

ENDING IN THE FRANXX

t. Deltafag



Fig 0 (2) : I give my time, not for /a/nons but for youuuuu

Disclaimer : This is supposed to be a poor fanfiction meant to replace the events of the episodes 23 and 24 of the show *Darling in the FranXX*. This is an autistic confluence of boredom, denial, and anger directed at said episodes, brought to you by "that autismo that wrote the lewd Ichigo/Alpha/Delta greentexts and always post about his lime-colored waifu. You know which one."

Read this at your own perils for your sanity, and only if you crave a *good ending*, or at least something more palatable than the platter of shit our two favorite dinosaurs got served at the end of their journey. THIS IS NOT FUCKING CANON. Unless you want it to be.

Fuck you, Nishigori. At least one ningen tried to rewrite the end of the picture book, and while it's probably bad fanfic-tier in the writing department, at least it's not intentionally a spat in the face of everything the show stood for and developed. My shit may be Twilight-tier, but at least it's not Astral Ocean-tier, you goddamn soulless bugman fucker hack. Yes, I am pissed. That's why I wrote this.

Forgive possible subtle english grammar mistakes plox, I am but a filthy frog legs-eating, wine-chugging, ESL surrender monkey.

Hiro really wasn't one to wake up in the middle of the night. Most of the time, he slept soundly and peacefully, drowning any kind of insomnia or concern in the arms of his loved one, forgetting any trouble in her silken embrace. But this night seemed to be different, as a very peculiar sound roused the blue oni from his slumber. Faint and inarticulate moans of pain came from his sleeping wife, who seemed to be caught in the throes of some unpleasant dream. Gently, but firmly, Hiro tried to wake Zero Tsu up, noticing with concern how her red skin and pillow seemed to be already stained in tears, and how her cries and moans of pain intensified. Now fully awake, he decided to take the matter into his own hands, slapping her face as she still writhed in her dream-like agony, crying for her Darling to come and save her from her torments.

Now Hiro was screaming for her to wake up, shaking her harder and harder as his own tears started to flow, unable that he was to save her. Suddenly, she opened her eyes, meeting his own gaze, burning blue with fear and concern. Her words were drowned by her cries and tears as she buried her face into Hiro's chest. Her short red horns were pressed against his skin, but he didn't care, his own physical pain losing all significance compared to her sorrow. His own eyes and horns were glowing lightly in the darkness of her bedroom, the only source of light in here at this hour of the night. A few long minutes passed, as Hiro was putting his heart and soul in the task of comforting his beloved Zero Tsu. She was his joy, his smile, his air, his everything. She was his other half, and for her happiness he would have gladly given his life – not that she'd let him do it, of course. Her smile would be protected, as long as he would stand with her.



Fig 1 : Hiro comforting 02, 2018

Feeling her ragged breath and chaotic heartbeat slowly coming back to normal, Hiro gently pushed Zero Tsu away from his chest, holding her at arm's length to have a better look at her. Even now, tears rolling and chest heaving, she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen, with her long pink hair and red skin.

- "What was that, Zero Tsu ? Looked like you were in pain...some nightmare again?"
- "That's...that's nothing, Darling. Just a bad dream."

Hiro's concern started growing. Many times before this night, his wife had acted with this kind of introverted secrecy. She still needed to lean on him for this kind of situations.

- "Zero Tsu, give me your hand, and close your eyes." he told her gently.

She did it instantly, her little red hand warm and nimble inside his own.

- "Now tell me what happened in this dream."
- "Dah...Darling, I don't want to worry you or...but..."

Her mumbling protestation was quickly cut short when Hiro kissed her. Her eyes opened again, seeing this warm, beautiful, sweet smile of his.

- " Don't worry about this, Zero Tsu. I'm your husband, remember? I'm here to help you carry your burdens. All your burdens."
- "O..Okay, Darling. I'll start."

"Everything had started when you tried to come for me, when I was in APUS. I saw flashes of you and the squad fighting your way to me against the VIRM soldiers, and Alpha giving his life to bring you to me. Or, at the very least, exploding after bringing you to me. When you came, you left my body on earth, and you physically connected yourself to APUS to find me and get me back.

In...in this dream, APUS wasn't just going to destroy VIRM and get Hringhorni back, it was going to fly into a suicide mission straight into their lair. Part of the klaxosaur ship you came in was also a bomb, that's hard to explain. When you came and connected to APUS, I tried to push you away once more, because I didn't want you to die with me. You still came to me and...and...."

Zero Tsu interrupted her recollection a few seconds, just the time to look at her husband and smile warmly.

"...And you still managed to convince me. That's funny, Darling : even in dreams, I can't resist you, and you knew it. Afterwards, we unlocked APUS' true power, and I became APUS. I saw my body, which stayed on earth, turn to stone as we destroyed the VIRM army."

- "Well, that's a bit weird but...You know what? Finish your tale, I'll talk later."

"After that, ancient klaxosapiens tech activated on Deimos and Phobos, the satellites of Mars, and opened a warp gate leading to wherever the heart of VIRM was supposed to be, to lead a sneak attack to their realm with the ship-bomb. We told our friends we had to go there and destroy them now and forever. APUS was going to accomplish its suicide mission whatever the costs. And the costs were our lives.

We promised to come back one day to our friends, and they went back to Earth. And then, we spent months, years, travelling through the void of space alone. I recall seeing flashes of the squad's lives on Earth, with them trying to survive and grow food. Kokoro had her baby girl, and Goro ended up seducing Ichigo. We stayed together all this time, and you were inside of me...well, inside of APUS, all this time, without ever moving, eating or sleeping."

- "So, I fused with you like a klaxosaur, right?"



Fig 2 : >implying he wouldn't love to spend two years inside his wife.

"Yes, Darling, exactly. And two years after we passed the warp gate, we arrived to the VIRM homeworld. But at the moment we arrived, they managed to break the bond between us, calling it a "shallow connection". You were there, but I couldn't reach you...your mind drifted away in the dark. They attacked us when we weren't there to fight by my side. Hringhorni severely damaged APUS, well me, and we both were left to die in space."

Hiro's hand pressed ever so slightly Zero Tsu's, feeling her own pain. He said nothing, however, as her tale didn't seem to be over.

"Meanwhile, on Earth, they seemed to notice something amiss with my petrified body, with Kokoro's daughter using Darling, a word she shouldn't know. They decided to pray around the statue, hoping to be heard whatever the distance between us and them. For a reason I can't explain, it was the thing that helped me focus on you and reach you in this moment. Together we managed to destroy the VIRM homeworld by punching the bomb inside of it and activating it by flying inside in Strelizia. I saw my body on Earth destroyed and turned to dust. I saw us die.

We drifted together, two souls linked in the void of space, as VIRM, still alive but without any souls in their paradise, vowed to meet us again at the apex of evolution. Hundreds of years after our death, we managed to reincarnate into new people on Earth. And then, I was...alone. Everything had been wiped out, all our memories together, all we ever did, say, or promised. Gone. And my last memory before I woke up was a vague feeling of deja vu when meeting with a young boy beneath a gigantic sakura tree..."

Hiro understood her story was finished, and he gently took her into another hug. Now he also understood why she had been in such a sorry state ; the dream in itself wasn't so bad, even if it was seriously weird by moments, knowing what really happened back then. But, as the blue oni embraced his red oni, he knew the last moments had been by far the most painful for her – losing their memories of each other was a fate worse than death, for both of them. It had happened once, many years ago, when both of them were kids. And where Hiro had become a husk of his former self, probably fated to kill himself, his then future wife, clinging to her residual memories of him, was becoming a callous and cold partner-killer, hellbent on finding her own Darling back.

- "Looks like a true nightmare, indeed." he told her, whispering into her ear.
- "Just...just hold me, Darling" she answered, shivering like a frightened animal."I

don't even know what's real and what's not."

– "It will be alright, Zero Tsu. I'm with you."

While comforting his red dino, the blue oni changed his position for a more comfortable one, gathering their blankets to wrap them around their united bodies. As he started gently stroking her lovely horns with his own, he had an idea.

– "Zero Tsu? Would you like it if I...if I told you what really happened in space? You really seem confused, so..."

Her gaze meet his own, and she lightly kissed his lips before whispering :

– "Yes, Darling. I'd love that."

She nestled comfortably in his arms, as Hiro started telling her his own story.



Fig 3 : *Greatest Love Story Ever Told. Ever.*

A few days at worst. That's what Nana and Hachi had told him about the length of their journey to Mars, and APUS. What was happening to Zero Tsu's body wasn't exactly clear : every now and then, her comatose body started showing new fresh wounds. None of those really seemed deep or grievous, but to Hiro, standing near her bed in the klaxosaur ship, there was no difference : each one of those injuries was one too much, and he'd have gladly taken them on him if he had that power.

The squad was there, too. Well, at least Goro, Ichigo, Zorome, Miku, Futoshi and Ikuno. Mitsuru had decided to stay on Earth with Kokoro, showing for once some kind of initiative. Not that a lone pilot could do much without his FranXX and partner, and staying with his partner would probably be the best for him.

Interesting fact, the last remnants of the Nines – Alpha, Beta and Gamma, had insisted to come with Hiro into space. "*We are warriors,*" they had said, "*and better die in battle in space than on an hospital bed.*" Exhausted husks of their former selves, the three pilots that had been part of Papa's first and foremost elite force were now dying without their esoteric maintenance. They were weapons of war, ill-suited for the peace that was coming. But anyway, Hiro wasn't going into space to wage a war against VIRM and their armies. He came for Zero Tsu, nothing more.

Those were the thoughts that crossed his minds in his first sortie in Alpha's repurposed M9 FranXX. The blonde and smug leader of the Nines had been quick to propose his help – and his FranXX – to Hiro, eager to give him a way to save his pistil. He had explained how him and his ilk, cloned from Zero Tsu's own cells and genes, were as skillful in every position, be it stamen or pistil ; and how now, with his saurification progressing faster than ever, Hiro would probably put too much strain on any human partner to pilot with them.

And now, when every P13 pilot would pilot with their partners, Alpha would pilot with Hiro and Beta with Gamma. At first, the idea of Beta and Gamma riding in their own M9 had been proposed, but with the death of Eta and Zeta, they would probably lose too much of their efficiency during the inevitable fights to come.

For now, Hiro was trying to enjoy Alpha's wild ride. This Nine didn't have alluring horns or pink hair, but by his piloting skill and style he was probably the closest thing to Zero Tsu when it came to pilot a FranXX. To Hiro's pleasure, riding the M9, even in the cold void of space, was really akin to piloting his own Strelizia. It was quick, nervous, powerful, efficient ; and where he would really prefer pilot the original, Strelizia was inside APUS now. As he tested the acceleration limits of the M9 in the void, he suddenly remembered something he had been told by his new partner.

- "Alpha, you said earlier you were Zero Tsu's clone, right?"
- "All of the Nines are", answered the young parasite with his usual smug smile, "or were." he completed, hoping Hiro wouldn't hear the faint note of sorrow in his voice. The wound caused by Delta and Epsilon's deaths still was recent.



Fig 4 : RIP little lime-flavoured waifu, forever in our hearts

- "So, does that means you're technically her kids?"

Alpha let out a really loud sigh, showing all the contempt he had for the idea. Probably a remnant of his long loyalty to Papa and APE's dogma...something that was now dead in the water with the treason of his master and the revelation of his alien nature.

- "I mean", he explained to his temporary stamen, "if you REALLY want to stretch the notion of parenthood, there is indeed something like this. However, don't expect us to change our attitude towards Iota or..."
- "Zero Tsu."

- "What?"
- "Her name is Zero Tsu", Hiro repeated with a voice colder than a winter wind. "That's how I named her. Remember, we don't have codes anymore, especially not those given by Papa. Not after what happened."

Once again, Alpha sighed with disgust.

- "Don't worry, Alpha. Once everything is over, your mother and I will find you a name..."

Back to the ship, Hiro was standing alone near the FranXX hangar. Now that the robots of the squad had been retrofitted for space, most of their distinctive points had been erased – except for the three M9s, which were already space-capable (just in case the Nines had to fight klaxosaurs in space) and devoid of all distinctive points. The late Werner Frank, also known as Dr. FranXX, had been an amoral asshole with an uncomfortable fetish for klaxosaurs, but he still had been a goddamn SUBARASHII-screaming genius when it came to his beautiful creations.

Now Argentea, Delphinium and Chlorophytum, instead of keeping their own weapons, were bearing M9-style magma spears. Would these reinforce their little group by giving them the appearance of a "true" team or would it deprive them from their hard-earned individuality? Only time would tell. Hiro smiled for himself when he saw, once again, the absence of Genista. Of course the black-clad mech wouldn't be there, Mitsuru and Kokoro were on Earth. And besides, such an heavy artillery piece wouldn't exactly be an asset in the cold and unfeeling aether between the stars.

The arrival of his blonde and fluffy current pistil took Hiro out of his thoughts about the missing FranXX. Alpha seemed dying from some unfathomable withering curse, but at least his ever-present smugness was still there. He was in his red pistil suit, a battle uniform which brought delightful memories to his stamen ; Hiro remembered vividly how Zero Tsu had the same when she had been assigned to his squad.

She was wearing it when Hiro had piloted with her the first time, when they had shared their first kiss in Strelizia's cockpit. She was wearing it when they had escaped together against their caretakers' orders, saving their squad from certain death during their first "true" fight against a klaxosaur. And she was wearing it during their third time, when Hiro had died, consumed by her stamen-killing abilities...just before willing himself back to life to protect his beloved partner in the heat of battle.

Snapping out of his daydreaming about his lovely Zero Tsu, he decided to listen what Alpha had to say. Fortunately, it seemed to be about her anyway.

- "You know, I always wondered...how did you tame her? I mean, don't take me wrong", he apologized, seeing Hiro's cold piercing gaze harden, "I know exactly how she was before she met you. And even if she seemed a bit...distant when we came to Mistilteinn to check on you, be sure it was miles and miles better than how she treated us before that. Trust me, you did the impossible."
- "You want to know the truth, Alpha? I'm basically one of the two human beings to have shown her a bit of love and affection despite her nature. And the other used to experiment on her to better understand her nature. I accepted her, I trusted her, I helped her. And she gave it back tenfold."

Alpha's smug expression was unreadable, as Hiro was once more falling into his "thinken of Zero Tsu" trance, gushing more and more about his partner :

- "The first time I met her, she was just a cute little red monster, and yet she was the only other free spirit I met in my years at the Garden. We managed to escape from the Garden, but we were captured, and our memories were wiped. She only managed to keep the memories of a Darling, and decided to spend her life looking for him – well, me."
- "So, you're the one she was searching for all those years? The one who gave her a name, and everything?"
- "Yes."

For a few seconds, Alpha was squinting at Hiro with a look of utter incredulity, unable to believe him. He then started laughing, in a sad outburst, as if the blonde pilot just discovered his entire life's purpose was a lie peddled by Outer Gods beyond understanding. Well, such a situation had happened, but a few days had already passed since.

- "Well, fate sure works in mysterious ways. That explains everything, though. Why you survived her, how you tamed her, and everything...wait one second. You said your minds were wiped, right?"
- "That's more...complicated, but I think she fell for me a second time during her time at Mistilteinn. Acceptance, affection, you know. When we came for the visit at the Garden and met you, she was becoming a bit colder, but I understood later she was just conflicted between loving me and searching for her original Darling. And then she tried to kill me...and while she did it, I got my memories back."
- "That's interesting. You know, as one of the Nines, I've known her for my whole life. Even as mere clones, we were supposed to be an elite guard keeping her from being killed, as Papa needed her for his plans for Gran Crevasse. And she was no more than a monster during her time with us. I'm sure she told you about the deal she made with Papa : killing monsters, becoming human. Never understood her fascination with being a lowly ningen...no offense, of course."

Alpha's remark had no answer from Hiro. *If only he knew.* Hiro's jet black hair were fluffy as hell, even more so than his current partner, but behind it his blue horns were growing each day a little longer. Seeing no reaction, Alpha went on with his memories.

- "And because she needed a stamen to kill monsters, she started riding with stamens. And killing them. Every single one of them was fodder, a necessary evil to bear for her, to unlock Strelizia's true potential and kill even more klaxosaurs. Three rides at most for each of them, and more than a hundred of them. I believed you may have met Code 081, the last one before you...the guy was a wreck after the first ride and was barely alive by the second one. Most of them didn't even last the whole third ride. And honestly, I don't know who she hated the most between us, her, and these stamens she had to kill to become human."
- "Sounds like a sad life" commented Hiro, who was, however, deep inside of him, comforted by the idea he was truly the only partner she had liked. And *loved*.

- "And then along came...you. The Messiah of the Garden, the chosen one, the *Darling*. I've been digging a bit about your past, when I met you with Hakase after the third ride. Did you know Papa wanted you to join the Nines at the time?"

Of course, Hiro didn't know, even if it seemed logical.

- "And, once again, the old man refused, so Papa didn't press the matter. Hakase's little experiment was everything that mattered. You know," he added with a smug smile, "we could already have been brothers in arms for months if he hadn't been so stubborn. You could have met the team, and everything, by now."
- "I don't think I could have been a very good Nine, Alpha." snickered Hiro with a bitter grin, remembering what happened during Kokoro and Mitsuru's wedding because of the elite team.
- "Thinking about that" told Alpha with a smile, "I still have something that belongs to her, her coat and hat from her uniform. Would you be kind enough to give it to her?"

Hiro pondered the question for a few seconds. He had always loved the conquering and dominant looks Zero Tsu showed with these garments, and the vast size of the coat had starred in more than a few fantasies about the two of them cuddling inside. On the other hand, it was a reminder of her dreadful past, and he knew his dear pistil to be somewhat ticklish about that kind of things. Still, maybe him giving it to her could make her like it more than before.

- "I will take it once she's back." he said.



Fig 5 : Mi General Code 016, *Le saluda su pueblo tan querido.*

Alpha seemed to be relieved for a split second, just before he started shivering in pain. His eternal smug smile replaced by a painful expression, he would have fallen to the ground had Hiro not be there to grab him.

- " Still in need of maintenance?" inquired Hiro, helping him to sit down as Goro and Ichigo were coming to them with a look of concern.

- "Meh, don't worry", snickered Alpha, still in pain. "At best, I'll probably be dead in two days. And seeing Iota's current state, any hope of using her for our maintenance is dead in the water. Let's hope I'm still alive when comes the time to save her."
- "Wait," asked Goro. "What do you mean by 'seeing her current state'? Is there a link between her and your maintenance?"

Alpha's smug smile was creeping back, the sordid situation he was in seeming amusing to him.

- "Well, no use in keeping you waiting, I guess. Our maintenance requires a blood transfer...with her blood. One of the reasons she hated it, I guess...as much as us Nines loath to admit it, we need her klaxosaur blood to survive."
- "Her blood or just klaxosaur blood?" asked Hiro, his eyes burning with a curious flame.
- "Nice try, Hiro, but I saw your blood results when we were at the Garden, and let me tell you, you're nowhere near the levels of saurification required to emulate her..."

Alpha suddenly stopped. Hiro had slightly moved his head, letting his horns, his deep blue horns this transformation had brought, shining through his head. An extatic, rapturous mask had replaced the blonde pilote's face. In these horns, he saw his salvation.

- "You...you are not joking, right? You would give him your blood?"

Ichigo seemed as much puzzled by the fact that he could do it, as she was astonished he would do it. Wasn't he, that pilot now dying, Papa's former main enforcer? Didn't his hand led APE goons to Mitsuru and Kokoro's wedding ceremony, leading to their dear friends being brainwashed? All in all, didn't his crimes warrant some kind of retribution? But to Hiro, Alpha wasn't just a criminal. He was literally bound by blood to Zero Tsu, as her clone, and, more important, his help would be necessary to save her. Alpha *had* to survive – and given how Zero Tsu was comatose and prone to spontaneous wounds, Hiro's blood would have to do it. Strelizia's stamen sighed, before looking at his dying pistil in the eyes.

- "Go get your brothers, Alpha. It's time for your maintenance."

Fortunately for everyone involved, Nana and Hachi had managed to install a few hospital beds and automated medical equipment in one of the rooms in the ship ; more, based on Hakase's notes and the urgency of the situation, they had finally greenlit the operation. Everything had gone smoothly, and the blood transfer had shown immediate results. Now the three of them were resting a bit before the final battle, their metabolisms trying to use their newfound maintenance to get back to work efficiently. Meanwhile, Hiro was staying with Zero Tsu, whose body, still comatose and covered in bruises and wounds, was still as profoundly beautiful as ever. He spent a few minutes changing her bandages and checking for new injuries, before just sitting by her side, interlinking his fingers with her own. Hiro fully knew her mind and soul were stuck inside the mountain-sized mech near Mars, probably suffering more inside the repurposed Star Entity than he did tending to her body. How long had they been separated? And how many times?

The first time, she had carved a path of dead stamens to get him back after their memories were wiped. The second time, he had killed his own tumor and had come back from the dead to protect her. The third time, he had rushed headlong into a deadly battlefield with only a training mech to protect him in hope to save her. The fourth time, she had faced VIRM monsters to join him inside APUS, about to explode back then, and had sacrificed her own life force to get him back. And now the fifth time, this one, he would be travelling to Mars, leaving Earth to save her from the threat of VIRM. It would be the last time. Nothing and no one would ever again part him from her side. He was so focused on her slow breathing that he didn't hear Ichigo and Goro entering the room, sitting besides him.

- "Still no changes?" asked Goro, a look of concern upon his face.
- "Not yet, thanks." Hiro answered, flashing a sincere smile to the parasites of the Delphinium. "How are you guys doing?"
- "Everything is fine, don't worry about us", said Goro. "I came here because...well, I had to apologize about what happened on earth, before we left. I shouldn't have hit you, that's not what friends do. Friends stand by each other, and we will stand with you, right? It's just...I was afraid."
- "Don't worry, Goro, you did nothing wrong" explained Hiro, looking at them without ever letting go of Zero Tsu's hand. "I was afraid too...afraid of a future without her."
- "You will get her back, Hiro" said Ichigo, a hand on his shoulder. "Like Goro said, we will all help you."
- "All together." commented Hiro with a faint smile, turning again his gaze upon his partner's comatose body.
- "Looks like our group even made it into space," added Goro, trying to change the conversation towards something less painful for his friend, "who would have thought?"
- "The last weeks' events have been chock-full of unexpected things, that's all we can say," remarked the horned stamen. "VIRM, Star Entity, the klaxosaur princess, Hringhorni, all that crap. Looks like fate has run out of reasonable ways to separate us and has decided to jump the shark in its quest to keep us apart. Hell, even the Nines are fighting by our side, now."
- "Well, about that...that was really kind of you, Hiro", said Ichigo. "They didn't deserve to die in such a painful way, waiting for a maintenance that will never come. There's no justice in this kind of fate."

Hiro looked at her, a strange light shining in his eyes.

- "I don't especially care for justice, Ichigo. If any of them can help me reach Zero Tsu, then sparing a bit of my blood to save them is totally worth it."

He was about to continue his pragmatic explanation when an alarm bell started ringing, calling for all parasites to come to the briefing room.

- " We better go, Nana and Hachi probably need us for the reunion", suggested Ichigo.

Hiro himself seemed very reluctant at the idea of leaving his beloved, letting go of her hand only after kissing her brow and whispering a few words in her ear. Would she hear them?

There was no way to tell.

The three of them were the last to reach the briefing room, every other pistil and stamen already ready to hear the information the two caretakers had to transmit. As Hiro entered the room, Alpha and his two brothers instantly kneeled before him, bowing their head to their now blood donor. Most of the marks of their sorry state had been thoroughly erased by his gift, and now they looked sharper than ever before.

- The remnants of the Nines are at your command, Hiro. Or should I say...Papa?" said their leader, whose gaze was showing a strange devotion as he spoke.
- "Hiro will do for now. Rise up, guys, the briefing must start." he answered, a bit embarrassed by such a display.

Hachi was still as emotionless as ever when he started explaining the situation changes, with Nana standing near him, ready to add any relevant information. Now APUS was only a mere hours away, and VIRM's fleet was standing between the ship and the gigantic work of works of Dr. FranXX and the klaxosaur race. There was no trace of Hringhorni or other APUS-sized enemies, but most of the VIRM troops around them were at least as big as the FranXX the squad used – with some, like the biggest ships, being around the size of a Super-Lehmann klaxosaur.

The objective was simple : get safely Hiro and his red-horned partner to APUS, and then hold the line until the mountain-sized creature destroyed all opposition, as it had done a few days ago on earth. Then, come back to Earth, feast and celebrate the return of Zero Tsu and the annihilation of VIRM. Simple enough, right?

Of course, this plan's execution would be trickier than expected, the biggest difficulty being the transport of Zero Tsu in one piece to APUS. Their robots were hardly designed with passenger space in mind, reason why both Ichigo and Zero Tsu had to travel in another FranXX' hand when the situation had asked for it – the first one to save Goro from a gigantic klaxosaur, the second one to save her Darling trapped inside Star Entity, who was then about to explode. But in the void of space, this situation would be extremely dangerous, and was as such rejected. Finally, the answer came from their ship's escape modules, which were large enough to fit a few people inside : its controls could be easily reached once inside, to offer a bit of mobility in space. It was decided the best course of action would be to strap this to Alpha's M9, use the squad's focused firepower to carve a path in blood, and escort it to APUS...then protect it as Hiro, getting into the pod, would penetrate APUS with Zero Tsy. Alpha would probably be weakened by the ordeal, but the others would be there to help him until the planet-busting creature woke up and worked its magic on VIRM's helpless troops, unleashing the apocalypse on the unlucky aliens.

Now the last questions had been taken care of, and each of the parasites was going to prepare for their last mission. For a few moments, Alpha and Hiro stood before their M9, looking at the escape pod – where Zero Tsu had been sedated and strapped to the walls for her safety – being affixed on the mech's backpack. The thing was sturdy enough to survive to what VIRM would unleash upon them, or at the very least Hiro hoped for it. He couldn't afford to be wrong. Not this time.



Fig 6 : Look at this cutie and tell me you wouldn't share your blood with him to save him from AIDS.

- "Ready to go, Alpha?"
- "To hell and back, Hiro, to hell and back."

And so they had taken off to the empty, frozen void that lied between the stars, feeling the weight of their mission upon their shoulders. Would they manage to survive, and vanquish their foes here? Or would their remains litter the place for untold aeons to come? There was no way back without victory. These thoughts echoed inside Hiro's mind as he soared at the tip of their formation, pushing the M9 to its limits to reach his goal faster. Even with their burden, the FranXX seemed lighter, stronger, more powerful than ever. Was it the newfound strength of Alpha, or the trust they had built together, sharing their blood and their memories? A few dots appeared on the control screens of the cockpit, and Hiro's lips stretched on a joyless smile. Enemies were here : he could at last unleash its frustration. He opened the comms, transmitting his instructions to the squad – which tried its best to maintain the formation.

- "Enemies incoming. Chlorophytum, to the rear. Delphinium, Argentea, guard the flanks. Beta, with me. We stay together, APUS in 4 minutes if everything goes right."

The four robots, in perfect harmony, rotated around Hiro, as a well-trained elite guard ready to take on anything. The Darling was so focused into his goal he nearly forgot to ready his weapon before reaching the bulk of his swarm of enemies. He shattered the first foe in his path with his massive spear, neatly cleaving through the torsos of three others with the same lightning-fast movement. Less than a second later, the second M9 joined him into the fray, helping him and Alpha clear the path towards APUS. Zorome's war cries echoed through the comms as Argentea's blows, in mighty spinning arcs, pushed away the tide of monsters in a whirlwind of fury. Chlorophytum sprayed with energy shots everything that hadn't been destroyed by their work, and Delphinium, in its habit of working with this kind of weapons, showed once again preternatural accuracy on the battlefield, each of its strikes destroying at last one of their enemies, often more. Second after second, they managed to go deeper inside the horde of VIRM creatures, which despite their strength were no match for the five FranXX. In the distance, APUS could be seen, towering over even the biggest ships around. Hiro's movements towards it were mechanical and without any heart, all of his thoughts focused on the package he had to protect until the colossus, and the girl sleeping inside. At first he had thought destroying these monsters would help him vent his frustration, his pain and his regret, but now exterminating them was becoming a chore...and yet still something he was very good at, as his next blow severed the spine of his target and cut clean the head of another. The ranks of their troops seemed to be thinning, dozens of them cut down in the

blink of an eye.

- "No need to stay there. Breakthrough in 15 seconds" barked Hiro before witnessing another painful sight : some ships of the VIRM forces had started to use bigger weapons on APUS, focusing on it now, and not on the klaxosaurs fighting by his side. He opened the comms again, a bead of cold sweat rolling on his forehead : "Once we get there, full focus on the ships."

It was time, and Hiro send every ounce of the M9's power to the thrusting engines, bolting towards APUS at breakneck speed, like a mistletoe arrow launched by an angry god. In a dozen seconds, they were out of reach of the swarm of goons, alone somewhere between the ship and APUS. The nearing klaxosaurs, those who had left the planet with Star Entity, made no effort to antagonize them, seeming to understand why these humans were there. For now, their friends were lagging behind, their own FranXX unable to match the sheer power of Hiro's deep connection and his piloting skill.

- "Alpha, do you think we can destroy a few of these ships before the others arrive?"
- "Heh. If we're together, of course we can."

The familiar sentence by a foreign voice brought a second of regret to Hiro, who nevertheless managed to once again send the M9 into a fury of annihilation, passing through the nearest ship like a cosmic shell through a sheet of paper, and continuing through two others, the rampage near equal to what he had unleashed at the battle of Gran Crevasse.

- " Oi ! Are we there to destroy their ships or to save Zero Tsu?" crackled Zorome's voice through the comms as the rest of the squad was slowly coming into position.
- "With those still firing on APUS, the rescue mission would have been more dangerous. Let's clear the field before rushing into anything too soon..." growled Hiro, more angry at the immature manlet's suggestion than he'd like to admit.

How did he dare to suggest his Zero Tsu wasn't the first and only thing on his mind at every waking moment? Fucking Zorome and his pleb-tier code number, seriously. As to give a bit more weight to his orders, the klaxosaurs around had followed his example and rammed into the VIRM ships like he had done, without any regard for their own safety and survival. One after the other, the main artillery pieces were all disabled by the heroic suicide of the klaxosapiens' livings weapons. Nice.

- "In position around APUS, all of you." ordered Hiro before joining again his friends near the giant thing.

Miles and miles and miles of metal and unfathomable insides, the child of the klaxosaurs' bonds, perfected by Werner Frank into this shining beast. Such a feat should have taken hundred of years to complete, maybe more. And yet, APE had completed it in a matter of months. Hiro started equipping his suit, letting Alpha direct his FranXX near the entry of the titanic klaxosaur. Once ready, he motioned his temporary partner to eject him, which he did with a smug but courteous martial salute.

Space was cold, and it was empty. But at least, Hiro could move in it, thanks to the rudimentary jet pack he had brought with him. He managed to grab the escape pod behind

the M9, letting out a sigh of relief when he saw it still intact. The security airlock made no difficulty to be opened, and Zero Tsu, still sleeping in her sedated state, seemed indemn enough. Only a few minor injuries had appeared, which Hiro took the time to treat quickly before jumping to the commands of the pod. However little these wounds were, they still seemed deeper than the previous ones – probably the work of the ships attacking APUS, harming her due to her connection.

- "Hiro to squad, about to disengage. You know what to do."

The commands of the pod were intuitive enough. After years of being an elite pilot, he was now operating something neither APE nor Hakase did design, something which came from an ancient, now extinct civilization. Still, he felt some kind of proximity with the million years-old technology...was it due to his horns, his eyes, his blood, all those features setting him aside from the ningens since he started riding with Zero Tsu? Maybe, maybe not. He was a few dozen meters away from the entry point when a few dots shone on the command panels, informing him something was coming. He looked at the thing once. He shouldn't have.

It was big. Very big. Eight times the size of a FranXX? Ten times? Built like the little – in comparison – VIRM robots, this creature was no doubt a worthy challenge for the team. However, anything was now in the hands of the group, and Hiro focused on the task at hand, cutting the comms to avoid being distracted by their possible grueling fate. Not that he didn't care about them, of course...but none of them were Zero Tsu. Each second to get to APUS seemed one too many, especially looking at his partner, who was now awake but still dazed and glassy-eyed, like deprived of her mind.

- "Don't worry, Zero Tsu, we're...nearly...there..." he whispered between his teeth, pushing his ride to its absolute limits before hitting APUS' hull.

They were there. In a sonorous clinking sound, both the escape pod and the colossal FranXX seemed to recognize each other, unsealing their doors to let the passengers enter : the way to the heart of APUS, and Zero Tsu's return, was now near. Hiro was about to succeed where she had succeeded, days ago : saving her.

Gently, he started removing the ropes and bindings tethering his loved one to her spot, before helping her getting up and guiding her towards Strelizia, deep inside the biomechanical titan. His stride was fast and happy, while his partner, always holding his hand, was slower and showed signs of confusion.

- "That won't do, Zero Tsu...Forgive me for this time." he apologized sincerely to his pink-haired girlfriend, before taking her into his arms, carrying her like a prince would carry a princess.

Was it stress affecting his strength? Did she lose so much weight during her days as a hollow husk of her former self? Did his strength increase that much in this time? Remembering how she had been able to accomplish incredible displays of physical prowess, none of these hypotheses was to be rejected outright. In a surprising moment of consciousness, she wrapped her arms around his neck as Hiro went on to find Strelizia.

Meanwhile, Mitsuru was planting cabbages and Kokoro was vomiting into a bucket for the second hour straight. The more time passes, the more the idea of an abortion, proposed by their new Nana, seemed interesting. After all, why would you want to raise a child in this barren world? And why should they stay so attached to a cluster of parasitic cells inside Kokoro's womb when they had no memories of even making him in the first place? But, still, the idea of Kokoro being the first teen mom in centuries seemed interesting too, and the prestige attached filled Mitsuru with delusions of grandeur.

At long last, Strelizia. The sight of their old familiar FranXX made Hiro's heart miss a beat, and for once Zero Tsu seemed to take interest into something. Jumping from his arms, she started running toward the cockpit, climbing the gigantic nerves of steel linking it to the rest of APUS. Happy to see her move at last of her own accord, Hiro started following her. Even integrated into the structure, Strelizia recognized her pistil and stamen, and opened eagerly at the contact of Hiro's hand, letting both of them assume their position. Nothing happened. No flash of suddenly recovered memories, no flow of power burning his body, no sudden screams of pain from his partner. They stood there for a few seconds, Hiro's stress and pain and fear, which he had managed to keep at bay for the last few weeks by focusing on her rescue, were now coming back magnified, amplified to levels nearing madness. Slowly creeping in his mind, a simple thought threatened to overwhelm him.

You have failed her.

Hiro clumsily got down of his seat before kneeling before Zero Tsu, still unresponsive, and taking her in her embrace, breaking down in tears. Everything he had done? For nothing. Coming here, near Mars? Useless. Tending to her body, treating her wounds, trying to find a reason for her state and...

A reason for her state. Her horns.

Even if he couldn't save her, at least he would know one last time what happened of his beloved. Without caring about the length of his horns, which were now standing more than six or seven inches out of his jet black hair, he took Zero Tsu's face into his hands, looking at her empty eyes. Whispering a crying apology, he closed his eyes and pressed his blue horns against her little red horns.



Fig 7 : Highly illegal horn-bumping. Darling's horns are under his beloved fluffiness.

He was falling in the dark. The fall was long, unbearably so. Was there something around him? Was there something around him *at all*? He felt like his presence in this palace, this unfathomable abyss of darkness and silence. He was defiling this place just by falling through it.

Something touched his mind. It was ancient, very ancient. An entity so overwhelming, so immensely vast, so deep and powerful this simple contact nearly manage to scatter Hiro's mind like leaves in the wind. But his love, his affection, his burning obsession for Zero Tsu shone there, brighter than any sun, than any star, than any light in this god-forsaken world. Like marked with a burning brand, the cyclopean thing retired, letting Hiro's soul anchoring itself to the little bubble of safety his reality-warping love had created here, in the belly of the beast. Around him, the thing – Star Entity – seemed patient, almost curious. It seemed to understand and respect the sheer power of love Hiro was projecting. But everything, its curiosity, its patience, its understanding and respect, all was for nothing if a mere touch was enough to shatter his being and destroy his soul. Nevertheless, Hiro persisted.

He had seen many things in his life. He had broken a red monster out of her cell and promised to marry her. He had drank her blood and saurified to the point he couldn't be called human anymore. He had died twice, coming back to stay with her both times. He had travelled to the stars to save his wife-to-be from APUS' grasp. He was ready, and he wouldn't be denied.

Not without a fight, so insignificant was he in front of this antediluvian Thing.

What love had wrought, let no God put asunder.



Fig 8 : Now THIS is waifufaggotry

Focusing exclusively on Zero Tsu, at the exclusion of anything else, he lunged into the hivemind that was Star Entity, letting his faith and love show him the way towards his partner. Around him, still no hostility could be felt ; in fact, the presence was reminding him of the Klaxosaur Princess, late leader of a fallen race, the one who had stolen a kiss from

him and revealed the truth about the invaders from beyond the stars. In their tense conversation inside APUS, he had felt her determination, her loneliness, her devouring hate for VIRM, who had been the ruin of her people. And ultimately, her death had helped Zero Tsu take him out of the trap VIRM had laid for them.

"And yet you still managed to do nothing with my sacrifice"

- "Hime?" asked Hiro, sincerely surprised to hear her voice, echoing around him as if he was standing in the middle of a huge cave.

"Our child knows what you did, you know. He knows how many of our kind you have slaughtered, and how you managed to give him to mankind so they could shape him into this form. And yet, you bear no hate for our kind, and you did more to stop VIRM and save our planet than all of your pitiful race put together. Even though you could have stayed on Earth, you came here, in the void of space, to help my kind with our crusade against the invaders. You were born a ningen, and yet with each passing day you're closer to our people. You are an enigma, child. Now tell me : why are you here?"

One name was Hiro's answer, beamed into the mind of Star Entity with such force that the hivemind around him shivered like jelly, its very integrity threatened by this intensity.

"So you came here, not to destroy VIRM, but to save the life of this...fake? This creation of the ningens, a bad copy of our ancient race? I may have misjudged you, and yet...you have potential. Be sure of one thing : Star Entity does not part easily from its souls, and this one's sins are many and terrible. What would you be ready to sacrifice for her to come back? Your life? Your soul? Your humanity?"

- "Alright, Hime" spoke Hiro, relieved to have someone to negotiate with. "Tell me what Star Entity wants for the safe return of Zero Tsu's soul inside her body."

"For both of your sins against our kind, killing them and giving our enemy control over our child, none of you shall be human anymore. You will join the rank of klaxosapiens and share our blood for the rest of your life."

- "No offense, Princess, but what does that entails? Blue skin like yours, horns, telepathy? Physical changes, right? Because if that's your price, that's not exactly a problem, and I gladly accept." explained Hiro, trying to understand his situation.

"None of you shall be able to rear childs with human beings. And yes, your transformation will be completed. Even though the fake will probably end up with red skin...I still can taste the work of that SINFUL MAN upon her existence."

- "Alright. That said, I thought you said you klaxosapiens lost your fertility..."

"Are you deaf, ningen? Our brethren who changed into living weapons, the klaxosaurs, those lost their ability to create new life. Our civilization was mighty and powerful, did you think we could accomplish so much by being infertile?"

- "Sorry, sorry." apologized Hiro, waiting eagerly for the next part of the deal.

"Now, to prove one last time your loyalty to our cause, Star Entity ask for two things. The first one is the weapon they made with the cores of our brothers – their accursed spear of life. This thing must be given back to our Earth, it can't stay in the defiling hands of VIRM. And the second one is the annihilation of VIRM."

- "I won't leave for a years-long crusade inside APUS to purge the galaxy from Papa and his ilk, if that's what you're asking for. However," he added when the princess' seething mind seemed about to explode with a furious stream of insults, "I'm ready to go and destroy all of those who are here."

"Alright, you goddamn ningen. Destroy every VIRM fiend you can find in this battle, and your debt is settled. Do we have a deal?"

- "Looks like we do, Hime. Thanks for this proposition, I'll never forget about your help."

As soon as these words were said, he opened his eyes, suddenly back to Strelizia's cockpit. In front of him, Zero Tsu was waking up from her state. Still crying, he gently nuzzled her horns with his own, which had become downright massive, and felt a spark of shared love and pure affection pass between them. She was coming back, Star Entity had kept its part of the deal. Reddening, alive at last, Zero Tsu opened her eyes, to meet Hiro's, shining blue with love, in a face which was turning light blue too. Once again, this was a story of reunion, and the blue oni had found his red oni at long last.

- "Dah...Darling is that you?"
- "I promised to get you, Zero Tsu..." he said, tears of joy rolling upon his cheeks.
- "I...I missed you so much, Darling...I was there, in the dark, and...wait. Why are you blue?"

Hiro smiled through his tears, choosing to embrace her one more time instead of talking about his deals and negotiations. They would have so much time to talk about it together. Hugging her tightly, he just kissed her cheek before whispering :

- "Do you remember the end of the picture book? With the princess leaving to avoid killing her beloved, and the prince leaving to find her? Well, in *this* story, the prince made a deal with a witch, forsaking his title, his realm, his humanity, to become like his princess, and at long last be reunited with her..."
- "And now your prince is with you, Zero Tsu."

Meanwhile, outside APUS, the situation wasn't really good. One of the biggest VIRM soldiers, though a mere bug compared to the klaxosaurs' masterpiece, had decided to interfere with the squad's mission. Hundreds of meters tall, sleek and nimble and ready for war, he had attacked the squad mere seconds before Hiro's escape pod had managed to reach APUS. Four FranXX, including one with only one (1) parasite inside, against an enemy

about ten times their size. The situation was dire, to be honest, but for now the P13 group and the two M9s seemed to manage it pretty well. Their constant hit-and-run tactics were useful in these situations where a single blow from their enemy would probably destroy everything on its path. Dodging yet another deadly swipe before bolting to attack another engine, Goro started thanking fate for Kokoro's pregnancy. Without it, Genista would probably be there, and the black mech really wasn't one to rely on speed, nimbleness or piloting talent. Kokoro's baby had probably saved her life.

The more time passed, the more the squad was hard-pressed to dodge every single attack, especially when lesser enemies stopped trying to damage APUS to try and take them down instead. The first one to stumble had been the Chlorophytum. Earlier, during their assault on the VIRM-infected Star Entity, Ikuno had pushed it to the absolute limits of its innate potential, sacrificing most of her life force to overload the FranXX' guns and create an opening for Delphinium. No one really understood what had happened and how, as the only true expert had been crushed under a gigantic boulder. Futoshi was a good pilot – better at least than Zorome and Mitsuru, and maybe at the level of Goro – but even he couldn't do the impossible when Ikuno suddenly lost consciousness and fell from her piloting station, her white hair still deprived of any kind of color.

- "Ikuno !" screamed Chlorophytum's stamen, feelings the commands as unresponsive as the lass on the ground.

He quickly jumped to her side, checking her pulse, her breath, anything that could imply his pistil wasn't dead. She was still breathing slowly, her heart was beating, but she wasn't conscious.

- "Ikuno ! Ikuno, wake up, goddamn it ! You know I need you ! IKUNO !"

The feeble and frail parasite opened her eyes slowly, and Futoshi sighed with relief, before trying to get her up.

- "I'm...I'm so sorry Futoshi. I can't go any further."
- "What ? Of course you can ! You're the stronger girl I know ! Here, take this" he said, giving her a pastry he had smuggled in Chlorophytum, "you need to eat for your strength to go back. Here, open wide !"
- "You don't understand, do you?" she whispered, fighting even to breath.
- "I...I just understand that you're my partner, Ikuno. I need you to fight. I need you...to live !"

What could he say? That since she had entered his life as her new partner, he had found more and more joy in piloting a FranXX? That thanks to her support, her calm and silent companionship, her skill as a partner, he had, maybe, grown into someone better?

That...could he even think about it...he started *liking her*?

That in a way, she had replaced Kokoro in his heart as his rightful partner and most precious pistil in the world?

What could he say? Ikuno, his Ikuno, was dying now. Tears filled his eyes as he embraced her for the first and last time, the cockpit around them crumbling under the colossal grasp of their enemy.

No one knew the intimate workings of a Nine's mind, except maybe Hiro, as his partner and wife was once part of the elite team under the code of Nine Iota. So no one knew what happened to Nine Alpha, their leader, when he saw the VIRM giant manage to grab the paralyzed Chlorophytum. Did he feel a pang of regret at the snuffed lives of two ningen? Did he remember the scream of agony of his brethren, Delta and Epsilon, mangled by VIRM on Earth days ago?

Whatever the reason behind it, the titan never managed to close his fist to crush the winged FranXX like an egg. Mainly because, sending his own M9 like the hammer of a god, Alpha had separated his hand from his arms, cleaving through his wrist in one fell swoop, saving his two battle-brethren from a painful and messy death.

- "Chlorophytum, is everything alright?" he asked, his usual smug replaced by a cold anger.
- "Chlorophytum here, Ikuno is in a bad state. I don't think we can go on like this." answered Futoshi, using the emergency comms.
- "Alright...Beta, Gamma, prepare to extract them. Delphinium, Argentea, I need you to get me back once I'm over with this...*monster*."

Alpha's natural leadership was seeping into each one of his commands, and the second M9 was already hauling Chlorophytum back to the ship when came the first question from Zorome :

- "Wait, you're going to fight it alone?"
- "I'm not going to fight it, Code 666. I'm going to *destroy* it."

Without letting Argentea's stamen protest about his bragging, Alpha had started to pray. But what the hell was this prayer of his, really?

- "I am the tip of His spear." he recited, his tone full of some kind of warlike devotion.
- "I am the edge of His sword !" roared back Gamma and Beta without missing a beat.
- "I am the steel around His fist !"
- "I am the hammer of His fury !"
- "I am His voice and His weapon, I am His son and His soldier, I am His right hand and the instrument of his will. My spear is hatred, my armor is disgust, my shield is contempt !"

While screaming his insane catechism of battle, the blonde pistil had managed to get near the head of the thing, dodging his stump with precision and velocity. As he embraced his neck, he concluded, in a whisper :

- "In Papa's name...*let none survive*."

The blast of light produced by the explosion blinded the parasites of the two nearest FranXX, Delphinium and Argentea, at least as much as the revelation the blonde and fluffy Alpha, the one who had led a division of soldiers to interrupt Mitusuru and Kokoro's wedding, the one that had once called Ichigo a *Yamato Nadeshiko*, was no more. Revelation

that lasted at least seven seconds before his voice, much calmer than it had been before, came once again from the comms.

- "Delphinium, Argentea, time for you to extract me. My ejection point is near the rubble that once was its head."

Of fucking course Alpha had a plan. He wasn't the kind of guy to jump headlong into suicide just because some big guy needed to be destroyed. Thanks Hakase for the ejection command of the FranXX, still. Argentea had no qualms against the idea of carrying the pod, but another problem had arisen in the meantime : though the biggest one had been taken care of, the swarm was now coming back, like smelling blood in the water with the defeat or destruction of two mechs out of five. As APUS had shown no sign of awakening, for VIRM, these earthlings who had left their blue planet to wage war to their cosmic hegemony were an easy prey. Their overconfidence was nevertheless blasted to pieces, literally, as the creatures were subjected with what looked like a full-on offensive from behind.

- "Don't worry, children, Hachi managed to find the weapons control systems on this ship..." explained Nana over the comms, reveling in her role of busty Deus Ex Machina coming to save the day. "Now get on board, no need to stay here."



Fig 9 : Nana in a pistil suit, her smile protected at last.

The team was overflowing with joy as the thought of the two heroic caretakers jumping into the fray all guns blazing to help, and as the broadsides managed to blast the creatures by dozens, everyone regrouped inside the hangars of the massive ship. A quick debriefing ensued, after Ikuno was rushed to an hospital bed. Alpha himself was alright, only a bit shaken by the autodestruct move, which was a baller move he seemed to be proud of. Hiro had managed to enter APUS with Zero Tsu, and now their long-term survival was depending on him reactivating the apocalypse machine. For now, the speed and maneuverability of their ship was more than enough to keep a reasonable distance between them and the army of VIRM ; the FranXX, which had been needed to get Hiro quickly, were no longer needed, and the parasites could rest a bit. Futoshi was keeping company to Ikuno, Zorome and Miku kept bickering to no end about their piloting styles, and Alpha, Beta and Gamma seemed mostly keeping to themselves. Although they had now fought side by side with the Cerasus squad, they were not yet comfortable enough to reach the "teammates" stage. Well, there

was a bit of that with Hiro, but Hiro *did* give them his sacrificed, DINOSIZE'd blood...and even then, they spoke more of him as a messiah, some kind of new Papa destined to throw out the old one like the Young King of the legends of yore.

Meanwhile, Goro and Ichigo looked from the windows towards the vast, empty fields of space, where only the occasional explosion troubled the quiet night around them. Despite all the pain and devastation who had took place here, near Mars, the unlimited reaches of outer space was, in a way...profoundly beautiful. Absorbed in the contemplation of this infinite field of stars, Goro suddenly felt his partner's tiny hand, nearly the hand of a child, joining his own to hold it. He looked for a second at Ichigo, before smiling lightly. Even if they died today, at least they would be dying together, best friends until the end.

- "I remember you and Hiro used to talk a lot about the stars when we were younger", said Goro, "but I guess there wasn't much time for stargazing back home."
- "We did it once, when we went to the beach, after Zero Tsu officially joined us. We even got to see shooting stars."
- "I see...", he snickered. "Hey, isn't that Orion, over there?"
- "Where?"
- "Here."

Goro lowered himself so that his head was at Ichigo's level, his cheek against hers, before taking her arms and pointing it towards the hunter constellation. They stayed a few moments like this, Ichigo's finger slowly drawing the shape of the cluster of stars while her stamen just enjoyed their proximity, delighting in their contact and in her faint smell of strawberry.

- "That's funny, you know," he whispered. "Hiro told me once he had named one of these stars like you."
- "Yeah, the Ichigo star...what of it? Why is that funny?"
- "I always wanted to ask him why he only did it with one, when you deserve so much more..."

Goro had knew Ichigo for years, being one of her closest and oldest friends along with Hiro, and yet he had never saw her so red and so embarrassed in her whole life. Not even the day Nine Alpha, during their meeting at the Garden, had kissed her hand in front of the whole squad.

- "Jeez, you stupid flatterer. Did you eavesdrop on Hiro wooing Zero Tsu to say such corny stuff?" she managed to say, hiding her large smile behind her hand as Goro got up.
- "Damn, I knew I shouldn't have listened to his tips !" he answered jokingly, before seeing her expression darkening. "Don't worry, I'm sure he'll be fine out there." he added to cheer her up. "He's with his partner inside the biggest, baddest, most powerful FranXX ever created. If there's one thing that can destroy these monsters and be back to Earth for dinner, that's APUS with the two of them inside."
- "I know, I know. Besides, we can't rely on Hiro to solve all our problems. We need to act by ourselves. Rely on each other, too." she said, coming closer as he put his arm across her narrow shoulders.

"Speaking of Hiro, I think you were right to apologize to him. He was right to go to space, but not in wanting to go alone. You were right to tell him off, but you were in the wrong when you hit him."

- "So what? Nobody's right and nobody's wrong?"

Ichigo sighed, before looking at him with a strange light in her gaze.

- "Truth, right and wrong, there's more to us than that. You showed him how much you cared for him as a friend when you apologized. And you showed me how much I needed to apologize to you."
- "There's nothing you need to apologize for, Ichigo..." he said, before she cut him off.
- "Oh yes there is. About how I never...gave you an answer. To what you told me, that day after you ejected me from Delphinium and saved my life. For weeks, months, I stayed focused on Hiro, until the Gran Crevasse battle. And then...it's only after talking with Ikuno that I understood how much you meant to me. After what happened to Mitsuru and Kokoro, I knew I couldn't tell you anything, so I waited. I waited until there was a moment, the right moment to tell you, after APE, after VIRM, after everything, but..."

She looked lost, broken, on the verge of tears. And yet, looking at his shocked face, she concluded.

- "But there's no better moment than this, right? Both of us, near Mars, waiting for our friends to wipe out this threat...Goro, I...I think I love you. No, I *know* I love you."



Fig 10 : Guys, is Ichigoro canon yet?

As she had done with Hiro so long ago, before VIRM, before APUS, even before Mitsuru and Kokoro's wedding, she tried standing on her tiptoes as much as she could to kiss him, but even with the heels of her suit, the height difference was too much ; Goro, as such, decided to solve the problem by lifting her in the air with a surprising strength, for a long overdue and heartfelt kiss. They went on for delicious seconds, their tongues fighting and intertwining as they stood there, eyes closed in their own newfound paradise.

Hiro was far away from her thoughts now, Ichigo only remembering him for the soulless, incompetent side of their shared kisses. Zero Tsu had been right, in that day near the beach : kisses are something you only share with your loved one. And Hiro...as much as she had

loved him, Hiro never loved her back – whereas Goro was passionate, burning with a fire covering her lips in ecstasy, his hidden and caged love now blossoming like a flower of devotion to his very own strawberry. Both of them were crying with joy now, the salt of their tears adding to the flavour of their love.

They could have stayed there for an eternity, maybe more, but every pleasure of life comes eventually to an end, especially when equality-preaching aliens were involved. As such, a mere minute had passed before a loud blast and an alarm siren getting off tore them away from this shared dream.

- "Ichigo, Goro, we need you for the briefing, the situation changed !" screamed Zorome from the other side of the room. "Wait", he added, suspicious, "were you guys pressing your bodies together too? Does that mean you will get preg-something like Kokoro, Ichigo?"
- "Piss off, you moron" answered the squad leader with an angry look upon her face. "What's the deal? Did APUS wake up?"
- "See for yourself"

-
- "That's a big ship."

Miku was right. The thing was a big ship. About 50 km long, if the sensors were right. It was probably the only thing in this space battle that wasn't utterly dwarfed by the might of APUS. Like everything else fighting under the banners of VIRM, it's nature was clearly alien, with purple bits everywhere. The thing was coming near their position, coming from behind them, from the deepest reaches of space. Its form, however, seemed oddly familiar to Alpha, who had seen something like this, once, take off to the stars with the VIRM leader after APUS had reduced their entire expedition fleet to ashes and cinders.

That was no ship. That was the spear of life, the *Hringhorni*.

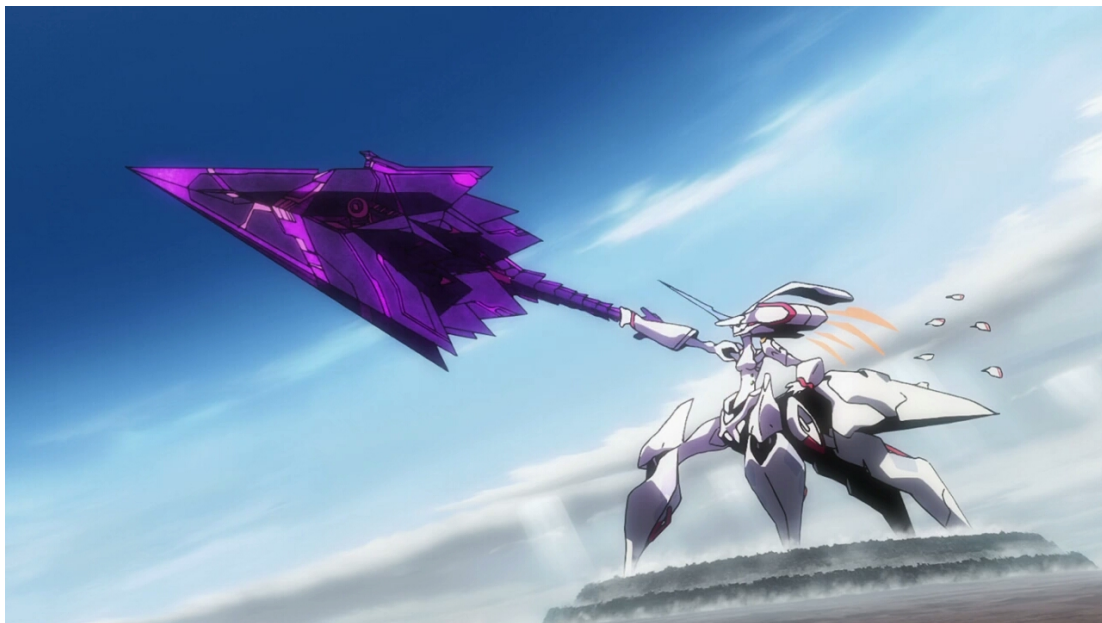


Fig 11 : Remember when I told you APUS was about 40km high?

None of them knew what it could do, to be honest. Even Hachi, who had been tasked to inform the Dr. FranXX about the progress made on its creation, had no clear idea about the depth and breadth of its destructive power.

- "I suggest we return to APUS. I don't know about this thing, but the army outside doesn't seem too bad, compared to this..." proposed Alpha, shaken by the thought.

Nana and Hachi went back, her to the controls, him to the weapons systems, and once again the ship went forth to APUS, engines, shields and weapons alike roaring as they made their way toward the VIRM swarm. To reach the repurposed Star Entity, they had to take this leap of faith and hope to make it alive. An agonizingly slow minute passed, as the ship tried to make it through said purple swarm, blasting them away with desperate fury.

Looking at his blue-haired partner, Goro asked :

- "Ichigo, do you think we should make a sortie and kill a few of them ourselves? It would take a bit of heat off the ship..."
- "You're right, once again," she answered, before starting to give her orders. "Beta, Gamma, go get your M9. Zorome, Miku, to Argentea. Goro is right, we need to kill them before they slow us down."
- "I suppose there's nothing to do for me, then..." muttered Alpha, and his snide comment went unheard by the rest of the squad.

A few seconds later, he was alone with Nana and Hachi in the control room. Futoshi was still taking care of Ikuno, and Alpha couldn't help but feel a bit of satisfactory *schadenfreude* thinking about the time she had slapped him in front of both their squads. Truly, there was no feeling like saving an old enemy just so he had to be reluctantly grateful. But had Ikuno even been an enemy? A girl unable to control her nerves, at best, and an inconvenience at worst. Thinking about her, once again, brought him the painful memories of the times when all his brethren were still alive. The playful and inquisitive nature of Delta, the chill and steady demeanour of Epsilon, the silent and deadly skill of Eta, Theta and Zeta...now all these moments together were lost in time, like tears in rain, and all that due to VIRM. Would he find peace at last one day? Well, at least Beta and Gamma were still alive, but for how much longer? These thoughts haunted him as he watched the other FranXX going for their sortie, one lone tear rolling off his cheek like a gift to his fallen brother and sisters.

Meanwhile, Goro and Ichigo were taking place inside Delphinium. Just as his partner seemed to hesitate, the tall stamen took her hand, lightly kissing her without a word, before taking her in a bear hug.

- "Don't worry, everything will be fine."

Her doubts temporarily washed away by the embrace, Ichigo seated herself in the pistil spot, Goro adjusting his glasses one last time while stealthily ogling her behind. What did Hiro told them, once? That parasites were better off being a bit pervy? Well, that and being in love had made him into the best parasite the world had ever seen, so that was an advice that could be trusted. Smiling, Goro closed his eyes and initiated the connection process.

This was no mere connection. For a second, the waves of their souls crashed into each other in a merging of terrifying intensity. There was no telling where each of them was beginning or ending, no way back after this mindmelding where Ichigo and Goro were a single entity, their two hearts beating as one. Opening his eyes, united to his partner, Goro felt his inhibitions crumble, a power surge coursing through his veins and Delphinium alike, shaping them both into something greater, mightier, more powerful than ever. This was probably what Hiro had felt during the Gran Crevasse battle, when he had reunited with his love and made a mockery of the klaxosaur forces defending the place, blowing up its lid in what could be described as an orgy of genocidal violence. So this was the power of love. Not bad.

In a flash of blue light, Delphinium had...evolved. It wasn't the exultant transformation of Strelizia, who had changed to a deep red in a love-driven slaughter of klaxosaurs, winning (as always) the battle by itself. Moreover, the black coating of Delphinium was too opaque to let any changes underneath be seen. And yet, the FranXX was shining with a newfound inner light, a hidden power its frame seemed unable to contain. Of course, despite the knowledge something greater had happened to them, none of this was known to Goro and Ichigo. Well, until Miku and Zorome started screaming over the comms.

- "Oi oi, what are you doing, Ichigo?"
- "Delphinium is shining like a star !"
- "Whatever you guys are doing", Beta commented smugly, "be sure you're ready to kill."

And oh boys they were. Argentea and the M9 were lagging behind, astonished by the sheer power the Delphinium was now putting in its swift strokes and dodges. Their magma spear was everywhere, shattering any VIRM soldier who dared to stand against it. This slaughter had something of an untold perfection, a dance of death, a whirlwind of precise hits that left no enemy alive. Or, at the very least, intact – more than living beings of flesh and blood, they were alien creations, monsters whose true nature was a mystery for the squad. Well, at least their destruction by Delphinium or Beta's M9 was easy enough, as they were no match for the skill of the Nines or a good dose of the power of love.

Argentea, though, had problems. Despite the recent upgrades the FranXX had recently received, it had never been a really good mech. And neither Zorome nor Miku had ever been really good pilots to begin with. Still better than Kokoro, or Mitsuru, or classic run of the mill brainwashed APE soldiers – but compared to Delphinium or Chlorophytum, their skills were somewhat lacking. Worse, now that Ichigo and Goro seemed engaged in a Strelizia-like rampage bordering on genocide, and that Beta's M9 was protecting its rear, Zorome and Miku felt more and more isolated from their friends, and finally decide to focus more on staying near Delphinium than trying to one-up them in this massacre. They still made due, though, holding the line and killing, killing, killing.

But at least, during this time, the ship was now drawing closer to APUS. How much time had passed since Hiro entered the klaxosaur-made titan? Half an hour, maybe more? If only...if only the gigantic thing could come back to life and..

"This is futile. Everything is futile. You lost, humans."

This voice...it couldn't be...



Fig 12 : Welcome to paradise, I shall be your guide.

And yet it was there. A shining, star-shaped, gigantic being of pure energy. In its center, purple like everything VIRM had created, two masks showing, as much as its two voices, the dual nature of this creature from outer space. That was the being that had been known as Papa, the Chairman of the Seven Sages and of the Lamarck Club, the founder of APE and former ruler of mankind – which he had "liberated from the cages of their bodies" for the most part. A cosmic vampire, spiriting away entire civilizations into its "paradise" of a hivemind, conquering by force what it couldn't get by ruse and deception. It was the bearer of VIRM's will, and the greatest threat mankind had ever known.

"You are trying to protect Star Entity from VIRM, when VIRM desire only to protect the universe from its power. We can give you peace, equality, and order. We can offer you paradise, but this being cannot be allowed to exist if it is not under our control."

No response ever came from a ningen this day. Not because Ichigo and Goro were too focused on the killing – and on each other – to care. Not because Gamma and Beta couldn't honestly be considered as true ningens. Not because Zorome and Miku, exhausted and in difficulty, had no time for this shit. Not because Futoshi was still with Ikuno, Alpha taken back to his younger days by a sudden flashback and Nana and Hachi focused on the controls.

Not for any of those reasons. But because APUS' answer had been far more eloquent than everything that could be said or done. Hiro had made his pact, and now him and his beloved had awakened the beast, which reacted to the VIRM army with fire and fury like the red planet nearby had never seen. Opening its mighty arms as to dare the purple space invaders to attack it, APUS revealed the immensity of its power. Untamed. Nuclear. Wild. Red and blue markings were now spanning its entire length, proving the control the oni couple had on it. A few seconds later, they were glowing with renewed energy as hundred, thousands, hundreds of thousands beams of energy of the same colors struck at the same moment, each one of them erasing a part of VIRM's army. Soon, nothing was left of it, except Hringhorni, standing alone on the battlefield.

- *"And you shall know his name is Papa when he'll lay his vengeance upon thee..."* whispered Alpha on the ship, exalted and transfigured by the display of superiority Hiro and Iota...Zero Tsu...had unleashed on this split second.

Now Beta's M9, Argentea and Delphinium were standing alone in a field of molten rubble, which had been a powerful army ready to dismember them – or at least ready to try – half a minute earlier. Ultimately, this army had proven its irrelevancy before the might of APUS, like flies in front of a god.

- "HIRO ! ZERO TSU !" shouted four voices at once, Beta and Gamma snickering a bit but still feeling too cool for this.

Back on the ship, Alpha was still in ecstasy before the proof of superiority of the new Papa on the old one, Nana was letting undignified squeals of joy, and even Hachi, still looking at his screens, showed a sincere, warm smile for about a second before coming back to his old emotionless self.

However, Papa was still there. His ethereal form hadn't budged, and he seemed to gaze upon the scene unmoved and calm, as if everything that had just happened, down to the complete and utter destruction laid upon his troops, was part of some mystic master plan, a grand scheme leading to his inevitable victory. A few seconds later, he spoke again, projecting his voice everywhere despite the very laws of physics governing the void.

"None of them had any importance in the eyes of VIRM. Only counts the order and peace we are there to restore. Both Hringhorni and Star Entity will be ours, and peace will come back to the universe."

Suddenly, APUS' face changed, its mile-wide face plate now separated in two parts. Both were showing the features of a classic FranXX, in the eyes and mouth and general form, but where the right part was blue, the left one was red, like some kind of strange Jian-theme mech, showing the profound beauty of their union to the rest of the world. At the junction of their parts, the gigantic horn of APUS was now glowing with energy, focusing it on a sphere of untold power as they started speaking to the now army-less leader.

- "There is nothing for you here, you monster. Your toys are dead, your army is no more. Leave the spear of life, and be gone from this place. Go back to your 'paradise'."

"Do you want the Hringhorni? VIRM shall honor your wish."

How fast could the spear of life, created under APE's orders from the cores of defeated klaxosaurs, to be APUS' weapon against the universe, go and strike a target? A few weeks ago, when it had taken off to space with VIRM's army, Hiro's efforts to restrain it with APUS had been pointless against its speed and power. So, pretty fast. The beam of red and blue energy hit it with full force, managing only to slow it a bit, and so even though the two onis had pushed most of their power in this crushing offensive. They could have tried to dodge it, but APUS wasn't Strelizia. It wasn't a nimble FranXX with a magma spear, built for speed, dexterity and overwhelming power. It was a slow and sturdy weapon of war, with enough energy to snuff out the stars and burn the heavens to ashes – and as such, their tentative failed at the last second, the tip of the spear lodging into APUS' torso, penetrating its skin of metal like a bolt of lightning made material. Both Hiro and Zero Tsu screamed,

and over their screams the old Papa spoke again, his two voices uttering in succession his victory speech over the two annoying parasites.

"We learned from our mistakes, Code 016. There was a time you and your partner were able to disrupt our plans with your...shallow connection. No longer shall it be the case. We *will* take control of Star Entity, and once this is over, you will join us in paradise. There is no heroism. No resistance. No denial. Only acceptance."

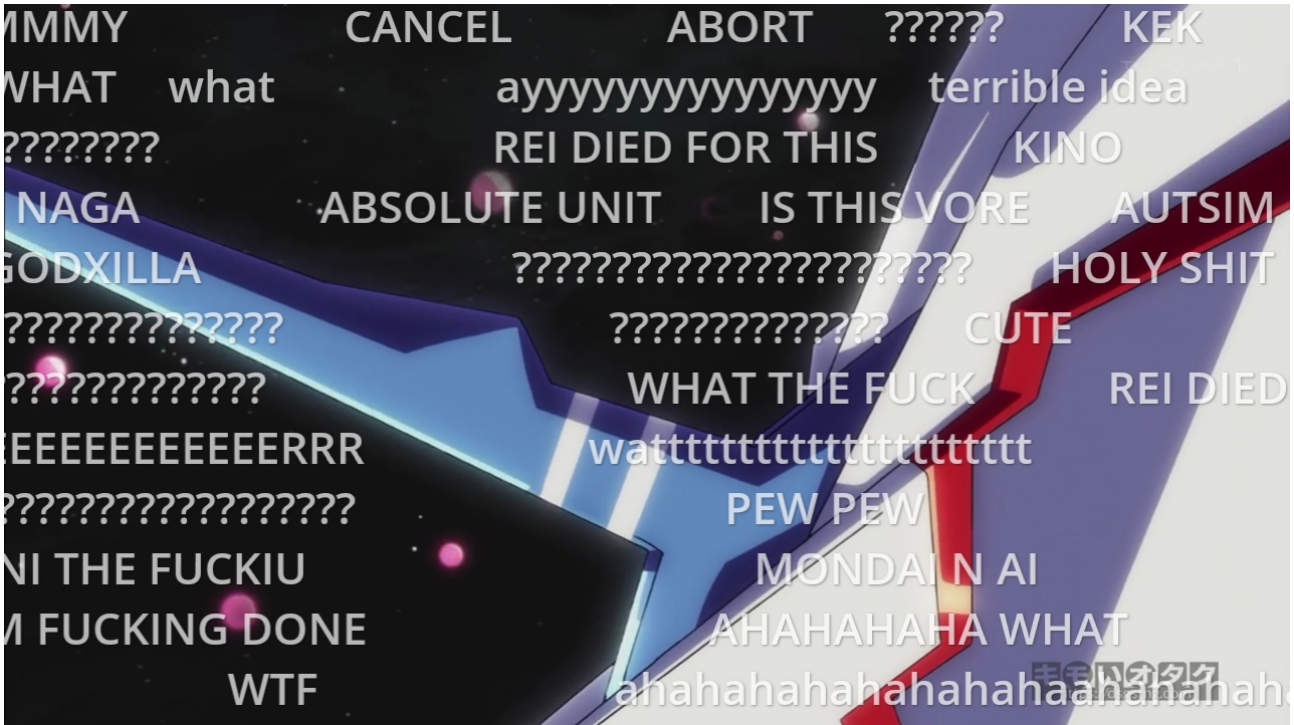


Fig 13 : Hey, at least this time there is no Warp Gate. For now.

EPISODE 23 : WHAT WE DO FOR LOVE