is that not so, Roid?”

“No, Keith. We will never forget.”

The silver-haired man named Roid took off the glasses that he wore for work and replaced them with glasses that he wore for funerals. Then he continued.

“How could we forget? The nobles and knights and the commoners of our Kingdom of Windermere, even the mountains, rivers, trees, and each blade of grass will remember forever that storm.”

*

Keith Aero Windermere and Roid Brehm were both boys when Windermere was engulfed in flames during the War of Independence.

It was now close to ten years later.

Because after the Second Unification Wars the “Ormond Treaty” had been passed, which forbade the use of weapons of mass destruction and tactical bombs to be used on

planetary surfaces, as well as bombardment of a planet from outside its atmosphere, the aerial war between Windermere and the Unified Earth Forces was a different kind of war.

Both sides were surrounded by spaceports and military bases, and some of the historians on the earth side claimed that every day was like a World War II dogfight.

Keith and Roid were also in the middle of this maelstrom.

*

It had been an unusually and unseasonably hot day.

The Sv-154 “Svärd” was a thin Valkyrie, looking much like a needle. Although it had been procured with the assistance of the earth-centered contract agency called the Epsilon Foundation, it was the first fighter that had been designed specifically for the Windermerean Aerial Knighthood. As young Keith descended on the runway, his body was streaming with sweat, like a waterfall. The boys who served as his attendants rushed over to him to wipe him down.

He stumbled and seemed like he was about to fall, so his attendants grabbed him and supported his limp body.

A true knight’s knees did not buckle. From the day he had decided to become one of the Aerial Knights, he had sworn that no matter the battle, his knees would not weaken, nor, no matter the battle, would he ever turn his back. Thus, when his legs trembled like a young fawn’s, he tensed his muscles and refused to let his regal bearing be disturbed.

This was already Keith’s fourth battle.

The unmanned “Ghost” fighters of the New Unified Forces knew no fatigue. Even considering the Windermerean’s outstanding physical abilities and the Knighthood’s force of will, they didn’t really know how to fight the Ghosts.

Happily, the Windermereans had an advantage.

The fold fault surrounding the solar system, separating Windermere from the rest of the galaxy, drove up the cost for the Unified Earth Government to resupply their forces in the Brisingr Globular Cluster. Conversely, the Windermereans were fighting from their homeworld. Manpower and goods were both in plentiful supply. Moreover, they had huge stockpiles of fold quartz, which was to be expected, since that’s what the earth people were trying to possess.

(From now on, all we *Hildis* need to do is dig our heels in and wait.)

This was just common sense among all the knights, including Keith. One warrior for one unmanned fighter. As long as the Unified Forces were losing economically, their offensive would eventually be stopped, and victory would be assured.

“Here, have something to drink.”

A hand held out a bottle of apple juice to Keith, who took it and started gulping it down. He didn’t look to see who had given it to him, but he already knew.

His silver-haired friend laughed. “Looks like you’re finished for the day, after this last battle.”

“I wish that were the case... In four hours, I’ve got to go on patrol again.”

The apple juice was terribly sweet, and the sugar was absorbed greedily by his exhausted body.

“No, I think you’ve got the schedule mixed up.”

A huge hand clapped down on Keith's shoulder.

"Sir Aldrya," Keith exclaimed. Sir Aldrya was Keith and the others' superior in the Aerial Knighthood. He had been attached to the Civilian Military Provider SMS, and his claim to fame was in having shot down two YF-27 Lucifers, which were piloted by cybernetically enhanced "cybergrunts," in the old battle over the Vajra homeworld.

"Anyway, we're not sending out you squires again so soon after you've had a battle. We're taking over today's rotation. You all can take rear guard."

"No!" cried Keith.

"Yes," said Roid. "It's better this way. You'll be more alert if you rest now."

"Look, Keith, Roid..." Sir Aldrya bent down and looked the two boys right in the eyes with a broad smile on his heavily bearded face. He looked like a bear. "I'm already twenty-seven. I don't know how many more years I have left to fly. The next generation – the next ten years – of the Aerial Knights is *you*."

The two star-shaped runes in his hair glowed genially, and he concluded, "Do a favor to your elders... don't take the glory *all* the time."

"...I understand."

A siren blared.

It was an attack.

"Attention! An unknown craft is approaching Carlyle City. It seems to be configured to carry bombs. There's also a team of fighters following it, apparently as back-up. Sir Aldrya, please launch! Attention..."

"Well, it figures..." Aldrya sighed and stood up.

There was nothing for Keith to do but see him off.

“Pray for my success,” Aldrya said. “For the Great Wind!”

“Yes, for the Great Wind!”

*

Sir Aldrya and his team never returned.

The city of Carlyle was engulfed by the “Black Storm” and was wiped out of existence.

Being stuck on the ground as rear guard, Keith and Roid were the only members of the Aerial Knights to survive.

The jet black storm spread outwards, and brought mass death with it.

Keith would never forget that day.

To the very last, he would never forget.

*

“Say, Keith... since that day, do you think we’ve become stronger?”

“Naturally.” Keith, now known as “the White Knight,” the highest of the *Hildis*, looked far off into the sky as he answered.

Still now, long after the end of the war, Keith continued to polish his air combat skills, being secretly deployed to many battlefields on many worlds.

Because the grave markers were all he could see, spread out before him.

Because they were grave markers with no bodies resting beneath them, just the spirits of the war dead.

Because the entire nation had tasted the same bitter suffering.

And because he wanted to pay back that same suffering to the earth people.

That was all. The souls of the dead couldn't return to *Mayan*, the Great Wind, until that happened.

“Even now... I dream of them... all the people who died in the war.”

“I do, too.”

“Sir Aldrya, and all our other brothers... Only a fifth of us managed to survive.”

Keith saw a giant dragonbird flying among the clouds. Perhaps it was even a *Draken*, a dragon of legend, for its wingspan was massive. He wanted to be as powerful as that. He *would* be as powerful as that.

“I'm not a person anymore, I am a *Draken*. A *Draken* defending his country, who will devour his enemies. I will not allow anyone to pollute our Windermere with their filthy hands. I will open a path to the future with blood, so please light the way for me.”

“I promise I shall,” Roid said solemnly, also looking up at the sky through his glasses.

Surely, they were looking at the same thing.

“I will light the way for your – and Windermere's – future, Keith.”

Chapter Five – Memories and Birthplace

Rag-Nyan-Nyan was in a festive uproar.

Not just all the members of Walküre, but all of Delta Flight, the bridge crew, and everyone else involved with Walküre's operations were all crammed into the narrow confines of the restaurant.

The date for Freyja's debut concert had been decided.

The Galaxy Network newscaster announced her name clearly, but to tell the truth, Freyja didn't feel anything in particular upon hearing it.

“Chosen from over thirty thousand applicants, it's Walküre's newest star, Freyja Wion! The big decision has been made for her to debut with the group at tomorrow's vaccine concert on the planet Randall. She'll be standing next to group 'ace,' Mikumo Guynemer; does this mean that Walküre now has *two* aces? We'll find out tomorrow, when...”

Freyja felt like she herself was getting forgotten in all the excitement of the news *about* her. Just yesterday, it had felt like she was the one watching TV, but now she felt as though she were inside the TV and tens of millions of people throughout the galaxy were watching *her*. She had checked the net hoping for something of an ego boost, but it was such a deluge of articles and stories that she had to stop. But it wasn't what the news stories were saying exactly, it was the sheer volume of them that overwhelmed her. If she tried to read every story that had come out even over the last day, her brain would quickly explode.

“COMING UP NEXT – SPECIAL REPORT! IS SHE A CYBORG? AN ANDROID? SOLVING THE RIDDLE OF MIKUMO GUYNEMER, THE ‘MYSTERIOUS VENUS!’”

(This one’s about Mikumo, huh?)

Mikumo calmly lifted a Magellanic cocktail to her lips, and Freyja wondered how she heard these kinds of stories without becoming upset. Just like a bird flying in the sky and a fish swimming in the water, so did cloaking herself in glory seem to come naturally to Mikumo.

And how should Freyja herself behave? So far, she had no real answer to that.

Up until last week, when she actually joined Walküre, Freyja had always felt somewhere in her heart that if she did join them, she would somehow just naturally be able to bask in the spotlight as glamorously as Mikumo and Kaname did. That, however, didn’t seem to be the case. Today’s Freyja Wion, really, was the same as yesterday’s Freyja Wion. And probably tomorrow’s, as well.

And then, what about the day after tomorrow?

She’d probably be the same as she was today.

The tens of billions of people on the other side of the TV screen were really the same as she was, weren’t they?

Although they’d most likely end up with a longer lifespan than she did...

Freyja didn’t understand.

She didn’t understand, but at least she could reflect upon the happiness that she currently felt.

*

When a dream comes true, that dream also vanishes. The world that you dreamed of until then has now become reality. What seemed like a distant, longed-for world now surrounded her and covered her, completely normal, like the skin her body was covered in.

It would be only a little while more before she truly knew that weight, that bitterness, and that magnificence.

*

Hayate was looking at things from a somewhat different position than Freyja was.

Even inside Chaos, on this fine, clear day, he knew it wasn't his place to butt in, but he thought that the questioning of Freyja was being done with... not a lack of consideration, really... but the whole thing seemed kind of embarrassing.

She was a girl who had rushed headlong and recklessly forward in order to achieve her dreams, and had made them reality. The light on her was extremely bright, but he had to admit that, despite her flustered responses, the spotlight suited her well.

Sitting next to Hayate was a woman he'd never seen before.

She looked like a tourist, with short pants that exposed her thighs and a low-cut top, but there was no waste in her movements. She smelled faintly of machine oil and gunpowder, but she didn't seem like a soldier. He didn't know what to make of her

piercing gaze. Her slightly pointed ears suggested that she was Zentradi, or at least had some kind of alien blood in her heritage, but that was neither here nor there, really.

“Cadet Hayate Immelmann?” she asked.

“Uh, yes. And may I ask who you are?”

“I’m Aisha Blanchette, from Engineering. You can call me Aisha. Or you can call me ‘Professor.’ I’m a Meta-Nexialist.”

“What would Engineering want with me?”

“Ya, even though I got all your data from Kaname, I figured it’d be good to say hi in person. At any rate, you got your wish to become a pilot, and that was also our wish.”

Don’t tell me I’m some kind of guinea pig, thought Hayate, a little uncomfortably. Scientists were always talking like this, weren’t they...?

“Oh...” he said, thinking, “were you the one who was talking to Commander Arad about my resistance to the Vár? So what?”

“Oh, you...!” The woman who had introduced herself as Aisha gave a huge sigh and exaggeratedly shrugged her shoulders. “We don’t really understand it, and we’d like to study you just a little more. Didn’t Arad or Mirage explain this to you?”

“I’m still not much for classrooms.”

Aisha sighed again. Hayate thought for a moment that she was going to lash out at him, but instead she took a massive gulp of the highball in front of her.

“Fold quartz. Do you know about it?”

“It’s a gem, right? And the core of the VF-31’s special systems? So the airframe won’t break or something, from what I’ve heard.”

“Well, that’s all you need to remember, I guess.”

Asiha's glance flickered over the pendent around Hayate's neck, but he didn't understand why.

"To put it simply, Fold Quartz is a super-dimension substance... A gem that can affect and influence time and space. You could think of it as a magic crystal."

"Sure, but really, it's scientific, isn't it?"

"I'd be happy to explain my thesis about it from the beginning, if you want, but I warn you it'll take at least ten years of intense study to get even the most basic understanding of the theory. What do you say?"

"Forget it. 'Magic crystal,' it is."

"Okay! So this magic crystal can be put to practical use in pretty much any field you can think of. Communications that surpass the barrier of time and space, extremely long-range space fold systems, high-output reaction furnaces, dimensional bombs that can cause unbelievable destruction, equipment that amplifies song energy, you name it. Whatever wonders the Protoculture could work, you can bet that Fold Quartz somehow made it possible."

"Can that plane do amazing things like that, though?"

"For your information, the Standard Type, the VF-31A, doesn't have any Fold Quartz in it. It just uses high-purity Fold Carbon. Apart from the reserve fighters, only the Valkyries you use in Delta Flight have Fold Quartz in them. Now, Delta Flight's fighters are named after the invincible dragon slayer, Siegfried. Can you guess why?"

"Because of Walküre?"

“Wow, not bad, and ya, not the other way around,” the woman said, her expression seeming to say, “Huh, this guy’s not a *complete* idiot.” If this was some kind of test, Hayate seemed to have avoided failing.

“And yeah,” she continued. “Fold Quartz is magnified by singing. That magnification can draw out the full abilities of the VF-31. It works out to a tangible increase of twenty percent.”

“Twenty percent?” It sounded like numbers for a discount sale.

“What, you were expecting some amazing thousand percent power-up like in the movies?”

“So, putting it simply, mach twenty becomes mach twenty-four?” Hayate was incredulous. “You’re an engineer, and you don’t think these numbers are absurd?”

For the second time with a female teacher recently, Hayate felt like a student who was being held back a year.

Aisha paused. “And yet... you too have had your own full abilities drawn out, haven’t you? Hayate Immelmann, it’s plain to see that you have your own affinity with Walküre’s music.”

“With... Freyja’s singing...”

“You remember that, of course, right?”

It would be impossible for him not to.

Dancing in the sky above Shahal City while it burned.

Seeing the sky before him as limitless.

That the azure sky would never end, as long as Freyja was singing.

As though the chains binding his soul had been broken.

“Walküre themselves go and sing on the battlefield,” Aisha continued. “Being close to the terror of death, evoking a strong desire to live, this provokes a maximum outpouring of Fold Waves from Receptors. And you... you have this ability, too.”

“Me? Singing?”

“No, not that,” Aisha said with a wry grin. “Well, you’ll understand what I mean sooner or later, I’m sure.”

“I will... huh...?” Whether he understood her meaning or not seemed a pretty subjective thing. Facts were facts, and that was fine, but Hayate couldn’t help thinking that this “professor” didn’t look like any professor he’d ever seen before.

“Anyway,” she went on, “in the airspace around a region where there’s a Vár Syndrome outbreak, Walküre’s singing helps ward against it among the pilots who are flying in the area and would be susceptible to it. That’s also a worthwhile reason, isn’t it, along with increasing the VF-31’s power? And no matter how you look at it, without air support, Walküre’s battlefield concerts would be infinitely more dangerous. And vice-versa.”

(I get it...)

Well, it had been a long explanation, but it had cleared up his doubts about why Walküre was necessary, so he should probably be grateful.

*

“Strange, isn’t it, that the Professor would come out all the way from the lab?” Arad mused, leaning against a handrail, as he downed a glass of whiskey in one gulp.

The progress of technology had robbed the profession of being a fighter pilot of some of its glamour and romance, but there were still a few perks. Thanks to advancements in how alcohol is broken down in the body, a pilot could get dead drunk and still be completely sober and ready to fly in a matter of minutes. If you heard stories about the famously drunk Space War I ace, Roy Focker, you'd be forgiven for imagining that he always had some drool spilling down his chin. No, even when he was drunk, his skills were unaffected. Or so he always claimed.

"I think she was just interested," Kaname replied. "And it's probably of some concern to Lady M, too." She had just finished introducing Freyja to all of Walküre's support staff, and her face said that she was happy to be done with her tasks as a leader for the day and was looking forward to some relaxation.

"Lady M, huh...? I've heard talk that the Professor has actually met her. Think it's true?"

"It's probably a good idea to take anything Professor Blanchette says with quite a few grains of salt."

"Good point. She loves telling those obviously fake stories, like when she said she met Basara Nekki, or helped fight some giant octopus thing in the ruins of earth."

Lady M: the mysterious woman who, it was rumored, commanded Xaos from the shadows. At least, based on the "Lady" designation, everyone assumed that she was a woman, but no one really knew anything except that she would sometimes give her enigmatic orders to the teams. And that she had been deeply involved at every level with the formation of both Walküre and Delta Flight.

“Well, it’s probably best that if anyone had to listen to her silly stories, it was Hayate and not us,” Arad said.

Kaname shook her head. “I couldn’t imagine myself understanding any of it, though...”

“Good point. It’s possible to get crammed with so much information that you burst.”

Arad was an extremely straightforward and uncomplicated person. If he had a mission, he’d see it through. He wouldn’t get distracted by other things, he just needed to know what the mission entailed, and he’d make sure it was completed. It’s human nature to avoid missions where one has to be deliberately left in the dark about some aspects, but the people who can accept such roles are the true commander type.

“Well... I don’t understand the workings of geniuses anyway, I guess.”

And heaven helps those who help themselves.

To him, the important things were the next mission with Walküre and his subordinates, and keeping himself alive; and as long as the world kept turning, everything was okay. Above even that, though, he truly believed in the organization called Xaos. As someone who never really felt comfortable in the New Unified Forces, that was paramount.

*

There are many wonderful things about youth, but one of the most wonderful is never having to worry about how much one eats, or so they say. One’s body wishes to grow,

and in spite of everything, one's vigorous metabolism turns calories into energy, and instead of piling on flab, it becomes new material for bones and muscle.

So naturally, young people will overeat and not worry about their abdomen paying the bill later, just like Freyja right now.

“Whew... Ah ate too much... Ah'm gori-gori-stuffed!”

“Eyes bigger than your belly, huh?” Hayate said, offering her a glass of apple juice, which she eagerly accepted and drank.

The moderate sourness and sweetness of it, and most of all, its coldness were very refreshing.

“Fank you! Appa'ju!”

“You're excited today... hey!”

“Huh? Hayate?”

He noticed that the glass was already empty. She should enjoy her drink a little more, he thought.

“This apple is from your home, isn't it?”

“A-wha?”

He sat down next to her and showed her the apple he was holding. On the peel, there were patches of white that had more sugar in them, and that looked kind of like butterflies or flowers.

“A Windermere apple? Where'd yeh get that from, Hayate?”

“Oh, somewhere, somehow.”

He nodded to a huge pile of them over at the dessert corner of the party room. The Galactic Apples were famous for being a highly nutritious fruit.

“Whew, they’re really popular!”

“It looks like the Chaos sales department stocked up on them, and I know even the Ragnan Unified Forces gets them wholesale. Both nutritious and inexpensive...”

“Yeh, yeh!” Freyja snatched the apple from Hayate’s hand and bit into it with a satisfying crunch. Showing how healthy her teeth were, she ate about one-fifth of the apple in a single bite, skin and all, which is the best way to eat a Galactic Apple.

“Windermere apples are the best in the galaxy!”

“...So I’ve heard. You want me to get you another?”

“Yeh! Thanks a heap!” She took a bit of time to finish putting the apple in her stomach. No matter where in the universe you go, you’ll always find girls who will make room for dessert.

“So how are you liking it here on Ragna?” Hayate’s tone was as brusque as usual, but there was affection underlying his words. “The gravity’s different, the atmosphere’s different. Heck, even moving to a new town is tough, to say nothing of a whole new planet.”

“Oh, it’s all still so gori-gori... To be honest, Kaname’s lessons are so tough that Ah’m just frazzled all the time.”

“I hear that,” Hayate nodded in sympathy. As they say, fellow sufferers pity each other, and he was definitely suffering under Mirage’s harsh training.

“But yeh know something, this place reminds me of mah village back home.”

“How so? I’ve always heard that Windermere is cold and blustery all the time.”

“Yeh betcha!” Freyja said, looking unabashedly joyful. Windermereans were proud of the windiness of their home, and liked hearing it being praised. For them, the wind was fate, the gods, and the carrier of souls, all rolled into one.

“The wind always feels great, the sky and the land all white, but there’s always some green in the apple orchards...”

“Oh, I see... wait, that doesn’t sound anything like here at all!”

“Yeh... they’re so unlike each other that it comes full circle and they’re alike again! Wait, what’s that old sayin’? ‘A stranger close by is better than a relative far away.’”

“That’s... not what that means.”

Freyja’s use of the common tongue was sometimes little odd. It wasn’t just the accent, she also used proverbs and idioms without apparently understanding what they meant. Since she got all the words right, though, even if she got the meaning wrong, it seemed a little nasty to keep correcting her.

“Well Ah guess that Ah don’t know what Ah really mean... just that everythin’ here is so much fun!”

She stretched, and Hayate noticed again her old player hanging over her chest. It was a far out-of-date multiplayer of the type you only see in backwater areas far from the heart of the galaxy. Its durability was its only merit, and as such was used primarily by explorers and soldiers.

“What *is* this?” Hayate grunted, and snatched the player up. It didn’t have a single scratch on it. For sure, this thing was durable. “You had this when we were on Al Shahal, didn’t you?”

“Yeh. When Ah was a kid, an Earthling who was on Windermere gave it to me.”

“Huh.”

Freyja held the player tenderly, nearly caressing it.

“This ol’ thing taught me all about foreign music. Lynn Minmay, Fire Bomber, the Milky Dolls, Chelsea Scarlett, Sheryl Nome, Ranka Lee, Mina Forte... they’re all on this player.”

Ah.

Even with severe restrictions, it’s possible to steal things from the cities using a computer. And Freyja was not about to let this little player out of her grasp. She was connected to it, orbiting around it like a satellite, more than the hour or two of the Galaxy Net broadcasts that she could listen to per day, where the signal-to-noise ratio would be less favorable.

“This player also taught me about Walküre.”

So *that’s* where the yearning started.

By the customs and conventions of her home, people existed to bear children. But this girl didn’t listen, and neither gave up nor resigned herself to it, but knew there was a brightly shining place in the world for her.

And knowing this, she started running and never stopped.

“Ah thought they were so cool, and Ah wanted to be just like them. But...”

But she was getting there, wasn’t she? She’d joined Walküre, hadn’t she? But to tell the truth, Freyja herself didn’t really understand anything.

The news about her was all over the Galaxy Network, and everybody on Ragna was congratulating her. She was in the same Walküre as Mikumo, Kaname, Reina, and Makina, and that should be all that mattered.

And then.

Hayate poked her rune.

It was a very sensitive part of her body, and she let out a yelp.

“What! What’re yeh doin’, yeh pervert!”

“You’ll fly, even it means risking your life... right?” Hayate said, smiling. It was a smile as transparent and clear as the sky, with no hint of malice about it.

And she really did believe those words. They’d brought her here, after all.

She clutched her music player more tightly.

“Yeh! If Ah try, Ah can fly! If there’s time for mopin’, there’s time for more flyin’! Life is jus’ thirty years!”

That was a strange expression that Hayate had never heard before, and he tilted his head in puzzlement. But Freyja was already running off.

“Where are you going?” he called.

“To the sea! To sing!”

There was no sorrow in her voice, not even a smidgen.

*

“She was talking about Windermereans’ life expectancy... it’s only thirty years,” Mirage’s voice said from behind Hayate. She had just arrived without him noticing.

“Where did you pop up from?”

“I was just hearing a story about Fire Bomber.”

“Huh. Still... is it true? About Windermereans?”

She stiffened, a bitter expression on her face, and nodded.

He'd heard rumors before, but now knowing that it was the truth, it felt different.

Thirty years. Less than half the life expectancy of an Earthling.

“So... Freyja only has about fifteen more years to look forward to...”

“I'm sure that's why she didn't want to wait until next year's Walküre audition.”

Mirage also seemed to find it inconceivable.

But there it was. Freyja's life was already half over.

At the age when humans would be in that space between youth and middle-age, thinking about things like marriage or building up retirement pensions, Freyja would no longer even exist.

“Huh... you know, if a girl has to point out that she's not married, everyone usually thinks of them as really mature and grown-up, or at least voluptuous...”

“That's sexual harassment.”

“Oh. Sorry...” Hayate said with unusual meekness.

Hayate always thought that each day would continue on much like the last and then nothing would ever really change, but that wasn't the case.

Ten years... that wasn't a very long time away. And someday he and Mirage would be standing at Freyja's grave mourning. That's the only ending he could see to their friendship.

“Freyja... somehow, we've all got to help fill her brief life with as much meaning and density as we can...”

“Yeah.”

For the first time, it hit Hayate that Freyja was truly an alien being.

*

Mikumo was by herself, floating in the Ragnan ocean above some sunken ruins. This was a stage that truly suited her. There was no audience, unless one counted the large mercat visible in the moonlight, as well as the jellyfish in the water.

She could hear a singing voice coming from somewhere. She instantly knew it was the new girl, Freyja Wion. Until just recently, Mikumo had thought that Freyja would never be anything more than an amateur.

Mikumo still didn't think that the girl could be her rival in any sense. There was no one who could match Mikumo.

She had remembered Freyja's name, and Mikumo would let her climb towards the heights for a little while, before hammering a pin into the bulletin board of the girl's heart. That would be worth the effort, she felt.

Sounds haughty and conceited, doesn't it? It's not.

Above all else, Mikumo Guynemer was focused solely and seriously on her own performance. And yet, living in this world, there was only a limited time in which to refine and improve oneself, and the rabble would never notice much of it anyway, so if she had a surplus of talent and skill, she might as well use it to teach others, at least once.

And so, she remembered Freyja's singing, and remembered her name. She was beginning to realize that Freyja was more than just a fan, more than "one of them."

She wasn't sure if that desire to help was being conveyed to Freyja, though. Mikumo was neither soft nor gentle.

“Well... at our next concert, we’ll see if she really belong in Walküre or not,”
Mikumo murmured, smiling a little *too* sweetly...

*

The next day, the next sortie was announced, but Hayate wasn’t surprised.

To that end, a big party was also announced, which Hayate figured was simply a way of preparing for a mission from which they might not return.

The battlefield was endless. It could be anywhere and everywhere.

A clear day was chosen, and everyone started preparing for the celebration, as well as preparing for the dangerous mission. Workroids were zooming back and forth in the hallways, crewmembers were repairing reaction engines, and that wasn’t all. The businessmen drafted proposals for waiving vacation time, and the arrangements were being made for the party.

“This isn’t a combat mission,” Arad kept insisting.

Indeed. It was even spelled out in the contract.

“The autonomous government of Planet Randall in the Iconia System has requested a vaccine concert. The rate of Vár outbreaks there is currently under once a month, but they forecast a sixty percent increase soon.”

The abnormally-shaped fold waves that appeared to cause Vár Syndrome could be detected and measured. They still didn’t understand where the fold waves came from or why they caused the outbreaks, but they knew that wherever there were large crowds and those unusual waves, there was the Vár.

In such areas, Walküre would go and perform a Vaccine Concert. Walküre's singing not only calmed the fold waves at the concert itself, but also had a spreading-out effect even on people who hadn't heard the music... or so they said.

At least, that was how Kaname described it.

"Well, umm... when a lot of people gather together, these weird fold waves come in and make it easy for a Vár outbreak to happen. It can be pretty dangerous. So when you sing live in front of a big crowd, you can suppress the strange fold waves. In doing that, the influence of the fold waves on the people at the concert is evened out, and it reduces the infection rate, so even the people who aren't listening to your songs are helped, indirectly... have I got it right?" Hayate's grasp of the process was kinda sketchy, but it seemed that overall, he got it. Kaname nodded in approval.

"That's it, more or less."

"Finally, I understand!"

So, if Walküre sang, it really did prevent the Vár. It was all written out in a pamphlet and he'd seen the effects for himself, but it was still surprising to him.

"And so," Arad finished up, "we've got the heavy task of protecting Walküre during their Vaccine Concert. Our team will reach the galactic stage, too, and there's no room for anything besides excellence. The fate of galaxy rests on our shoulders!"

It was mostly a lot of hot air, of course. Managers, and especially military commanders, knew the value of getting their people enthusiastic about their duties.

Of course, it wasn't just for that purpose, but also to prepare them for going into a life-or-death situation.

*

With a gonging sound, one arm of the *ElySION* launched from its mooring. This was Delta Flight's mothership, the *Aether*.

If you look at a usual *Macross* ship, you'll see what looks like small ships attached to it as arms, but actually, these ships are the same size as a twentieth century nuclear-powered aircraft carrier.

"*Aether*, launch! Once we reach lunar orbit, execute a fold!" As Arad, acting as both the commanding officer of the *Aether* and the commander of the Third Aerial Combat Wing, gave down his order, the ship's gravity control system and reaction engine went into high gear, propelling the *Aether* free of Ragna's gravity, and out into space.

A journey into outer space: something Hayate had experienced many times. But Freyja, given to gazing out even at the sea for hours at a time, the experience was very different.

*

Just as soon as you pass through the intoxication of a fold, the tedium begins.

The going theory is that folding close to a planet is ill-advised, because of the twisting of space that occurs when a fold is initiated. Not only can the planet's gravity affect the ship as it enters the fold, but, again, the warping of space can create disaster for the planet itself. Any blunder is potentially massive and cannot be undone.

Anyway, it wasn't long before Hayate popped into the hanger, hoping to see his precious Valkyrie. The VF-31 Siegfried had forward-swept wings. That is, the base of the wings was at the aft of the variable fighter.

The peculiarity of forward-swept wings though, was that they made the plane itself unstable. Hayate hadn't really thought that instability of control would be any kind of advantage, but Mirage had explained before that actually, it helped during aerial combat. The fighter could turn more quickly, and climbing was made easier. An unstable fighter was more agile than a stable one, and could make maneuvers much more easily, just as a vehicle with only two wheels is less stable but more nimble than a four-wheeled vehicle.

And his fighter was gorgeous.

It wasn't just because of the thin lines. But the smooth bodyline of the fighter made it a work of art, not unlike a finely crafted sword. It was a thing of beauty.

"Huh? Haya-Haya?" A head popped up from the VF-31's maintenance hatch, that of a pretty young woman whose cuteness and gentleness seemed at odds with the dreary environment of the hangar. That cuteness of her face was matched by the voluptuousness of her bust and rear. It was Makina Nakajima.

"Haya-Haya' ...? And what's a member of Walküre doing way down here?"

"Just doing tune-ups on your fighter, Haya-Haya. You won't need the support anymore!" She smiled proudly, oil smeared on her cheeks. "I just finished the customizations on your ARIEL-III A.I. system."

Next to him, from somewhere in the ship with access to the ship-wide network, the slender and almost robotic face of Reina Prowler appeared in hologram form.

“You can use the AR system without a helmet,” Makina continued, “and you can even use the G-cancelling EX-Gear! You can fly however you like, Haya-Haya!”

“We reset ARIEL-III to fit your priorities.”

“Wait wait wait... you two did *all that*...?” Hayate was amazed that they would go to such lengths, and anyway, was stuff like this part of Walküre’s job description?

“Hmmm...” Makina considered this for a bit, thrusting out her chest, and then smiled brightly. “You want to look good on stage, don’t you?”

“On stage...?”

“Sure! You won’t just be fighting, after all. You’re also going to be our back-up dancer. This will let you fly your own way and make your performance better.”

Reina projected a bunch of older videos all at the same time. They showed Delta Flight performing precisely coordinated acrobatic maneuvers while Walküre sang brightly on various stages.

Makina declared, “If you want to *really* tear up the dance floor, leave the mecha-mecha to Maki-Maki...”

“...and Rei-Rei...”

“...We can do it!” they said, posing together rather skillfully, considering that Reina was just a hologram. Reina blew a kiss and vanished, and Makina gave a fond look at all the mechanics, then left the hangar.

“Looking good on stage, huh...?”

Murmuring to himself, Hayate looked up at the cockpit and felt a thrill in his chest.

An unknown voice inside him was calling out to the sky.

*

When she first saw the audience, they were illuminated by sweeping holo-lights, looking like an ocean made of light. From the dressing room, Freyja could only look at the scene, but she already felt as though she were about to be tossed out into space. There were over a hundred thousand people gathered at the specially-built stage at the Randall spaceport, but Freyja couldn't see all of them, since the crowd spilled out from the amphitheatre into the surrounding area, and quite a number of wealthier people were watching from anti-gravity boats floating in the air over the stage.

You can call it a "Vaccine Concert" if you want, but a festival is a festival. The effect spread outward like a blossoming flower, as the wild enthusiasm of the hardcore Walküre fans infected the more casual concertgoers, until the entire crowd was excited and cheering.

Young and old, male and female, all of them were calling out for Walküre.

Freyja drank this in, and felt overwhelmed. So many people, all gathered together to see them... it was just like everyone had said, and it was kind of a miracle in a way, wasn't it?

"Freyja."

"Eep! Uh-yeh?" Freyja's consciousness had been so focused on the crowd that she hadn't noticed Mikumo standing right next to her.

"What kind of thoughts and feeling go into your singing?"

"What kinda thoughts...? Er..."

“Singing is the act of expressing your feelings. I’m not talking about spirituality, I mean it quite literally. You will have a direct connection to the reactions of the audience. What do you plan to express to them?”

“Well, Ah guess Ah... um...” Freyja couldn’t answer.

Singing was just singing. She hadn’t thought about it any more deeply than that.

Makina bounced over and threw her arms around Mikumo’s shoulders from behind. “And what about you, Kumo-Kumo? What feelings will *you* bring?” Within an instant, Reina was there, too, and gave Makina a glare. Maybe she was trying to help her friend out?

“Today, Freyja, do your best to satisfy me out there,” Mikumo said, her eyes piercing Freyja’s with utter seriousness. “If you can’t do that, Walküre won’t be needing you.”

It seemed like an attempt by, say, a corporate employee to make a new staff member toe the line, but that wasn’t it. Mikumo’s eyes said that Freyja needed to find her own place on stage, her own way.

There was nothing dishonest or calculating about it. For Mikumo, it was clear that perfecting her own performance was her constant, never-ending quest. Even if a meteorite fell during the concert and killed the audience, Mikumo would still be on stage, singing her best.

“Are you done?” Kaname asked, stretching out her hand. “We’re on now.”

This was their pre-concert routine. Artists often have these little rituals they do before they go on stage, but it’s really the same as the rites performed by shrine maidens or other religious figures. It differs in scale, but not in kind.

“For the galaxy!”

“For everyone!”

“Flare up in an instant!”

“Risk our lives, and have fun!”

“Go! Walküre!”

And so it began. The wondrous stage.

*

Trailing rainbow-colored smoke, Hayate’s fighter flew above the stage, and he was amazed at how responsive the controls were.

He had already had hundreds of hours of practice in the VF-31 simulator, and had flown both, in his initial training, a VF-1 and the mass-produced VF-31A. But his own fighter, a “J”-type, as tuned-up by Makina and Reina, was a completely different story. It seemed like the canopy didn’t even exist, and he could almost feel the wind as he flew lightly through the air. The cockpit setting that Reina had picked, AR-type (that is, “augmented reality”), was a really good choice. Through this system, the plane’s surroundings were projected along the interior of the cockpit in real time, so that it seemed as though Hayate were just on a seat that was flying in the sky. He’d heard that it made some more timid pilots faint dead away, but Hayate had no clue why anyone would be so scared. To him, this was *real* flying.

Oh, and by the way, before Reina’s adjustments, the AR would only be able to be accessed by those looking through the eye-shield of a helmet. She had reformatted it so that it was actually projected into the cockpit, so that the AR would be visible even

without wearing a helmet. Furthermore, his fighter was equipped with “ARIEL-III” super AI system, which read the movements of the pilot’s eyes, and adjusted the cockpit projection accordingly. In this way, the pilot was freed from having to check a countless number of gauges and meters.

It wasn’t like a cyborg hookup, but it was at the current limit of connection between man and machine – a living, flying Valkyrie... at least as Professor Aisha Blanchett conceived of one.

(And now, Freyja... here I come!)

He felt the wind rushing past his face.

*

From the stage, the crowd looked like surging ocean waves.-Freyja was hearing one hundred thousand shouts and seeing two hundred thousand eyes. That’s not to say that all of them were focused solely on her, but if she hadn’t been here, there wouldn’t be any.

“We’d like to formally welcome our newest member!” Kaname, as leader, announced, just as she’d done in rehearsal. Freyja had practiced her response over and over. She’d be fine.

“Ah-Ah’m from Windermere. Ah love apples! Ah’m Freyja Wion... n-nice to meep you!”

And... flubbed it.

This was absolutely awful. And she couldn’t just play it off as a dialect issue.

She’d screwed up again.

Her face turned red, but she realized that even this was a part of defining her “character” to the audience.

A number of the fans started shouting Freyja’s name. Many of them were holding up placards, and some were even cosplaying, wearing her stage outfit. Her debut had just been announced the day before... these people must’ve spent all night making their costumes.

She felt cheered by this.

And in the sky, she could see Hayate’s Valkyrie dancing and twirling.

She was happy after all.

*

Hayate was messing up the formation, which naturally was irritating to Mirage, but even in irritation, she saw that his flying was magnificent.

Even with his “ad-libbing,” Delta Flight could adjust and make it all still look splendid.

It wasn’t exactly genius, though.

According to Arad, the ability to view everything from a “bird’s eye” view was a special ability. Without losing one’s own field of vision, one had to be able to see the entire area as though looking at it from high above. It took imaginative ability as well as an athlete’s sense of the surroundings, and took a special nature to be able to do.

This involved an ability to improvise, of course, and Mirage and the others were all excellent pilots who could all do this well.

All that said...

Flying with Hayate was actually... kind of fun.

Mirage felt some discomfort at how little discomfort she felt.

She knew she *should* be fretting, worried, and anxious.

But instead, she was just excited.

*

Kaname also sounded excited and in a good mood as she communicated with the others.

“The chance of a Vár outbreak has dropped from 42 to 38!”

“This is Delta Leader. Roger!” Arad said, sounding satisfied. This was a good vaccine concert.

Hayate’s joining had been good for team motivation, especially Mirage, since she lacked skill with things like his “ad-libs.”

“What about Freyja?”

“Non-active. We’ll just have to wait and see. Her range graph is fluctuating because of the live performance. There’s a risk it’ll stay below the allowable level.”

“Well, you four have been fine without her, so—” Arad abruptly cut off. His AR screen lit up, announcing an enemy attack. His facial expression changed from that of an aerobatic background dancer to that of a veteran fighter pilot.

“Delta Leader to all units. We’ve got some uninvited guests. The unknowns from before... *Fafnir* is coming!”

*

Within seconds, the airspace above the concert became a free-for-all battle.

Suddenly, they came breaking through the atmosphere – the same unknown Valkyries that had challenged them at Shahal City, the ones that carried more stealth equipment than was standard for the Unified Forces. A beam from one of the enemy fighters – they didn't know what the fighters were called, and so had just nicknamed them *Fafnir* – grazed Hayate's Valkyrie. A direct hit would kill him.

Yes... yes, he would die.

Cold sweat ran down his spine.

Well, maybe I can lose some weight... a kilogram or two, he thought. I need to get through this without wetting my pants.

(This is... a battlefield...)

“Delta Two to Delta Five.”

In combat, Delta Flight was obliged to use their fighter numbers as call signs. They didn't use any special designations, both to avoid aural miscomprehension and any wiretaps. The numbers were in direct order of rank: Arad, the leader, was One, Messer was Two, Three was Chuck, Four was Mirage, and the rookie Hayate was Five.

“Don't engage any of the fighters directly. We still don't know *Fafnir*'s specs, but I'm guessing that our missiles and our automatic targeting system will be useless against them. Stick with Delta Four. Like glue.”

“Sure thing.”

Hayate being Hayate, he wasn't actually listening to Messer at all. But rather than being stuck in his own reveries, he was actually quite focused.

First, he retreated a bit, in order to ascertain the situation – and if that's all he did, he might be viewed as a coward, but he had other plans.

The skill to retreat is a crucial one in aerial combat, and one he'd learned in his flight exam, when Messer kept firing on him. And so, he focused on running away.

He fled, further and further, with the enemy fighters chasing them, in order to draw them away from the concertgoers and his friends. And while he was flying away, he didn't get hit.

That time also gave Delta Flight some moments in which to prepare a counterattack.

This would be a foolhardy place to die. He'd probably get a medal, true, but it'd also be the end for him.

*

Next to Kaname, another one of the parabola-type fold wave modulators was destroyed. The modulators were a vital part of the Vaccine Concerts, since they would amplify the fold waves of Walküre's singing. With the modulators gone, Walküre's sphere of influence was limited to just the people inside the concert hall; the modulators were necessary to cover the entire city.

(The enemy... has studied our methods...!? I had a feeling they weren't simply terrorists or space pirates!)

*

(That gold—!)

Messer alone was fighting with the *Fafnir* that had golden trim.

This enemy was terrifyingly strong.

Messer couldn't believe that there was a pilot this good. The enemy's cockpit was opaque, but it didn't feel like the fighter was unmanned. Its movements were like those of a human pilot, supported by an analysis system like ARIEL-III. It definitely wasn't an unmanned cyber-controlled fighter or piloted by remote. There was a person inside this *Fafnir*.

And yet, in some ways, it seemed like a drone. The turns it was making were sharp and fast enough that they should have broken the pilot's bones, or at least cause him to pass out. And in the middle of a storm of missiles, he was evading them within mere centimeters, and dodging lasers as though he already knew the lines of fire.

(Could this be one of those enhanced cybergrunts people whisper about...? But I'd heard that the Galaxy Fleet, which developed them, had been destroyed...)

"Delta, come in. Delta, come in," came the voice of an operator over the electronic interference. It was the *Aether*. "The Fifth Combat Squadron of Randall Unified Forces is arriving to support you. They're engaging the enemy now..."

There were no reinforcements that could come from the aircraft carrier, so this must be the Fifth, including their elite core, Flight 924, called the "Musketees."

Twenty fighters were soaring towards the *Aether*, closing in on the mere six *Fafnirs*.

What had been a stalemate suddenly looked like a victory.

(Later... I've *got* to take that pilot down...!)

Tensing his body against the pull of so many Gs, his eyes flicked momentarily to the AR screen, where she saw, in profile, Kaname's singing face, and then he plunged right back into the flurry of missiles and beams.

*

A song could be faintly heard. It wasn't Walküre.

It was somehow more *transparent*, as though the song itself were made of wind.

It didn't feel at all sinister, instead bringing tranquility and stillness to mind.

Hayate listened exceedingly carefully.

"Delta Flight, all units! Missiles! Break!" Arad exhorted, and jerked the pilots back to reality.

Suddenly...

"What!?"

A missile nearly grazed Hayate's wing.

Dead.

If his reflexes had been a hundredth of a second late, he would definitely be dead right now.

"What... what the hell is going on?"

A building loomed closer in front of him. He switched to gerwalk mode and rushed up its wall. The force from his jet nozzles shattered the building's windows, and the glass looked like a blizzard of crystal as it fell.

From his steep climb, he flipped, inverted.

They were still coming. And there was a second wave of missiles. He fired several volleys from the railgun connected to Valkyrie's arm, but some missiles seemed to slip through.

Then Hayate realized that those projectiles hadn't come from the direction of the *Fafnir*.

No. They came from the reinforcements.

The VF-171 Nightmare Pluses that were being flown by the Fifth Combat Squadron fired a wave of missiles. It was a perfectly coordinated saturation attack.

They should be competent, and also be in control of their fighters and tactics... but there didn't seem to be any kind of surprise attack from anywhere, and no other threat in Hayate's immediate surroundings...

"Vár confirmed! It's the Fifth Combat Squadron!" Mirage nearly shrieked.

"What? All of them at once? That's impossible! Or... the Vár is somehow changing its strategy..." Chuck shouted back.

"Our allies are firing on us! What should we do, Commander Arad?"

They didn't want to fire on their allies, but those allies were attacking them utterly without mercy. And the *Fafnirs* behind them weren't slacking in their pursuit.

"Stay calm," Arad said. "Wake up and face reality."

He sounded composed, but he knew that some or perhaps all of the affected pilots might be killed. The Fifth Combat Squadron's firepower was overwhelming.

*

“Guh...”

The city, burning.

The mountain of corpses.

A white hand reached out.

“No!” the Grim Reaper howled, “I want to hear her...!”

*

Even with everything happening, Walküre continued to sing.

No, that’s wrong.

They were singing *because* it was happening.

The city burned and the populace ran about, trying to flee.

This was the girls’ duty.

Wherever the Vár was, Walküre would sing.

Their objective was to protect the pilots of the Fifth Combat Squadron. They had to protect the soldiers until those soldiers’ own volition was restored and they stopped attacking their allies. This was also Walküre’s way of protecting their fans.

But then, before their eyes, the last modulator was destroyed, and it became obvious that they were boxed in.

*

“We should attack...? But they’re our allies!” Hayate couldn’t believe the orders he was being given.

“Yes, they are. But they have the Vár. They must be suppressed.” Amazingly, even in the middle of a dogfight, Messer’s voice was calm and composed. Even when the battle first broke out, when Hayate could hear an edge of tension in Messer’s tone, it was worlds apart from his own semi-panicked outbursts.

Even more, while Messer was speaking, he evaded enemy fire and scored direct hits on two VF-171s.

And there it was – Hayate wasn’t to help the pilots.

He *couldn’t* help them.

“Walküre’s singing isn’t reaching them!”

“It is. It will. But in the meantime, they’re firing missiles, and could kill dozens or hundreds of innocent civilians. We cannot ignore that.”

“But still–!” Mirage cried.

“When we fight, it is our duty to risk our lives to protect those of others. The NUNS pilots have that same duty. They knew something like this could happen. They’ve been brainwashed by the enemy and are trying to shoot us down. And to stop them from killing those that they’ve sworn to protect, we have to kill *them*.”

“Even so–”

“If you can’t fight without getting the enemy’s permission first, then get out of a VF-31! This is the world both of you chose!”

Hayate realized that Messer was absolutely right.

And yet... But still...

(I...)

And then...

He could still faintly see Freyja, and she was still singing.

(That’s right.)

“My job isn’t to kill... it’s to *protect!*”

He switched to battroid mode. And ramping up the leg thrusters to full power, he whirled upwards.

As Hayate burst forth, a swarm of large missiles rushed towards him.

There seemed to be over a hundred of them, but he used the vision-controlled lock-on to target them all. The railgun connected to the arms, the head-lasers, the micromissles in the legs, and the beam gunpod in the hand... as all of them fired, making it look like the battroid was raining pure light, Hayate danced.

He kept dancing.

“I... I’m a backup dancer for Walküre! Whatever happens, I won’t let anyone interrupt their concert!”

And maybe, just maybe, he had found his true *raison d’être*.

His pendant was glowing faintly, but he didn’t notice. He was focused solely on dancing.

*

In reality, Freyja hadn't even started.

She wasn't singing, and she was wondering, just a little, if people even wanted her to.

Her rune wasn't glowing, and her fold receptors were inactive.

She felt utterly worthless.

She still believed in Walküre, believed in singing on the battlefield. However, faced with missiles exploding and lasers sizzling right before her eyes, it was understandable that her heart would quail.

And yet...

He was fighting.

High up in the sky, Hayate was fighting.

Not in order to kill, but in order to live.

Like a giant made of light, he was in the air, trying not to kill the people afflicted with the Vár, but still protecting everyone on the ground.

With single-minded intensity, he was fighting, and dancing.

Who was he doing it for?

(For himself.)

And he was fighting because Walküre was there.

And among them, there was Freyja.

If she didn't act, all his fighting would be for naught.

Take a deep breath.

Sing.

Sing with your entire soul, and make your rune shine.

Shine... and sing.

*

With his missiles spent and his railgun empty, enemy missiles started slamming into every part of Hayate's battroid. Mirage and Chuck were covering him as best they could, but their own survival, as well as protecting the city and Walküre, took precedence over guarding Hayate.

He had energy-converting armor, which took the surplus power from the engine and used it to strengthen and protect the Valkyrie's body, but it wouldn't last much longer.

It seemed like his battroid's arms and legs were about to get blown clean off.

His battle was over.

“Wait... that singing...!”

His face broke into an open grin.

He mustn't forget.

Freyja's song.

Freyja's singing voice rang out all across the battlefield.

And with the first phrase that echoed out, the Fifth Combat Squadron in their VF-171s regained their self-control.

*

It seemed to come almost too late but Kaname gasped at the girl Freyja's explosive power.

With the modulators destroyed, this was purely the girl's potential, and Kaname hadn't expected that.

"Not bad. I get it now. This is your reason for singing," Mikumo, standing next to Freyja, said with a fearless smile.

That's right.

It was time to grant Freyja her place in Walküre.

And Mikumo, and Kaname, and Reina, and Makina all began to sing.

Their harmonies billowed and undulated, clearing the Vár that hung oppressively over the battlefield.

*

Inside the cockpits of the fighters that Xaos were calling *Fafnirs*, the Knights grimaced.

Those savages had defiled the Knights' master and their master's song with their own wretched singing.

"Aerial Knights, all units: proceed to the second stage of the battle plan. The first stage has been completed successfully."

"Roger. White Knight and team, proceeding to second stage."

Hot on the White Knight's tail was the Valkyrie with the Grim Reaper emblem. The pilot's skills were impressive.

(I wish I were free to go after him and see how good he *truly* is...)

The gold-trimmed *Fafnir* accelerated sharply upwards and broke free of the planet's gravitational field, looking like a shooting star.

The other fighters followed. Yet they had not been defeated.

*

The Vár outbreak on Randall had been suppressed.

The infected people were back in their right minds, and because Delta Flight had shielded it, damage to the city had been kept to a minimum.

“We did it, everyone!” Hayate said as his battroid gave a thumbs up sign.

Chuck responded in kind, and even Mirage, slightly late, gave an awkward thumbs up.

Behind them, Walküre were still singing, and the crowd was listening rapturously.

Hayate's first battle had come to a successful conclusion... or so he thought.

(What's that...?)

At the edge of his field of vision, he noticed the *Fafnirs* in formation.

“Hey! Those guys... they're coming back!”

Tensing up, Delta Flight quickly readied themselves for combat.

What the enemy fighters did, though, surprised all of them.

They issued streams of smoke behind them.

It was an aerobatic move, just like Delta Flight. They were doing some kind of performance in the sky above the city.

Smoke also poured from the unmanned drones launched by the *Fafnirs*, and it coalesced into a giant screen hanging in the air. Projected on it was a terribly handsome man wearing glasses.

“I,” he said, “am the Chancellor of the Kingdom of Windermere, Roid Brehm.”

*

“It can’t be...” Freyja murmured, dumbfounded as she looked up at the screen. “Lord Roid...? Why...?”

She didn’t understand.

The mysterious Valkyries came from her own homeworld. And she could never have forgotten the face of her kingdom’s Chancellor.

“To all children of the Protoculture. We, the Kingdom of Windermere, along with the Great Wind, in the name of His Majesty King Grammier Nerich Windermere... hereby declare war against the New Unified Government!

Roid’s rune was shining. He was in deadly earnest.

And in that moment, Freyja Wion, and the people of Windermere, found themselves the enemy of earth... no, the entire galaxy.

The End
of Volume 1