

小説 機動戦士ガンダム

# 水星の魔女

高島雄哉 [原作] 矢立肇・富野由悠季

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Mobile Suit Gundam  
THE WITCH FROM MERCURY



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MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM  
the **WITCH** from **MERCURY**

**1**

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### [WORLD]

**Ad Stella:** The name, signifying "To the Stars," marks the Space Era, established after humanity's expansion into the cosmos.

**Spacian and Earthian:** The inhabitants of space are called "Spacians," and the inhabitants of Earth are called "Earthians." The economic disparity between these two camps has widened with the growth of space industry, producing division and strife between Spacians and Earthians.

### [COMPANIES]

**Vanadis Institute:** An organization researching the body-function augmentation technology known as "GUND." Though it was conducting research with the goal of assisting the human body in a space environment, it repurposes the GUND technology for military applications, in return for funding received from the mobile suit manufacturing company Ochs Earth.

**Benerit Group:** A major conglomerate in the space industry and the leading force in the mobile suit industry.

**Three Branches:** As of A.S.122, it refers to the three major companies within the Benerit Group that have achieved outstanding performance: Jeturk Heavy Machinery, Peil Technologies, and Grassley Defense Systems.

**Mobile Suit Development Council:** An organization formed for the sake of mutual cooperation in mobile suit development. Its members include the CEOs of mobile suit manufacturing companies such as Jeturk, Peil, and Grassley. It regards the GUND Format's adverse effects on the human body as a dangerous threat.

**Shin Sei Development Corporation:** A mobile suit company on Mercury, to which Prosperia belongs. They are responsible for developing the mobile suit "Aerial," which Sletta pilots.

**Cathedra:** An auditing organization under the umbrella of the Mobile Suit Development Council, whose purpose is to maintain order and ethics in the development of mobile suits. Delling Rembran serves as its supervising representative.

**Dominicus Unit:** Originally a special forces unit belonging to the Mobile Suit Development Council. As of A.S.122, it is now under the direct control of Cathedra.

## [SCHOOL]

**Asticassia School of Technology:** A higher-education facility run by the Benerit Group. It is made up of specialized piloting, mechanical, and management strategy departments. A recommendation from a company affiliated with the Benerit Group is a prerequisite for admission.

**Student Number:** This consists of three elements identifying the student's year of admission, department, and personal number. Third-year students are designated as "K," second-year students as "L," and first-year students as "M." The piloting department is "P," the mechanical department is "M," and the management strategy department is "S." The personal number is determined by the hierarchy of the recommending companies. Suletta's student ID number "LP041" is made up of "L" for her admission year, "P" for the piloting department, and "041" for her personal number.

## [TECHNOLOGY]

**Mobile Suit:** A colossal humanoid machine that far exceeds the size of a human body. Pilots board the cockpit inside the unit. The pilot suit and cockpit seat are physically connected through attachments.

**Permet:** A metal compound refined from the organic complex of the element "Permetnium," discovered during the lunar development era. It possesses the property of information sharing among Permet particles and is used in various space-related technologies by mixing and controlling Permet as materials or propellants.

**GUND:** A body-function augmentation technology which uses Permet. "GUND Format" is a system which uses GUND technology for military applications, and a mobile suit equipped with it is called a "GUND-ARM."

## #0 Prologue

### **Where is thy lustre now?**

From William Shakespeare's "*King Lear*"

**[FRONT]** A huge artificial living facility constructed in outer space. These are built with asteroids as their foundation. By rotating the entire structure or specific sections, artificial gravity is generated, enabling long-term habitation for people.

# 1. ERICHT SAMAYA

In the pitch-black void where not even stars dare twinkle, one is forced to acknowledge the solitary existence of self. The intensifying cadence of one's breath fills the world in an immersive rhythm.

— *Thrall to LF-03. Restarting Permet link connection test. Three, two, one.*

The voice echoes in the helmet

The cockpit of the mobile suit known as the LF-03 is shrouded in darkness, with the faint glow of the control system the only source of light, casting an ethereal glow on the pilot. Yet, their face and their emotions remain obscured by the visor's gleam, a mystery to the observer. This is a moment that requires no individual sentiment, no melancholy. The pilot is focused on the test.

— *Interconnect established. Currently on layer 31. Please commence calling.*

The pilot answers the voice as it's heard again.

"Understood. Commencing call to layer 31."

Following the operator's instruction, the pilot pulls the trigger of the control lever, a literal call to the machine's system.

— *No abnormalities detected in GUND Format. Connect to layer 32.*

"Calling layer 32."

The monitor indicates that layer 32 had been cleared.

— *Callback confirmed. Connect to layer 33.*

Suppressing their anxiety, the pilot's finger is poised on the trigger. Up until layer 32 had been cleared some time ago. However, progressing beyond layer 33 was somehow an insurmountable challenge.

Ironically, the number "33" has come to be a detested figure, although it holds no significant meaning beyond its place in the sequence.

"Calling layer 33."

Pulling the trigger grip with their right hand, the pilot leans forward.

However, the main console flashes an error.

The information is shared with the operator, who issues instructions with detached efficiency.

—*Error. No callback. Fall back to layer 10.*

The pilot pulls the lever again but to no avail. Their control movements become increasingly violent. The error message repeats.

“Calling from layer 10 to 33 again.”

—*Error. No callback.*

Not again.

“Calling layer 33.”

—*Error. No callback.*

No matter what, it cannot be cleared.

Running out of patience, the pilot speaks out, "LF-03 to Thrall. Requesting increase in GUND Format score."

—Negative. That's contrary to the test objective.

“We don't have time. Executing now.”

—*Hold on!*

The pilot attempts to pull the lever again.

An instruction comes from another terminal. The voice is decidedly older than either the operator or the pilot.

—*Elnora. Let's end for the day.*

The pilot is unable to ignore that voice.

Elnora, as the pilot is known, halts her grip momentarily, but unable to give up entirely, she attempts to argue.

"I'm not yet in the dangerous range. Let me increase the level and test layer 33--"

—*That's enough, Elnora.*

Elnora Samaya's body jolts slightly at the slightly heightened voice. Inside the visor, she accepts the instruction, biting her lip.

“Yes, ma'am.”

With Elnora's voice, the panoramic monitor switches to external view mode.

Inside the hangar, dozens of staff members are bustling around.

Operators and mechanics are giving instructions.

"Test concluded. Begin analysis of Permet influx values."

“Yes, start maintenance on the Lfrith as well.”

“Understood. Beginning analysis.”

“Detected any abnormal fluctuations?”

“Look for tremors before the fluctuation.”

As Elnora releases the lock on her helmet, the cockpit lights begin to fade.



Next, the hatch in front of her opens, and she takes off her helmet and takes a breath.

"Phew..."

Her sweat hung in midair. This was a zero-gravity environment.

Weaving through the staff, a figure moved towards the cockpit. With an ease that spoke of familiarity with zero gravity, they lightly touched down at the cockpit hatch.

"Don't get too worked up."

It's the person who reprimanded Elnora earlier.

Elnora looks up.

"Dr. Cardo."

"If you can't clear this, then no one can."

At the words of Dr. Cardo Nabo, Elnora answers while looking down.

"We need to prove the soundness of the GUND Format as soon as possible. Otherwise, the council will..."

Elnora's grip tightens on her helmet.

The council refers to the Mobile Suit Development Council. It was composed of CEOs from various mobile suit manufacturing companies, and its influence was immense.

Cardo watched Elnora intently.

"Our success won't mean a thing if you're crippled for life."

"But—"

"Besides, someone's here to see you."

Cardo shakes her head and gestures outside the cockpit.

"What?"

As Elnora lifts her face, she hears a voice.

"Mommy! "

A young child floats towards her as if swimming in the air. To avoid getting hurt, she is wearing a pink rabbit-shaped cushion on her back.

However, the child loses her balance midway and drifts off in the wrong direction.

"Mommy! Oh, ah, whoooooa!"

"Eri!"

Elnora leapt from the cockpit in surprise, kicking off the hatch.

"Whoooooa"

Eri - Erich Samaya's body starts to spin out of control. Unlike Cardo, Eri hadn't yet mastered the skill to move their body in zero gravity—or in a gravity environment, for that matter.

"Eri!"

Elnora reaches out with both hands and manages to catch Erich.

Ericht giggles.

"Mommy! Daddy's waiting for you too! Let's have cake together!"

"Haven't I told you that you're not allowed to come here?"

Elnora scolds Ericht, but she doesn't listen and looks to the side.

"Is she still sleeping?"

Elnora followed Ericht's gaze.

Before them stood a white mobile suit—the Gundam Lfrith.

Mechanics were swarming all over it, beginning their maintenance work immediately on the various sections.

Reminded of her failed test by her daughter's words, Elnora was filled with gloom.

"Yes. You're right."

Ericht, noticing her mother is upset, talks to Lfrith.

"What a naughty girl. It's time to rise and shine."

Just then, a voice is heard from Elnora's terminal. It's Cardo.

"Lfrith is still an infant."

"A baby?"

When Ericht looks, Cardo is standing on the hatch, touching her microphone.

"Yes. She doesn't even know how to turn over in bed. She's the child of all the staff members here. Now, your mommy is trying to teach her all sorts of stuff."

"I see... Then I'm her big sister!"

Ericht looks at Lfrith.

"How old are you now, Eri?"

Researcher Nyla Bertran asks from the scaffold in front of the Lfrith. Next to her is Wendy Olent, a fellow researcher who also served as a test pilot.

When asked her age, Ericht shows the number with her right hand. The gloves of her infant spacesuit are like mittens, with the fingers all bundled together except for the thumb, so it's hard to tell how many there are, but her every gesture amuses all the staff, including Nyla.

And then Ericht exclaimed joyfully.

"I'm four!"

This artificial living space, created in a small asteroid floating in space, is called a "Front." The name of the Front where Ericht lives is taken from "Fólkvangr," the domain ruled by Freyja, the goddess of love, beauty, fertility, and war in Norse mythology.

A live broadcast of the news was streaming on the hangar monitor, though no one was watching.

Footage showing a significant number of Gundam Lfrith Pre-Production Models being carried into a spaceport, then switching to the Earth headquarters of their manufacturer, Ochs Earth Corporation, was being displayed.

As the news anchor spoke, images were shown on the screen.

"As of the 20th, the Front 3rd Autonomous Sector has approved a budget to purchase Gundam-type mobile suits manufactured by Ochs Earth. Ochs Earth's weapon system has raised major concerns regarding bioethical issues for its pilots, and the accountability of the company, as well as the Mobile Suit Development Council, has been called into question."

A commentator nodded and made a comment.

"Originally, the GUND Format was a medical technology meant to assist with physical dysfunctions caused by the space environment. However, when the Vanadis Institute, the lead researcher on the project, was acquired by Ochs Earth, the GUND Format was repurposed for military mobile suits. Physical damage to its pilots due to data storms then emerged as a problem."

Various applications of the GUND were displayed on the screen, showcasing prosthetic arms, legs, and even more extensive mechanisms intricately connected to the body. An agreement was reached, and the representative of Ochs Earth, the acquiring party, and the representative of the Vanadis Institute, the acquired party, shook hands. Next, footage of people undergoing treatment in beds was shown. Connected to life-support machines, their eyes were vacant, and their gazes unfocused.

"Just imagine. An 18-meter-tall giant frame moving with non-biological mechanisms, controlled by forcibly linking it to a human body. The burden placed on the pilot must be immeasurable!"

Throughout the commentary, the Gundam Lfrith Pre-Production Models continued to be transported into the spaceport of the third autonomous sector of the Front.

Cardo's research facility was medium-sized, and the staff residences were in the artificial gravity section.

In the living room of the Samaya family, decorated for a birthday party, Nadim Samaya was watching the same special news program. His work clothes bore the company logo of Ochs Earth. Nadim himself was an employee.

The commentator continued.

"The recent mobile suit buildup may provide Earth with an excuse to expand its military and accelerate tensions between both sides--"

Nadim's face visibly showed his displeasure.

"Say all you want about our products."

Today was his beloved daughter's birthday. This was not the time to be watching such a program. He turned off the TV with the remote control, and in the darkened screen, his reflection could be seen. He wore an apron and held a remote control and a plate in his hand.

The sound of the front door opening was heard, and he turned around.

"Daddy, I'm home!"

Ericht energetically leaped into the room.

Nadim put down the plate and remote control and welcomed Ericht.

"Welcome back."

Elnora also entered the living room.

Nadim took his daughter into his arms and spun her around.

"Kya-ha!"

Ericht was overjoyed. The room was decorated with "HAPPY BIRTHDAY" signs and lines of origami rabbits.

Seeing the party decorations, Elnora said, "This looks great. I'm sorry you had to do everything."

"It's fine. Eri helped out too."

Nadim smiled at his daughter.

"I did this part myself!"

"You're amazing! It looks so pretty."

Ericht looked pleased being praised by her mother.

Nadim put his daughter down on the floor and said, "Eri. Why don't you go show Mommy your birthday hat?"

"Right!"

Ericht energetically ran into the back of the room, and both parents watched her leave with smiles on their faces.

But Nadim noticed that Elnora seemed to lack her usual energy.

"Layer 33 again?"

At Nadim's question, Elnora involuntarily looked away. However, she quickly put on a forced smile.

"If I don't clear that soon, it'll mean trouble for everyone."

But Nadim felt responsible as well.

"I'm sorry. This wouldn't have happened if the higher-ups weren't in a rush to roll out the Lfrith."

"We needed a sponsor, anyway. You helped us, Nadim."

"I just hope the council will stay quiet until the deadline."

## 2. COUNCIL

Elsewhere, influential corporate executives from across the cosmos had assembled on a different Front. They were convening the Mobile Suit Development Council.

"The press conference is in one hour," the young Vim Jeturk informed, prompting the CEO of Jeturk — Vim's father — to curl his lips into a smirk.

"This is the end of Ochs Earth. This is what happens when Earthians get presumptuous."

Sarius Zenelli remained cautious.

"Hopefully, it'll be as easy as you say. We don't know if Dr. Cardo Nabo will comply."

Echoing Sarius, the other CEOs murmured their agreement.

"But are you sure this is okay? We may be overstepping the bounds of private enterprise..."

"You say that at this stage of the game?"

From behind Sarius, Delling Rembran interrupted the conversation, triggered by the word "overstepping."

"What's wrong with overstepping them?"

Delling's tone was assertive, and the participants began to murmur, casting sharp glances toward him.

"We're not asking for your opinion, Delling."

Even after being singled out by Sarius, Delling continued unperturbed.

"Once those guys at the Vanadis Institute complete their Gundam, it will be too late. As the Mobile Suit Development Council, we must make a decision. So that humanity can remain in peace, we must wield the hammer of witches."

The party was just about to begin, with a cake placed in front of Ericht.

Ericht, the star of the show, couldn't contain her excitement.

She stood on her chair and chanted, "Cake! Cake! Cake!"

"I'm putting in the candle lights now."

But as Elnora moved to light the candles, her hand fell limp with a mechanical whir. The candle light fell onto the table.

"Oh, my," said Elnora.

"Mommy?"



"Sorry. Give me a moment."

Elnora rolled up the right sleeve with her left hand. Her right arm was a mechanical prosthesis — a GUND. With practiced movements, she removed the arm, swapped the built-in unit, and recalibrated it.

While watching her mother's arm, Eriht said, "Your GUND always stops working, Mommy."

"Yes. But without this technology, Mommy wouldn't be alive right now." Elnora smiled at her daughter. "So Dr. Cardo is my teacher who saved my life."

On the room's shelf was a photo of Elnora and Dr. Cardo.

Eriht's face broke into a smile.

"Granny's awesome!"

"Eri!"

Nadim gently scolded his daughter.

Laughing, Elnora successfully lit the candle this time.

"Dr. Cardo isn't one to fuss about what people call her."

"Even so, that's rude. She's a prominent figure in GUND theory."

As Nadim said this, a call came through on his terminal. Seeing Nadim's expression quickly cloud over, Elnora grew anxious.

"Is that from headquarters?"

Nadim nodded, addressing his daughter.

"Just a moment, Eri."

"Whaaat!"

Eriht pouted as her long-awaited birthday party was interrupted. Nadim couldn't resist her adorable expression.

"Daddy has work."

"Sorry."

"No! I want to cut it now!"

Even after Nadim had entered his room, Eriht continued to protest, her cheeks puffed out in indignation.

Leaving the living room and entering his darkened room, Nadim — hesitating at the sound of his daughter's voice — closed the door and responded to the call from headquarters. The face that appeared on the monitor was a coworker of Nadim's age, Yamaoka, working at their Earth headquarters, dressed in a suit and tie.

"What's wrong?" asked Nadim.

"The council is holding a meeting now." Yamaoka's voice was somber.

"But it's not even the deadline yet!"

Nadim started up his computer, placing the terminal on the desk and fitting the earpiece.

"It was Delling. He's behind this."

As soon as Nadim heard that name, his brow furrowed intensely.  
"That ex-military guy?"

"We don't know what he'll do. You be careful too."

At the same time, the mid-size transport ship, Begavent, was approaching the spaceport. The guidance lights of the port illuminated, and communication from the control room reached its bridge.

—*Fólkvangr to transport ship Begavent. Control 173.*

"This is Begavent. Communicating with 173. Distance to gate entrance is 22."

—*Course confirmed. Please enter through Gate 3.*

At that moment, near the control room, a person in a spacesuit approached the base of a large parabolic antenna installed on the surface of the small asteroid.

The device they held was connected to the antenna, and some kind of program was unzipping on the screen. Soon, the system infiltration was complete, and the entire communication functionality of Fólkvangr was disabled.

As the operative looked up, their helmet visor reflected the image of the transport ship perfectly.

Two Gundam Lfrith pre-production model prototype units were also stored in Fólkvangr's hangar.

Nyla, in one of the cockpits, called out to Wendy from outside, holding a drink in her hand.

"The ship's here! Come help me move, Wendy."

While organizing data in the cockpit, Wendy complained.

"Tariff rates have increased so much recently. It's pissing me off."

Ochs Earth Corporation, being of Earth origin, had been forced to comply with favorable deals for the Spacians in many situations. This was a source of discontent for Wendy.

Nyla spoke to Wendy in a comforting tone.

"Transportation isn't free, you know?"

"The Spacians are monopolizing it unreasonably."

"I'll treat you to something after this. Come on."

Nyla skillfully squeezed on the container, causing a portion of the drink to fly towards Wendy. Wendy gobbled up the droplet of drink that had formed into a sphere in front of her.

"That's cheating."



Wendy laughed awkwardly, troubled by Nyla's antics. Wendy, who tended to be negative about many things, always found her composure disrupted by the cheerful and dependable Nyla. But Wendy enjoyed their relationship like that, and it seemed Nyla felt the same.

The two of them leaned against each other and headed towards the cargo loading.

"I found it, Eri! This is the one, right?"

In her hand, she clasped a short fork meant for children. The very one Ericht had wanted, the one she'd been searching for all along. But there was no reply. In the living room, only the birthday hat Ericht had made lay discarded.

"Eri...?"

Ericht was in the research dock, unaware of her mother's concern. Her gaze was fixed upon the quiet, imposing form of the Gundam Lfrith.

"Just wake up already!"

Ericht shouted at Lfrith.

"Daddy and Mommy... Everyone only cares about you! It's supposed to be my birthday today!"

With a flail of her limbs in frustration, Ericht spun in a dizzying whirl.

"Ah, ah..."

Ericht clung to the mobile suit in panic.

— I'm sorry about that.

That voice seemed to echo from the Lfrith, at least to Ericht's ears.

Startled, Ericht looked at Lfrith. But its eyes were dark, their depth unfathomable.

The hatch of the cockpit opened, revealing Cardo. It was Cardo's voice.

"Granny!"

Relieved, Ericht leaped towards Cardo.

Cardo kicked down the cockpit's ramp and scooped Ericht up into her arms.

"You came here alone again? Didn't Elnora say you're not supposed to?"

"But..."

Pouting, Ericht cast a resentful glance at Lfrith. Inside the cockpit floated tools that Cardo had brought in.

"Is this child important to you too, Granny?"

"She is."

Cardo answered without hesitation.

"Why? Then you don't care about the other two over there?"

Her tiny finger pointed towards the neighboring dock. The "two" Ericht referred to were the two blue-grey units, the pre-production prototype models of Lfrith that Wendy and Nyla were working on just a while ago.

While looking up at the towering white mobile suit – the Gundam Lfrith, Cardo said, "This one's special."

"Special?"

"In order for you, your daddy, and your mommy to live in space, you need to have an adaptable body and not a weapon like this."

Cardo stared straight at Lfrith.

"Lfrith is the future of GUND that we're aiming for. She is a new door that will open up new possibilities for humanity."

"I don't get it."

Ericht made a confused face.

"Then, do you want to try talking to her?"

"Okay..."

With a sly smile, Cardo guided the increasingly bewildered Ericht into the cockpit.

Only Cardo – or perhaps not even she – knew what she was thinking or whether it was just a whim. Regardless, Ericht found herself climbing into the cockpit of the Gundam willingly.

As Ericht took her seat, the spacesuit attachments and the seat connected automatically via cables. Simultaneously, the cockpit powered up, and the seat and console rose up.

Cardo began operating the main console.

"Come here, Eri. Place your hand here."

Guided by Cardo, Ericht fumbled about, and the cable connecting the seat and her back extended. As Ericht's right hand touched the monitor, a biometric authentication began. A beam of light traced along, displaying Ericht's biological information.

"Now Lfrith will recognize you. Tell her that this world isn't scary."

Cardo smiled at her warmly.

Ericht considered for a moment before beginning her chat with – or rather, to – Lfrith.

"My name is Ericht Samaya! Do you like cake? It's my birthday today! I'm going to wear my birthday hat!"

Although Cardo had been watching Ericht with a smile, her device beeped, and she responded immediately.

"What's wrong?"

The call was from a senior executive of Ochs Earth Corporation in a conference room within Fólkvangr.

"The council is about to hold a press conference."

Behind the executive, monitors showed a council press conference about to begin. Things were already in motion.

"I wasn't told about this."

Cardo's voice suddenly hardened.

"Ochs Earth has been left out of this."

"Got it. I'm on my way."

Ending the call, Cardo quickly weighed her options while looking at Ericht. Leaving her alone wouldn't result in Lfrith moving. She thought about taking Ericht to the conference room but showing this child the mundane political maneuvers would serve no purpose.

"Can you go back by yourself, Eri?"

"Yeah."

"Don't make your mommy worry now."

With that, Cardo left without bothering to look back.

Once Cardo was out of sight, Ericht immediately forgot about returning home and started talking to Lfrith again.

"The cake has strawberries on it. You see, Mommy..."

### 3. INFILTRATION

The mobile suit carrier, *Ulysses*, far larger than the cargo ships already docked in Fólkvangr, was moving through the same sector of space. On its hull, a figure holding a sword was painted, the emblem of the Dominicus Team, but no eyes were there to see it amidst the stars.

From the captain's chair, Rajan Zahi opened a comm channel.

—*Deployment of Ulysses is complete. We can commence at any time.*

That report was received by Delling, who was in the hallway connected to the conference room on the Council Front. In the room, preparations for the press conference were underway. A staff member was attaching a lapel microphone to Delling's chest.

"Raid it along with their headquarters according to the plan."

—*Don't we need the Council's approval?*

As the staff member stepped away, Delling was free to speak. While moving toward the stage, he quietly responded to Rajan.

"I'll assume full responsibility."

While it was a clear order of attack, there wouldn't be any problem even if it was recorded. The press conference venue was filled with numerous camera drones floating in the air, surrounded by a multitude of journalists. Delling was cautious to the end.

The Council members were already lined up on the stage that Delling was walking towards.

First, Sarius, as the representative, would issue a statement.

—*We, the Mobile Suit Development Council, have just now made the decision to freeze all development of Gundam-type mobile suits.*

At his words, the reporters started to murmur. Sarius's words were also heard in the conference room on Fólkvangr.

—*In addition, we will forcibly seize Ochs Earth, the company that developed them, under the authority provided by business administrative laws.*

The people from Ochs Earth Corporation and Vanadis Institute present in the meeting room were taken aback.

"No way..."

"Are they planning to cut us off?"

Just then, Cardo entered without knocking.

"Any ships scheduled to enter port?"

"There's one transport ship. It should be docking soon."

"Stop it. Don't let it enter the port!"

Cardo had started to guess the Council's — Delling's — intentions. Immediately, the staff started making calls.

However, the ship was already docking. Cardo's realization was one step too late.

From the window of the Fólkvangr communications room, the landing was confirmed.

The retina of the staff was authenticated, and the boarding bridge door opened. The two staff members were clad in spacesuits.

A gun muzzle equipped with a silencer slowly extended from behind the door. When one of the staff members noticed, two gunshots rang out—immediately after, blood splattered. Due to zero gravity, both the blood and the body floated in space.

The armed intruders pushed the body aside and advanced into the interior of Fólkvangr, issuing a GO sign from the corridor. Then, more soldiers with guns poured in.

The declaration that Sarius had started at the remote conference venue had reached Fólkvangr.

*—And to maintain order and ethics in the development of mobile suits, we will establish an auditing organization named Cathedra. Allow me to introduce the supervising representative of Cathedra, Delling Rembran.*

Following Sarius's words, Delling stepped onto the stage, and the flashes from the cameras of the press filled the conference venue.

At the same time, their faces twisted in bitterness, Nadim and Yamaoka were watching the conference.

"They never planned to accept us! They aren't dealing with us financially, but by using violence--"

At that moment—and completely unbeknownst to Nadim and Yamaoka—the infiltration program planted by the operatives was triggered, causing the parabolic communication antenna to cease functioning. Yamaoka's words were cut off, and the monitor froze. The communication had been completely disrupted.

"Yamaoka... Damn it!"

The words NO SIGNAL were the only ones reflected on the screen.

Nadim slammed his fist on the intercom in frustration. Even without knowing the details, it was clear that an attack had been launched on their comm system. And he had a good guess at the mastermind behind it.

"Spacians are so narrow-minded..."

The residents of space, including Delling, or perhaps many corporations in space, had turned hostile towards Ochs Earth, an Earth-based company.

When Nadim left his room, the pair who were supposed to be preparing for the party were nowhere to be found.

"Elnora? Eri?"

In the region near Fólkvangr, the massive thrusters of the mobile suit-equipped ship Ulysses ignited, the vessel rapidly accelerating.

Inside the ship, the mobile suit Heingra took its position on the catapult, paused momentarily on the launching rail, leaning forward for a swift takeoff. At the end of the catapult, the binding lock at its feet was released, and with perfect timing, the thrusters blasted, sending Heingra speeding into the void.

The Heingra had locked onto Fólkvangr, where Eri and the others were. Several mobile suits from the Dominicus Team were already ahead.

A communication from Rajan came in.

—*Headquarters to all Dominicus units. You are to seal off Fólkvangr and its surrounding space at once. Don't let a single shuttle get away.*

The Dominicus Team spread out, surrounding Fólkvangr.

Meanwhile, inside Fólkvangr, Nyla led the way through a zero-gravity corridor with Wendy following.

Nyla noticed something was off after taking a right turn at a T-junction.

From deeper in the corridor, faint smoke was visible. The next instant, another smoke grenade was lobbed, and smoke billowed. Sensing danger, Nyla halted in the middle of the T-junction and signaled Wendy to stop.

"Nyla?"

"Run, Wendy. Hurry up!"

As Nyla pushed Wendy back the way they came, gunshots rang out in rapid succession.

One bullet hit Nyla straight in the head. Nyla's body went limp and started floating, with droplets of blood expanding around her.

"Nyla!"

A heart-wrenching scream echoed in the corridor.

Pushed away, Wendy was moving farther from Nyla.

Almost immediately, the corridor lights switched to red, and an alarm began to blare.

## 4. GUND-ARM

"The alarm?"

Elnora, who had been searching for Erichit, came to a halt in the corridor. Soon enough, Nadim caught up with her.

"Elnora! The council has crossed the line."

The alarm, coupled with Nadim's words, connected in Elnora's mind. Naturally, her immediate concern was Eri.

"I can't find Eri."

"Eri's missing? You take care of Eri. I'm going out in the Lfrith."

"It's too dangerous!" Elnora immediately objected.

"It'll be too late by the time they arrive! Believe in the GUND-ARM you made." Nadim retorted, flashing a daring grin as he continued towards the dock.

—*You're going yourself, manager?*

One of the astonished staff members asked.

"I can't make contact with Wendy. Establish an escape route while I'm holding them back!" Nadim responded, clambering into the cockpit.

—*What about reinforcements from headquarters?*

"We shouldn't get our hopes up," Nadim answered, closing his helmet's visor. The Lfrith's systems activated, its bulk beginning to move. The crew directed the machine with illuminated guide poles.

"LF-01, launching!"

Following Nadim's vocal command, the catapult's hook disengaged. The mobile suit shot towards the depths below and instantly ejected into the void of space. The machine's attitude control thrusters automatically kicked in, optimizing its orientation in space.

"GUND Format Permet score, two!"

Responding to his voice again, the pre-production Gundam Lfrith prototype raised its head, its camera eyes lighting up.

The enemy ship's radar had already locked onto Nadim's suit. The officer in charge of the tracking system reported the match.

—*Checking identification. Matched with target mobile suit.*

"Send in the Dominicus Team."

—*Roger that. Initiating action.*

The Dominicus Team pilot responded to Rajan's command.

Immediately, two Heingra launched from the Ulysses hangar, closing in on Nadim's suit and starting their attack. However, the beam shots from the two units didn't even graze him.

"So fast! So that's a Gundam?"

The pilot of the Dominicus team shuddered. Despite being briefed, the overwhelming pressure of actually facing the suit was something else entirely. The two Heingra split up, one above and one below Nadim's suit.

Nadim's suit swiftly shot down the unit below while deploying weapons, numerous GUND-BITS from its backpack.

"Permet score, three!"

Nadim's shell unit responded even stronger. The movements of the GUND-BITS were all under his control.

The Heingra fired its shield-mounted machine gun, but the small units dodged its attacks as if they had a will of their own.

"He dodged it?"

A small unit latched onto the Heingra.

"Impossible--!"

An explosion from it enveloped the Heingra.

Nadim's breath turned ragged all at once.

"It's been a while since I felt like this."

On Nadim's face, a red mark caused by the Permet influx appeared, closely resembling the glow of the shell unit on his suit.

The Dominicus team's comms officer relayed the results of his analysis, "The opponents are using unfamiliar swarm weapons."

"Swarm" refers to the group. While each had an independent thought structure, as a whole, they behaved as if they had a singular intelligence. Through the GUND format, Nadim intuitively controlled multiple Gunbits.

"Do not engage one-on-one. With numbers--"

However, before the order could be relayed, a shot from behind Nadim's unit pierced through the other Heingra.

"Is that you, Wendy?"

Wendy's eyes were filled with tears.

"I have to avenge Nyla."

Understanding everything through Wendy's words, Nadim gave a silent nod.

"I see. I'm going to lure the enemy away. Make sure everyone has an escape route."

A new blip appeared on the Ukysses operator's display.

"Second Gundam-type mobile suit detected to port side in travel direction."

The approaching Gundams were displayed on the monitor, closing in while shooting down the Heingra. Rajan nodded.

"That matches our information. Remain on guard. Kenanji."

Rajan connected a channel to the pilot on standby on the dock.

"Deploy Beguir-Beu."

—Roger.



Responded the ace pilot that the Dominicus team boasted of, Kenanzi Avery.

The operation had only just begun.

## 5. SPEECH

Delling's speech begins with several camera drones hovering around the conference hall, capturing it.

*—Throughout my years of experience on countless battlefields, I've come to one conclusion. Weapons should only exist to kill people.*

As he speaks, soldiers continue their incursion, the Fólkvangr control room already completely wiped out. The corpses of its crew floated in the air with their blood, like spectral apparitions.

*—There should be no excuses for this. Once someone holds in their hands a tool meant purely for killing, they have to bear the sin that comes with it.*

Delling declared, his voice growing more intense.

*—But the mobile suits of Vanadis and Ochs Earth are different! Not only do they take the lives of their opponents, but of their operators as well. This is not a tool. It is a curse!*

At that very moment, Nadim and Wendy were facing off against the enemy out in space, the two having already taken out four Heingra units.

"Keh!"

Breathing hard and in pain, Wendy's face is mottled with red spots like bruises. The Gundam had overwhelmed the enemy, and maybe it was the price she had to pay, but she was gradually starting to show symptoms.

Nadim opens comms with her.

"Wendy! It's too dangerous to raise the score further!"

But his voice didn't reach her.

Back on Fólkvangr, the staff finally understood the danger they were in and made a move to escape. But just as they were about to flee, a squad of stormtrooper commandos appeared and unleashed a relentless barrage of gunfire upon them. Delling's speech continued to play on the monitors in the room.

*—The punishment for taking a life should be imposed upon us by humans, and not machines.*

“Nyla... I'll avenge your death!” Wendy hollers. Ahead of her, the Beguir-Beu appears, piloted by Kenanji.

Wendy's mobile suit charges forward with zero hesitation.

—*People must kill or be killed by people. I believe that's the minimum courtesy in the foolish act of war.*

She raises her Permet score and deploys her GUND-BIT in an attempt to surround Kenanji's mobile suit, but he quickly activates his non-kinetic pods.

Her approaching GUND-BIT fall silent one after another, an attack known as an “antidote” as it neutralizes GUND Format.

As he moved to provide cover, Nadim noticed something unusual.

“Get back, Wendy! That's no ordinary custom type!”

A claw-like mechanism unfurls from the legs of the Beguir-Beu, and it swoops down on her suit. Despite her desperate attempts to evade the attack, Kenanji's piloting skills proved too much for her. The “claw” latches onto her rifle. She pivots to wrench the suit off her, but the claws have dug in, entirely immovable. A second later, more “antidote” completely dims the light of the suit's shell unit, and the lights in the cockpit wink out.

“I can't move. Why?!”

She tugs frantically at the controls, but there's no response whatsoever.

Kenanji confirms the situation for her, indifferent to her plight.

“GUND Format link suppressed. This is the end of the Gundams.”

“Nyla...”

Wendy's thoughts turned to her days with Nyla, just before Kenanji's suit thrust its saber into the cockpit of her suit and fired off two additional shots.

“Wendy!”

Nadim cried out in agony, but his voice no longer reached her.

Delling's speech, in the meantime, resonated far and wide throughout the entirety of the living spheres humanity called home.

—*When we pull the trigger ourselves, we bear the burden of the life we're taking, and of a sin we can never atone for.*

In the conference room, one of Sarius' underling's whispers in his ear, and his eyes go wide in astonishment at the message. His facial expression broadcast at the time would later be replayed again and again as historical stock footage. It was here that he first learned of Delling acting on his own authority. Delling, however, continued to speak with a commanding voice, keenly aware of the murmurs going up behind him.

—*In war, or any form of murder, that's how it has to be.*

## 6. CARDO NABO

With the casualties continuing to mount on Fólkvangr, Cardo found herself cornered in her office as she fled the invasion. She opened a drawer in her desk to reveal a gun she had rarely ever used. When was the last time she serviced it? Would it even fire?

As she looked up, she saw a souring, red-hot glow spreading across the door to the laboratory. Enemy combatants were about to burn through the door. She sighed as the door was wrenched open, and soldiers spilled into the room, immediately taking up positions around her desk. One of them, who appeared to be the commander, spoke to her.

“Dr. Cardo Nabo. You are going to die here.”

It amounted to what was probably the clearest death sentence that could be made, but she was unfazed by it. She continued to speak, her voice civil as she tried to get her point across despite knowing the other party had no interest in hearing what she had to say. She had lived most of her life that way.

“Humanity was born in the cradle of Earth. Our bodies are far too fragile for us to venture into space.”

The walls surrounding Cardo and the soldiers displayed various GUND tech and images of people afflicted by cosmic radiation. They were presentation materials for visitors. She remembered all of the material perfectly; it was all her own research, as much of it a child of her own bearing, or even more so.

*“Still,” she thought to herself, “how did they manage to infiltrate so easily? Did the front’s management AI misidentify the assailants as visitors? No, the AI isn’t at fault. Content-aware errors by AI are over a hundred years old. Maybe the entire Fólkvangr system has been hijacked and is experiencing decoherence, a quantum information disruption. Hell, it’s overkill.”*

“Just as an infant has to put on clothes, humanity must don the GUND to truly go out into space.”

The commander merely scoffed, leveling his gun at her.

“That’s just an excuse for a technology that requires sacrificial victims.”

“You don’t understand.”

Cardo said, reaching out imperceptibly into the drawer she had just opened and gripped the gun.

“What all of you are taking away is the future that the GUND will save!”

In one swift motion, she brings the gun up and at the commander and in that instant, the sounds of heavy gunfire rang out.

The Gundam Lfrith Pre-Production model that Nadim was piloting was now doing its best to evade the enemy, its left leg exploding as it's hit, slamming the suit into the outer wall of the research facilities.

“Nnngh!”

Nadim gritted his teeth. He just couldn't find a way to counter the “antidote” being used by the enemy's mobile suit, the Beguir-Beu. He had no way of knowing the proper names for either, though. He was unable to fight in close quarters, and when he tried to pull back for a long-range attack, the enemy quickly closed in on him.

A blow from the Beguir-Beu grazed his suit, destroying the outer wall of Fólkvangr. The impact also rattled the Gundam Lfrith in the hanger with Ericht in its cockpit. It was more than enough to terrify the child who was curled up in the pilot seat.

“Eri!”

There was only so far the child could have gone, but Elnora had finally tracked her down.

“Mommy! Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!”

Ericht tried launching herself out of the cockpit, but she couldn't move because the cable extending from the seat was still connected to a section on the back of her suit. So instead, Elenora rushed to her, clutching the girl tightly in her arms. Ericht sobbed as she clung to her mother.

“Mommy!”

“It's okay now. It'll be all right.”

As the hatch closed quietly and the cockpit immediately rose up, just then, someone's voice could be heard. An automated comms probe connected to an external channel.

*—Headquarters to all units. We've successfully neutralized the lives of Cardo Nabo and all key members. Retreat as soon as preparations to blow up the front are complete.*

There was no doubt in Elnora's mind that what the cold, callous tone said over the comms was true.

“Dr. Cardo... Why did you have to die...”

Elenora tightened her grip.

*—I repeat...*

“Mommy,” Ericht murmured softly.

In the next instant, all the monitors in the cockpit came up, and the boot-up prep sequence was initiated.

“A callback from layer 33? With whose authentication vitals...?”

Elenora looked at the screen and felt a shiver go down her spine. On it wasn't her own name displayed, but Ericht's. Layer 34 had been reached.

“Mommy, did she wake up?”

Aghast, she looks at Ericht.

“Ah... ah...”

The Gundam is taking a life.

As her mother stuttered and stammered, trying to find the words, her daughter merely pouted in her lap.

## 7. LFRITH

A single mobile suit bursts forth from the launch port of Fólkvangr's hangar. Once it stabilizes, it immediately begins to accelerate towards the nearby sector where the Beguir-Beu and the Lfrith Pre-Production model are engaged in combat.

The mobile suit carrier Ulysses' radar accurately captures this movement. The operator informs Rajan.

—*Strong electromagnetic waves detected from within Fólkvangr. It's an unregistered Permet identification code.*

“They have another machine?”

Rajan had to decide instantly whether to send additional troops or retreat as a precaution. Preliminary intel indicated there were only two Gundams. But nothing is ever certain. Currently, the Beguir-Beu was overpowering the two Lfrith units with the antidote, easily downing one of them. Rajan didn't believe the appearance of a third unit would significantly alter the battle's outcome. So he chose to leave it in Kenanji's hands.

The situation analysis by Elnora, who pilots the third unit, is not much different from Rajan's.

Regardless of Ericht clearing Layer 33, she has had no pilot training. She couldn't possibly fight.

Still, should they run away? If they did, Elnora and her daughter would lose Nadim, a man irreplaceable to them, forever.

Despite seeing no chance of victory, Elnora, unlike Rajan, decided to fight.

Within the Gundam Lfrith's shell unit Ericht and Elnora occupied a powerful red light surged.

Immediately, three Heingras give chase.

The moment Ericht reaches for the console, a bruise appears on her face, but it glows a faint blue-white instead of red. Unlike Nadim and the others, Ericht doesn't seem to be in pain.

Immediately after, small units are ejected from the Lfrith's back.

As the three Heingra maneuver to position the sun at their backs, they simultaneously fire their beam rifles at the Lfrith.

Seven GUND-BITs whirl around the Lfrith's left arm, rapidly orbiting and combining to form a large shield that absorbs all the beams from the three Heingra.

"One, two, three!"

With an innocent, childish voice unfitting for the battlefield, Ericht counts and points at the Heingra. The monitor follows suit, locking onto each target.

The GUND-BITs disengage from the shield formation and rapidly deploy from the Lfrith, surrounding and shooting down one Heingra in a matter of moments. They pierce the head of a second one, downing it as well.

The remaining Heingra barely avoids the GUND-BIT's attack but loses its beam rifle. The determined pilot draws a beam saber and closes in on the Lfrith.

Sensing the situation, all the GUND-BIT swarm and circle around the Lfrith. Two connect to the beam rifle, releasing a larger beam and destroying the last Heingra.

Elnora was consumed by a visceral dread—she had killed someone for the first time—or perhaps, had forced her daughter to do so. She had no intention of fighting or taking down enemies.

"Mommy, mommy!"

Yet, at her child's voice, Elnora jolted back to reality.

Ericht wore an innocent smile.

"They look just like candles! Isn't it pretty?"

"You're right..."

The mother held her daughter close, her head bowed. This was no time for fear. She had to protect her daughter, her husband—and their comrades.

Yet even such thoughts were disrupted by the blaring alert.

Immediately after, a flash of light assaulted Elnora and Ericht.

It was a powerful beam emitted by the Beguir-Beu.

The Lfrith—or perhaps Ericht, unconsciously—shielded themselves with the GUND-BIT's shield and retaliated with a beam of their own.

The Beguir-Beu evaded the counterattack while slashing at the Lfrigh with a sword in its left hand.

Just before the impact, the Lfrith produced a blade-like beam from its rifle, parrying the enemy's slash.

The blades clashed, scattering sparks into the void of space.

At this moment, Kenanji, who was piloting the Beguir-Beu, remained composed.

“Not bad. However...”

With the swift judgment befitting an ace pilot, Kenanji activated the non-kinetic pod again, deploying an antidote.

“This is all a Gundam can—”

In an instant, the GUN-BITs lost control and froze in place.

“No!!”

Stunned by the potent jamming against the GUND format, Elnora could hardly believe it.

Sensing the enemy's confusion from the flicker of their blade, Kenanji didn't miss a beat. He swung the Beguir-Beu's right sword and severed the Lfrith's left arm.

“Ah!”

Elnora screamed while Ericht was paralyzed with fear.

Just as Kenanji was about to deal the final blow, an unexpected shock ran through his cockpit.

Nadim's unit had fired a beam vulcan from a distance unreachable by the antidote.

The non-kinetic pod was heavily damaged—Kenanji faltered for a moment.

Immediately, Nadim's unit clung onto the Beguir-Beu, simultaneously kicking its thrusters to full power and pulling away from Elnora's unit.

The two Lfrith units entered comms range, and a channel was opened.

“Is that you, Elnora?”

Most of Nadim's face was covered in bruises from using the GUND format.

“Nadim!”

“Daddy!”

Ericht seemed delighted to hear her father's voice.

“Damn you...”

Kenanji tried to chase after Elnora's unit but was hindered by Nadim's unit clinging onto him.

The groaning of his unit was audible even in the cockpit, making Kenanji grow more irate.

"Let go of me, damn Gundam!"

Nadim, breathing heavily, spoke to Elnora.

"You have to run, Elnora."

"Don't be ridiculous! I'm coming—"

Nadim gently interrupted Elnora's words.

"You're not the only one escaping here!"

Nadim's eyes flicked to Ericht on the monitor. Their daughter was staring intently at her mother.

Elnora understood what Nadim wanted to say. But just as she was about to object, interference began to disrupt their comms. The distance was increasing. Their connection would soon be severed.

"Live. Both you and Ericht. For everyone's sake!"

"...!!"

At that moment, a powerful beam grazed the cockpit carrying the mother and child, illuminating them brightly. On Elnora's face, an unbearable sorrow was etched.

Then, two more shots—fire from the mobile suit carrier Ulysses. Now, when they couldn't use the GUN-BIT—even if they could—if hit directly by the ship's cannon, even the Lfrith wouldn't come out unscathed.

Elnora's hand trembled.

After repeated hesitation, Elnora gripped the controls, inverting the attitude control direction.

"I love you, Nadim."

Ideally, they should have been out of communication range. But her voice reached him.

"I love you too."

Nadim quietly murmured before pushing the GUND Format to its limit.

"Permet score, four!"

The shell unit of Nadim's unit glowed red. Then, enveloped in light, it accelerated further while clutching the Beguir-Beu.

The Beguir-Beu was utterly overpowered and couldn't resist.

Nadim's labored breathing signaled the approaching end.

"Yaaaaah?!"

Nadim's pupils turned a deep, bruise-like red. All he could see was the Beguir-Beu. The inflow of Permet exceeded the limit, plunging into the realm of a "data storm."



In the far distance, Fólkvangr—where he spent irreplaceable time with Elnora and Ericht—was blowing up. Although Nadim's perception had become unstable, regrettably, the fall of the research facility, his own death, and everything else was all but certain.

## 8. HAPPY BIRTHDAY

As the battle was winding down, Nadim vividly experienced it. The party which could no longer take place, where the living room door opened, and Ericht scurried in. Was it a dream shown by the Permet?

—*Daddy, I'm home!*

—*Welcome back.*

Nadim gently embraced Ericht as Elnora entered the living room. On the table, there was a birthday cake for Ericht.

—*What's a birthday, Daddy?*

—*It's when we celebrate the day you were born, Eri.*

—*And what do we do to celebrate?*

—*Well...*

"Mommy. Hey, mommy."

Elnora, struggling to pilot the Lfrith and crushed by guilt and responsibility, was unable to respond to her daughter's pleas.

Then, a voice, which should not be heard in the cockpit, resonated.

—*Happy... birthday... to you...*

That singing voice, though mixed with an awful noise, was unmistakably recognized by Elnora as her husband's. She listened intently, head bowed. She wasn't hallucinating it.

Eri's eyes sparkled.

"Daddy! It's Daddy!"

The song reached the cockpit of Beguir-Beu as well. Kenanji was suddenly puzzled. It wasn't comms from his team. Could it be from the enemy persistently pushing his unit? But to sing during a battle...

The same song echoed in the Ulysses' bridge.

"Cut off the communication."

Rajan issued the command, suppressing his shaken emotions.  
But his subordinate replied in confusion.

"I can't. The source appears to be the Gundam."

In fact, the line was never open to begin with.

—*Happy birth...day... dear Ericht...*

The bridge grew even more restless.

Rajan stared into the darkness of space.

But the song finally ended.

"What's going on?"

The arms of the Lfrith pre-production prototype lost their strength, and the glow of the shell unit vanished. The Beguir-Beu confirmed it had gone silent and brushed aside Nadim's suit.

"Happy birthday to you."

Inside the Lfrith, Ericht continued singing joyfully.

As if shaking off the voice of her husband, which she could no longer hear, Elnora started to withdraw from their sector of space.

Meanwhile, at the press conference, Delling raised his fist and declared.

—*And our Cathedra shall deny...*

Delling's gaze was sharp.

—*all Gundams.*

## #1 The Witch and the Bride

**The readiness is all.**

From William Shakespeare's "*Hamlet*"

**[LAGRANGE POINT]** The term refers to the gravitational equilibrium points between two celestial bodies – such as the Earth and the Moon. There are five points from L1 to L5, and because the energy required to maintain a fixed position in these areas is reduced, many fronts are concentrated there. Asticassia School of Technology is located at L4.

# 1. SULETTA MERCURY

Suletta Mercury, a seventeen-year-old pilot with a head of fiery red hair, basks in the zero-gravity of her cockpit, surrounded by munchies and her pen case, beaming as she ticks off the admissions process paperwork on her tablet. Her airtight suit, a brilliant shade of yellow, seems to mirror her delight. A polar bear face printed on the side of her helmet only adds to it.

“Admission process, check.”

She continues flicking through the school uniform order form and the regulations outlined in the student handbook displayed on her screen.

“Uniform, check. School regulations, check. Cockpit regulations, check.”

Suddenly, a shimmering light darts across the main monitor, illuminating the cockpit. Its radiance seemed to be conveying a message to Suletta.

“Don’t worry, Aerial. I did an application for you, too.”

Suletta conversed with Aerial, the mobile suit she was in, as if it were completely natural.

Mobile suits are giant, humanoid machines that tower over the human form. An individual boards a cockpit inside it and, through the support of numerous operating systems, wields the colossus.

It is Ad Stella 122, and many corporations are pioneering the development of various types of mobile suits.

An announcement comes in over the cockpit speakers.

“Arriving at Front Sector 73, Asticassia School of Technology, in five minutes. The ship will now enter a docking course.”

Manipulating the student handbook out of her way, she brought up the shipboard guidance menu on her main console. By linking her monitor’s visuals to the transport ship’s cameras, Suletta was able to witness a vast school materialize before her very eyes.

“That’s... the school?”

As she leaned forward, her heart skipped a beat at the breathtaking sight before her, something new and unlike anything she had ever encountered.

“Mom, I finally made it!”

The transport ship starts to realign itself toward the Front’s spaceport.

Suddenly, Suletta catches a shimmer on her main sight and zooms in with the camera feed. Despite some initial graininess, a second and third zoom resolves the image of a figure in a spacesuit, floating aimlessly in the void, seemingly unconscious or drained of energy.

"What? No Way! You can't! No, no, no, no!"

She frantically hailed the bridge. They appeared on her monitor.

"This is the bridge."

"They'll die!"

Suletta's cry crackled throughout the bridge.

"What?" the crewman replied, shocked into a simple response.

The crew's monitor displayed a close-up of Suletta's face.

"S-someone is... Someone is outside!"

Doubting what he heard, the crewman switches to the external cameras and sees the white spacesuit for himself. A glance at the seat next to him and the other crew member nods in agreement and triggers the emergency broadcast.

"Rescue team, alert. A person is in need of rescue. Prepare for extravehicular activity!"

On the bridge, the crew springs into action, executing start-up sequences on a small craft. The airlock in the hangar releases its seal, letting out a rush of air as the pressure drops. Simultaneously, preparations begin to send out a launch.

"Please confirm victim's status. Are there any signs of collision with debris?" the crew asks Suletta.

But, the words fail to reach Suletta, her mind is preoccupied with rescuing the victim. How long has that person in the spacesuit been in space and in need of rescue? Do they have any oxygen left? She was sure she was right.

The crew was also acting quickly.

Suletta connects the cables on the seat to her airtight suit attachment to boot-up the cockpit. Her main visual switches to external monitors where she sees the hangar hatch open.

Donning her helmet and hastily tucking her bag of munchies that had been floating around her into a pouch on her suit, she murmurs to herself in a small voice.

"If you move forward, you gain two."

It's the mantra she uses to move forward when she's lost.

"What?"

With a fierce grip on the control levers, she declares, "I'll save them!"

Aerial's eyes blaze green as the suit struggles to break free of its cage, forcing it to unlock and allowing it to take a step forward. The giant's steps were big and fast.

The nearby hangar staff scattered as the crew from the bridge cried out, "Hey! What do you think you're doing? Leave the rescue to us!"

But Suletta was unstoppable. As if in perfect harmony with her emotions, the Aerial vaulted forward.

"Wah!"

"Do they intend to leave the ship?"

"Damn it..." Despite their apparent frustration, the crew chose to overlook Suletta's spontaneous behavior.

"Attention mobile suit pilot! We're opening the exit hatch. Stay put until then!"

The outer hatch seal broke and started to open slowly. Peering outside, Suletta cautiously walked toward the ship's exterior.

"I-I'm sorry--"

"If you spot someone in need of rescue, let us know. We'll respond immediately," the crew interrupted her apology, being professionals and knowing that Suletta wasn't to blame.

"Yes sir!"

Suletta positioned herself at the edge of the hatch and gently jetted out into space to prevent any damage to the ship. Activating its orbital maneuvering thrusters, the suit quickly stabilized its orientation and headed toward the location of the person in need of rescue.

When the beacon on their spacesuit chimed, they looked up, only slightly opening their eyes. The suit, with its transparent visor, has a delicate yet airtight multilayer fiber. Despite the close proximity of the vacuum of space that is inhospitable to life, the stars filling the sky were a magnificent sight.

A light caught their attention, moving among the stars. It was the thruster light of a spacecraft's propulsion engine, coming and going as it deftly adjusted itself as it drew nearer.

"Could this be the ship that came to pick me up as promised?"

Gradually, the shape began to materialize. It wasn't a ship, but a blue-and-white mobile suit, the Aerial. So, naturally, it was the first time the person needing rescue had laid eyes on the machine.

The Aerial made minute corrections to its trajectory and carefully reached out to the person, keeping their relative speed as close to

zero as possible. But the person began to struggle to escape, fearing it was coming to capture them.

Seeing this play out and misinterpreting it as their distress, Suletta cried out, "Almost out of oxygen? Beginning rescue!"

The two huge mechanical hands of the mobile suit secure them as if to protect them. Without hesitation, Suletta opened the cockpit hatch and sprang out into the void.

The rescued person struggled, likely confused, their limbs flailing. Cradling them, Suletta detaches their propulsion pack, and kicks off the manipulators, swiftly returning to the cockpit.

As the hatch closes, air begins pumping back into the cockpit, the outer wall of the hatch also closing completely.

Suletta immediately calls out to them. Normally, helmets would prevent voices from being heard, but contact lines open with a touch to the helmet, making conversations possible.

"Are... Are you okay?"

A message of 'oxygen replenishing' is displayed as the memory indicates the air quality within the cockpit is quickly rising.

"Hello? Can you—" Suletta attempted to call out to the person, giving them a shake. But before she could even finish her sentence, she was met with a fierce headbutt from the person she had just rescued, a clear indication they were just fine.

"Nnngh!"

Suletta winced, feeling dizzy, despite the two of them wearing helmets.

A voice full of anger and frustration sounds in Suletta's helmet, "Don't interfere!"

"Excuse me?" Suletta couldn't help but ask in return.

As the cockpit's air supply stabilizes, the person raises their visor.

There, was a girl the same age as Suletta, with silvery hair and eyes. She couldn't help but stare at her with rapt fascination.

"I'd almost made my escape! Because of you, it's all for nothing! You'll take responsibility for this!"

This silver-haired girl snarled, glaring daggers at Suletta as she grabbed her by the chest and yanked her closer. There was no sign of gratitude whatsoever.

"Sure," Suletta responded, caught off guard by her ferocity and not fully comprehending the meaning of the response that escaped her lips.

## 2. ASTICASSIA

The artificial space known as a "Front" is an asteroid that has been meticulously transformed into a home for humanity, mirroring the Earth in its trappings of sky, land, and human habitation.

One of the numerous Fronts was the Asticcassia School of Technology Front.

Suletta found herself dazzled by the unfamiliar view before her. The monorail glided down the central shaft, whisking through the network of tunnels before reaching the academic sector. Students zipped along the connecting roadway between the dormitories and the school structure on electric bikes, each partnered with a spherical terminal affectionately called "Haro."

The station swarmed with students in the morning rush to school. Should she follow these kids? As Suletta wondered, a guide robot controlled by Haro approached her and started talking. This being her first encounter, Suletta bowed deeply, showing her respect.

A Demi Trainer mobile suit strolled leisurely along the footpath outside the school building. As chattering students waved from the crosswalk, the Demi Trainer paused, swiveling its head in their direction. One of their peers was at its helm.

In a large classroom, practical training using Mobile Crafts was underway.

A gesture from a Mechanic department student was the cue for the Demi Trainers to ascend, one after another, from their underground bunkers.

Once the students placed their handbooks within the Demi Trainer cockpit, the main console's monitor came alive, displaying the view from the head-eye camera on the primary sight. As the cockpit hatch slid shut, the front skirt above the mobile suit's legs descended.

The lock disengaged, and the Demi Trainer ambled from its cage toward the entrance. The hangar doors yawned open, revealing identical machines lined up in formation inside, and beyond that, several more were in motion across the parking area.

Suletta stood before the hangar, her gaze lingering on the training ground. Her eyes were alight with anticipation.

"Ms. Suletta Mercury?"

"Y-Yes!"

Startled by the sudden call, Suletta's voice hitched.



"You're here to observe the drills, right? I'm Nika Nanaura, a second-year student in Mechanics. If you have any questions, just ask."

With her striking blue underlayer of hair, Nika extended a warm smile. Her attire – not the typical uniform but the Mechanic department's work clothes – hinted at her ongoing training.

"Yes, M... Thank y... Thank y-you verr..."

Caught unawares by the sudden interaction, Suletta stuttered through her response, her nervousness apparent.

"Are you nervous?"

"I-I've never... been to... a school before."

"It's your first time?"

Nika, taken aback, echoed the question. She had assumed Suletta had transferred from a Mercury school. But then, were there even schools on Mercury?

At that moment, a trio of female students barged in, seemingly elbowing Nika aside.

In a flurry of excitement, they peppered Suletta with inquiries.

"Say, is it true you're from Mercury?"

"Do people live there?"

"U-um, well..." Suletta struggled to find her words.

"What's your major?"

After a moment of confusion, Suletta awkwardly decided to sit on her knees, carefully avoiding the trio's gaze, and finally replied, "I'm in the Piloting department..."

"That makes you one of the elite!"

"What did you transfer here for?"

The volley of intrusive questions continued unabated.

"My mother... told me to go."

"Your mother?"

The students exchanged glances.

"So did she also tell you to wear that old-fashioned hair band?"

"Cut it out!"

The trio laughed innocently, their questions playful and teasing.

Nika frowned at their antics, but to everyone's surprise, Suletta responded cheerfully, not missing a beat.

"Yes, of course!"

Their laughter died on their lips as they stared, speechless.

"Seriously?"

Suletta noticed their astonished expressions, but before she could react, the rapid patter of approaching footsteps caught her attention.

### 3. MIORINE REMBRAN

The source of the footsteps attracted attention as she walked up to a teacher, seemingly ignoring everyone around her.

Suletta recognized the stern face.

"Oh..."

It was definitely the girl who had headbutted her.

"Miorine Rembran. I've heard what happened."

Silver-haired and silver-eyed, Miorine seemed to grasp from the hushed whispers and sidelong glances that her current predicament was common knowledge. She mentally shrugged off the nuisance.

As Suletta surveyed her surroundings, she spotted two figures, apparently not students, dressed in business suits a short distance behind Miorine. The bodyguard-like attire suggested that Miorine was of special status.

The teacher acknowledged Miorine but gave no overt reaction, merely signaling for her to assimilate into the class.

"Prepare immediately to join the class."

"Yes, sir."

Just as Miorine started walking, a timid voice wafted through the air.

"I-I'll take..."

Suletta, half-concealed behind a tablet and appearing ready to bolt at any moment, slowly approached Miorine.

"I'll take responsibility!"

Miorine tried to catch a glimpse of her face. However, Suletta, still hiding behind the tablet, mustered enough courage to voice her intention.

"I-I'll help you with your escape! Just tell me what I should do!"

Suletta had only shared a brief dialogue with Miorine during the rescue operation and was clueless about Miorine's objectives or intended destination.

On the other hand, Miorine, recognizing the familiar voice, exclaimed, "It's you! You're the girl who got in my way!"

A murmur of confusion spread amongst the students.

"Responsibility?"

"What's that?"

Desperate to stifle their probing, Miorine retorted, "Idiot! This isn't the place..."

Miorine was eager to escape the awkward situation, but an unwelcome comment was hurled at them.

"Responsibility, huh? Why not let her take it?"

The one stoking the flames was Felsi Rollo, a second-year student in the pilot department, currently garbed in her pilot suit. Beside her was Petra Itta, a second-year student in the Mechanic department, clad in the same work clothes as Nika, though somewhat disheveled.

Miorine, aware of their allegiance to Guel, didn't take their veiled hostility to heart. Nonetheless, a smirking Felsi continued her provocation from her seated position.

"You want to run away, right? To Earth."

Miorine shot Felsi a fierce glare.

"Class is in session! No more chatter!"

The teacher's stern admonition defused the tension, albeit temporarily. Suletta, her face still shielded by her tablet, studied Miorine closely.

"Earth?"

As her thoughts spiraled, an alarming sound echoed out, disturbing the normal rhythm of the class.

Several Demi Trainers, in the midst of training, grew alert.

The panels on the ceiling were changing one after another, and two names were displayed there.

One of them incited a severe frown from Miorine.

Following this, blast doors flew open with a thunderous roar, the air shimmering from the heat exhaust of mobile suits.

Two mobile suits—the Dilanza and Kapell-Kuu—were embroiled in a fierce bout.

The Dilanza, wielding its green-tipped, beam partizan spear, was driving the Kapell-Kuu towards the center of the training ground. The Kapell-Kuu maintained a strategic distance, unleashing its beam vulcan.

The Dilanza, employing its hover unit, managed to evade the onslaught of bullets. Stray beams exploded and scattered against the barrier shield lining the partition wall.

The teacher, a pair of binoculars in hand, grimly surveyed the unfolding scene.

"A red Dilanza. It must be Guel Jeturk."

Amidst the escalating battle, the school's broadcast system activated. The voice that resonated was surprisingly calm.

—*Apologies for interrupting your drills. This is an official duel, approved by the Dueling Committee. I, Shaddiq Zenelli, will be the witness. I ask that no one interfere.*

In the lounge of the Duel Committee, Shaddiq wore a confident grin. Encircling him were three committee members—Elan Ceres, Secelia Dote, and Rouji Chante—seated in close proximity.

## 4. GUEL JETURK

"A duel?"

Suletta, rooted on the training ground, was struggling to piece together the situation. Nonetheless, she found herself utterly absorbed by the raging battle.

With a broad swing, the Dilanza's beam partizan clashed with the Kapell-Kuu. The strength of the Dilanza was staggering. The pilot of the Dilanza—Guel Jeturk—spotted a figure standing in front of the hangar, right behind his opponent's mobile suit. The onboard camera zoomed in on Miorine.

A smirk crept onto Guel's face as he checked the monitor. Immediately, the Dilanza launched a powerful offensive, forcing its adversary backward.

"Hey! That way is..." the pilot of the Kapell-Kuu cried out, but it was too late. The two mobile suits were closing in on the students.

"Huh?"

"No way."

"Are they coming toward us?"

Still fixated on the battle, Suletta was oblivious to the danger. Behind her, Felsi and Petra were whooping and cheering.

"Go, Guel!"

"Get him!"

In a fierce flash, the Dilanza's beam partizan sliced through the Kapell-Kuu's blade. The crippled Kapell-Kuu tossed aside its destroyed weapon, attempted to regain its footing, but the Dilanza's cross-shaped beam pierced its head. The impact sent the Kapell-Kuu flying backward, crashing onto the ground.

"Ms. Suletta!"

Nika spotted Suletta, still frozen on the spot, staring wide-eyed at the mobile suits. Panic took hold of her.

Suletta's sleeve was jerked.

"You fool! Do you want to get hit?"

It was Miorine. Pulled by the hand, Suletta started to run.

Behind them, the Dilanza sliced off the blade antenna from the felled Kapell-Kuu.

"Run!" Miorine shouted.

The blade antenna whirled through the air and landed with a thunderous crash right behind Suletta and Miorine. The body of the Kapell-Kuu collapsed, a giant dust cloud billowing up and shrouding the workspace in front of the hangar.

When the dust settled, they saw the fallen Kapell-Kuu and the Dilanza, retracting its partizan. Suletta and Miorine lay some distance away, panting heavily.

"Did you see that, Miorine? How Guel Jeturk fights his duels! Both you and the company will be mine before long."

A voice, brimming with confidence, echoed across the field.

Miorine looked up. Standing on the cockpit hatch of the Dilanza, chest puffed, was the victor of this battle—Guel Jeturk, his white pilot suit with gold embellishment gleaming under the lights.

Guel's father, the CEO of Jeturk Heavy Machinery, backed the powerful Jeturk House, which owned its own school ship. From the bridge of this ship, Guel's half-brother, Lauda Neill, addressed him, "Class is still in session, brother. Leave here immediately."

However, Guel continued his tirade.

"The bastard down there laughed at me. Calling me a man with a runaway bride."

"Bride?"

Suletta blinked, alarmed by the word. She turned to look at Miorine.

"That jerk."

Miorine spat, disgust etched on her face. She rose to her feet and briskly walked away.

"Hold it, Miorine! The rules say that when you lose, you apologize like a groveling worm. I want you to see how he does that."

Miorine didn't turn back. Suletta watched her as she walked away, an air of defiance around her.

The training field echoed with nothing but Guel's mocking laughter.

## 5. GREENHOUSE

The residential structures called a Front in Ad Stella are based on an asteroid and equipped with artificial gravity. By rotating the entire or partial sections of the Front, centrifugal force generates a gravity level equivalent to Earth's, an even 1G. As a result, the residents of each Front, although largely born in space, are genetically no different from Earthborn humans. They can live in space throughout their lives without suffering from muscle atrophy or bone loss caused by zero gravity or lower gravity.

Miorine meandered through the woodland fringe of the campus. It was a modest forest, but it teemed with trees - Earthborn life reshaped to endure the cosmic environment, flourishing under the pseudo gravity. The foliage bore the mark of genetic modifications—tools against pests and preservation issues, mere contingencies for closed environmental living. Yet, to Miorine, it mirrored the familiar verdancy of Earth's own forests.

Beyond the embrace of the forest stood a greenhouse. Miorine manipulated the controls at the entrance, causing the door to ascend with a smooth glide, like a mechanical blind. An outpour of light unveiled the blossoming chaos of flora within, the ripe tomatoes and vibrant flowers basking in the artificial sunlight.

"I'm home," she announced to the greenhouse, her voice laced with mordant humor. It was an unplanned return, an unexpected reunion with her green tenants. Unsurprisingly, the tomatoes offered no response.

An unfamiliar voice punctuated the silence, reaching her from the forest's edge.

"E-Excuse me!"

She recognized the voice instantly. It was that meddling girl. She seemed harmless enough, though.

Miorine half-turned towards her.

"You again?"

"I-I just wanted to thank you for saving me earlier." Suletta bowed, her words stumbling out in a rush.

"Huh?" Miorine furrowed her brows. She had merely helped a child who seemed about to get caught up in something. She didn't recall anything warranting gratitude.

The girl asked the question that had evidently been troubling her.

"M-Ms. Miorine, about your fiance--"

Miorine cut her off sharply, "Stop. I never agreed to any of that."

The very mention of Guel was enough to stoke her ire. Suletta seemed taken aback, her cheeks reddening as she attempted to process this information.

"You mean that guy just decided on his own that you're engaged?"

Suletta's words hung in the air, her mind evidently reeling from the prospect.

Miorine paused, considered her words, then finally explained, "It was a duel. At our school, the students settle important matters through duels. Money, authority, apologies... Even marriage partners."

Her emotions bled into the final word. Frustration, bitterness, resignation - a cocktail of sentiments that Suletta undoubtedly sensed, her confusion apparent, yet it morphed into worry.

"So you're going to marry him? Why?"

"My lousy father designed it that way."

Meanwhile, in a region not far from Asticassia, inside another Front floating in space, a congregation of the influential Benerit Group was poised to commence. The meeting was presided over by none other than the Group's president, Delling Rembran - the father of Miorine.

"Jeturk Heavy Machinery, Peil Technologies, Grassley Defense Systems... These three are the Benerit Group's highest earners for this period."

Each named corporation was a giant in the mobile suit industry, commonly referred to as the 'Big Three.'

The CEO of Jeturk, Vim Jeturk, slouched in a show of calculated nonchalance as if the honor was a predetermined fact. Before him were the quartet who helmed Peil Technologies and Sarius Zenelli, the CEO of Grassley Defense Systems.

Glimpses of other company delegates blinked across a mounted monitor - some obscured behind the steel veneer of their headgear. Each announcement from Delling was met with a symphony of applause resonating from the screen's depths.

Yet, Delling's voice sliced through the celebratory din, "However..."

The thunderous applause dwindled to an echo as the word hung heavy in the room.

"...the Parneo Company has recorded a loss for three consecutive periods. Our group has no need for companies in the red. I am hereby suspending their access to the group's finances."

Projected onto the oversized screen, the Parneo Company's CEO grew visibly pallid.

"Wait a minute, President Delling! If that happens, we'll go bank--"

"Exactly. You'll go bankrupt."

Delling's gaze bore into the man, as unforgiving as the cosmic void. The CEO of Parneo Company wilted under the weight of the sentence, unable to counter the icy proclamation.

"Their financial documents indicate there is potential for recovery."

"They've had their chance. The only thing I'm interested in is results."

Delling rose, the gesture a silent gavel declaring the discussion concluded. Sarius Zenelli's stoic countenance betrayed no surprise at the verdict. Vim's gaze, however, followed Delling with an undercurrent of animosity.

After leaving the room, Delling was immediately approached by his secretary, Rajan, who began reporting.

"I've assigned two agents to keep watch on Mistress Miorine.

Would you like to meet them?"

"For what?"

Delling continued his stride, not even a flicker of interest at the mention of his daughter.

"You know better than to waste my time."

## 6. TOMATO

Beneath the foliage of the greenhouse, Miorine lifted the lid of a floor storage bin. It was a trove of refrigerated tomatoes, a veritable feast of vibrant reds. She gingerly added a handful of her mother's tomato seeds into the mix. Though she'd initially dreamed of ferrying the entire greenhouse back to Earth, she'd reconciled with settling for her mother's precious seeds.

Hovering by the entrance, Suletta observed Miorine with curiosity. Her two bodyguards lingered further off; their watchful eyes trained on the sole exit.

Overcome by curiosity, she tiptoed towards the threshold, her foot almost breaching the oasis of green.

"Stay out!"

Miorine's voice snapped, sending Suletta scampering back.

"I-I'm sorry," she stuttered, though her gaze never wavered from Miorine.

With a hint of irritation, Miorine asked, "What is your deal?"



"Excuse me, what is that?"

"What is what? It's a tomato, naturally."

"That's a tomato?"

Pure astonishment was etched on Suletta's face as she looked at the tomato, having seen one for the first time.

Miorine, just as purely, was flabbergasted, "What exactly do you Mercurians eat?"

"We do have tomato flavoring, but..."

As if on cue, Suletta's stomach growled.

"Uh..."

Embarrassed, Suletta tried to disguise the sound by holding her stomach and sinking to the ground.

After a moment, Miorine placed something wrapped in paper beside Suletta. As the paper unfolded, a large, red tomato made its grand appearance.

"Here."

With that, Miorine retreated into the depths of the greenhouse.

Suletta turned to face the plump red globe that was the tomato, cradling it tenderly within her hands.

"Th-Thank you!"

Yet here, Suletta was stumped. The matter of its consumption eluded her. Without much thought, her gaze flitted towards Miorine.

"Umm..."

"Just bite into it."

Miorine instructed, her gaze not straying toward Suletta. Inspecting the tomato warily, apprehension creeping through her veins, Suletta took Miorine's advice and bit into it.

Juice from the tomato, alien to Suletta's palate, trickled down her chin. The vibrant flavor, the scent of freshness, caused Suletta's eyes to gleam in appreciation. A singular word, an utterance of satisfaction, bloomed within her mind.

"Delicious!"

From Suletta, that simple proclamation carried an air of authenticity that was hard to dismiss. Miorine, who had been absently stroking the petal of a potted flower, spoke up.

"Not all tomatoes taste good. That one's special."

As Suletta shifted her attention from the tomato back to Miorine, she found herself anticipating the next words, tomato juice still smeared on her cheek.

"My mother made it," Miorine added.

"She made a tomato? "

"That specific breed, of course!"



"Your mother..."

At the mention of 'mother,' Suletta's interest was piqued, and she regarded the tomato with newfound wonder.

"It's the same for me. My mother sent me here to study so that I could make Mercury a more prosperous planet. That's why..."

Yet, as if a shutter of her heart had closed, Miorine's expression darkened once again.

"I see. So your mother is still alive."

"S-S-Sorry!"

Sensing the undercurrent of Miorine's emotions, Suletta stumbled over her words in a panic, seeking to apologize.

While she was still grappling with her emotions, Miorine took charge of the situation.

"Hand me your student notebook."

Without a word, Miorine retrieved the student notebook from Suletta and busied herself with its operations. Her intentions were clear; Suletta was to leave as soon as possible.

Being unfamiliar with the complexities of the student handbook, Suletta could only watch in silence.

"You don't know the way back, right? Once I've given you the school map app, scram and leave me alone."

"Right..."

Before Suletta could muster a response, a voice laden with self-importance echoed outside the greenhouse.

"Playing farmer again? All this pretending you're on Earth... what's it good for?"

The voice belonged to Guel Jeturk.

He stood out, wearing a uniform starkly different from the standard blue-green of Suletta and Miorine, his white garb adorned with a gleaming gold insignia.

With his jacket casually draped over his shoulders, Guel ascended the greenhouse stairs, followed by his younger brother, Lauda, and a duo of juniors who admired him: Felsi and Petra. Next to Miorine, Guel's towering figure was an imposing sight. He was quite literally looking down upon her, yet Miorine, unbowed, retorted.

"Guel. You can't just barge in here."

Nonetheless, Guel sauntered into the room without a hint of hesitation, his voice echoing loudly, the very embodiment of his domineering presence, not just to Miorine but to everyone in attendance.

"I came up with a bright idea. From now on, you're gonna live with us at Jeturk House. We can't have any more escape attempts, after all."

His words were met with smirks from Felsi and Petra, spectating from the sidelines.

Miorine challenged Guel's audacity, "I never agreed to this."

"It's your father who made the rules."

"Do we always have to follow what our parents decide? Aren't you daddy's little lap dog?"

With these biting words, Miorine painted a scornful smile on her face. Guel, in a fit of rage, began a destructive spree, knocking over the wall-mounted plant pots in a row.

"What are you doing? Leave them alone!"

As flowers and soil scattered and gardening tools lay ruined, Miorine launched herself at Guel, only to be forcefully rebuffed.

A pitiful cry escaped Miorine as she crumpled to the floor, the shock causing the drawer's tomatoes to scatter across the ground.

"Oh, how clumsy, my lady! Better watch yourself!" jeered Petra and Felsi, basking in Miorine's humiliation.

Suletta, in a fluster, seized Laud's sleeve, pleading for him to intervene.

"W-We have to... we have to stop--"

"If you want to stop my brother, do it yourself."

"Sh-She needs h..."

Suletta couldn't help but whisper. However, Miorine's bodyguards, stationed outside the greenhouse and fully aware of the chaos within, remained apathetic, their yawns indicating their disinterest. They seemed to be present merely to stymie Miorine's escape.

Guel aggressively snapped a branch he picked up and brandished it menacingly at Miorine as though threatening to strike her with it.

"I've been too lenient with you, it seems. As your future husband, I'll have to teach you some discipline. You just need to shut your mouth and give yourself over to me."

Before another word could escape his lips, Suletta pulled back her arm and landed a swift blow on Guel's posterior.

***THWACK!***

The satisfying reverberation filled the greenhouse. Miorine's eyes widened in astonishment.

'OUCH!'

Caught off guard, Guel let out a yelp. He spun around, only to find Suletta, a stranger, standing there defiantly, her knees quivering.

Both Lauda and his entourage stood speechless.

However, Suletta, summoning her courage, met Guel's gaze unflinchingly.

"D-D-Didn't your mother ever teach you? You can't act like that!"

Her bravado remained undiminished, though her legs betrayed her fear. Yet she continued to rebuke Guel. Infuriated, he closed in on Suletta.

"What the hell's your problem?"

"Heeee!"

Suletta shrieked as he leaned in, his forehead nearly grazing hers.

"Don't you know who I am?"

She quickly sidestepped Guel and found refuge behind Petra.

"What the...?" Petra muttered, taken aback by this sudden development.

Suletta wracked her brains before hesitantly offering, "Um, well... A pushy suitor?"

At Suletta's attempt to guess his name, both Petra and Felsi burst out laughing.

"Pffft!"

Mocked by his own entourage, an infuriated Guel declared loudly, "I happen to be the heir to one of the three branches of the Benerit Group, the head of the Dueling Committee, and the reigning Holder!"

"Holder?"

"The school's number one pilot, as chosen through duels."

Still shielded by Petra, Suletta retorted bravely, "Th-That may be true, but... But what's wrong is wrong! Please tell Ms. Miorine that you're sorry!"

"Huh? Here at this school, right and wrong are decided through duels. Or would you like to duel me yourself? Hahaha."

Guel laughed dismissively at Suletta's audacious proposal. He was confident that she was in no position to defy him. But he was about to be proven gravely mistaken. Suletta emerged from behind Petra, her gaze unwavering.

"I accept."

"What?"

Once again, the smile plastered on Guel's face melted away.

"You and I will duel!"

Suletta declared resolutely. She had taken Guel's casual suggestion seriously and accepted the challenge, looking him square in the eye.

"Stop it! This has nothing to do with you!"

Miorine, who had been lying on the floor, started to get up, but Guel cut her off. His demeanor had changed; his mirth was replaced by grim determination.

"Sounds fun. If you lose, you'll have to leave the school!"

"Right," Suletta responded confidently.

"You idiot!"

Miorine's helpless cry echoed through the greenhouse, but it did little to dampen Suletta's resolve.

A determined fire flickered in her eyes.

"I'll do it."

## 7. DUEL

Within the cavernous hangar of the Jeturk House's academy ship, students assigned to maintenance bustled around, prepping a mobile suit for dispatch. As the large shutter slid open, Guel's formidable Dilanza was ushered into the airlock chamber.

"Send the carrier to Gate No. 2! Load it with spare packs, too!"

The voice of Kamil Kaysink, the Jeturk House's chief mechanic and a senior from the Mechanic department, reverberated through the hangar.

Up on the bridge, the operator meticulously oversaw the launch procedures.

"The carrier is now moving to Gate No.2. Spare packages are loaded."

The Dilanza was secured within the container.

— *Phase 02 of launch preparations. All personnel, final check.*

Lauda was on the bridge with the staff and felt the weight of his brother Guel's upcoming duel. His victory was crucial for the Jeturk House.

Guel, now donning a pilot suit, climbed into the cockpit and initiated the systems of Dilanza with practiced efficiency.

Across the academy, in classrooms and corridors, students tuned into the impending duel, their eyes glued to student handbooks and tablets.

"There's gonna be a duel!"

"With Mr. Guel!"

"Who's he against? "

"A transfer student, I hear."

The container housing Dilanza was transported to the catapult of the Jeturk House's academy ship.

—Passage to tactical testing sector. No obstacles. Takeoff granted!

Following the operator's commands, the container was fastened onto the carrier, rotated into launch position, and then fired from the catapult, following the distribution paths spread across the Front to the tactical testing sector.

Simultaneously, at the spaceport of Benerit Group headquarters, Guel's father, Vim Jeturk, was bidding farewell to Delling Rembran with his associates. As Delling ascended the ramp to the group's colossal courier ship, Vim discreetly signaled to a subordinate, ensuring no one was observing.

"Are you sure about this?"

Vim swiftly retrieved a compact transmitter from his subordinate.

"If Delling dies, my son Guel's engagement will be secured. I have to act before the results of these silly 'duels' are nullified."

Vim scrutinized the transmitter, his gaze shifting between the departing ship and the device in his hand. Unbeknownst to Delling, a powerful explosive had been implanted on his ship on Vim's orders.

"Set the detonation for ten minutes after launch."

The subordinate, realizing the point of no return had passed, could only nod in affirmation. Vim echoed his thoughts aloud, "Delling... our long friendship ends today."

The gate to the tactical testing sector opened, and the container carrying the Dilanza appeared on the surface.

—*Environmental setting data for tactical testing sector received. Coriolis correction, stable.*

The operator's voice filtered through the comms. The container's fastenings clicked open, and the bay doors parted.

—*Bioinfo, identification complete. Permet link, satisfactory.*

The doors on the container's top layer shifted open sequentially, revealing the sleek form of the Dilanza. In the cockpit, Guel, following protocol, announced his student number and the machine's name with resolute clarity.

"KP001, Guel Jeturk. Dilanza, let's go!"

The cage lock disengaged with a metallic snap, and the Dilanza descended onto the surface of the tactical testing sector. In an instant, its blade antenna extended, and the camera eye pulsed into life.

Back in the Duel Committee Lounge, Shaddiq watched with evident enjoyment as the Dilanza projected onto the sizable screen.

"Show-off. Aren't you going to watch, Elan?"

He spun around to prod Elan into participation, only to find his fellow committee member engrossed in a book.

"Who cares," Elan dismissed him with a nonchalant flick of a page.

On the cockpit monitor, Guel's younger brother Lauda voiced his disapproval. While idly toying with his hair, he expressed his dissatisfaction.

"Why accept a duel from that country bumpkin?"

In response to his brother's words, Guel responded with a self-assured grin, "I'll make it quick for her. I'm the future ace of Dominicus, after all."

A blip on the adjacent monitor indicated the approach of a second mobile suit. Guel's smirk broadened, "There she is. The Mercurian girl."

The Aerial had arrived, albeit with noticeably shaky steps.

In the committee lounge, one of the Duel Committee members, Rouji, was showing Aerial on the tablet he held.

Beside Rouji was a Haro.

Secelia, peering at the screen from behind, said,

"She's got a flashy one, too."

"I don't see a logo. Could it be handmade?" Rouji replied, gazing at the mobile suit he had never seen before.

A camera drone equipped with a Haro hovered between the two suits, its lens trained on the mobile suits preparing for combat.

"With mutual consent by both parties, we will now begin the duel. As always, victory will go to the first one to break the blade antenna of their opponent's mobile suit. Both parties, face off!"

Guel, catching sight of his opponent on the Dilanza's main screen, couldn't suppress an exclamation of surprise.

"Miorine? Why are you here?"

The image of Miorine donned in a pilot suit confronted him. He had been expecting to duel with Suletta, the transfer student from Mercury.

The academy's student body erupted in speculation.

"What?"

"Isn't that the princess?"

"I thought it was the transfer student?"

The transfer student who had become the talk of the entire school—Suletta herself was also astonished as she looked at the screen.

"How did Ms. Miorine board Aerial?"



She should be the only one in Aerial's cockpit.

Immediately after the duel with Guel was decided, Suletta naturally headed for the hangar but couldn't enter without her student handbook. While getting lost on her first day in the school, she went around looking for her handbook by retracing her steps, and before she knew it, the duel had started.

"Right."

A wave of realization washed over her as she recalled handing her student handbook to Miorine in the greenhouse. She hadn't retrieved it, and without it, she couldn't approach the tactical testing sector.

Overwhelmed and unsure of how to rectify the situation, Suletta was jolted from her thoughts by a voice behind her.

"Ms. Suletta? What's wrong?"

Turning around, she found herself face-to-face with Nika.

Inside the cockpit of the Aerial, Miorine was already engaged in battle. The duel itself had not yet commenced, but she had never been one to shy away from conflict, no matter the circumstance. This was true even for a verbal spar through a monitor.

"What's the meaning of this, Miorine?" Guel's domineering voice boomed through the monitor.

No, it was as if the whole world was pressing down on her. Miorine fired back, her eyes searing with determination.

"I'm sick of people making decisions for me."

Her life had always been decided by her father's whims. The idea of someone making decisions for her made her blood boil. That's why she couldn't stand Suletta deciding to duel on her behalf.

"This is my fight!"

Miorine spat back, her words simmering with defiance. Guel's response was nothing more than a smirk as he raised Dilanza's beam partizan.

"Impudent girl. Have it your way. I'll show you firsthand that you're no match for me."

As Dilanza seemed about to launch an attack on Aerial, a communication from Shaddiq chimed into his cockpit.

— *Guel? Do you approve the change in duel opponent?*

"I approve. Victory is never decided by mobile suit performance alone."

"Nor by the skill of the pilot, alone."

Miorine finished for him. In unison, they pronounced, "The result itself is the only truth!"

"Fix release!"

Shaddiq's command was followed by an intense light that engulfed the tactical testing sector, transforming it into a desolate, cloud-strewn wasteland.

"DUEL" blazed across the sky, marking the official start of the combat. The Dilanza charged forward, with Aerial attempting a clumsy counter.

"Weapons. Where are the weapons?"

Miorine, meanwhile, frantically searched for Aerial's weapons. As she manipulated the controls, a beam rifle appeared on the sub-console.

In an instant, the rifle was launched from the Aerial's back.

The rifle's thruster kicked in, and Aerial took it into its hand with precision, aiming at the Dilanza.

Most of the movement was not Miorine's unfamiliar handling but the result of the attitude control system.

Energy filled the muzzle, and Miorine's command pulled the trigger, releasing a potent beam. The attack missed Dilanza, and the resulting recoil threw Aerial off balance. Following Newton's third law, the action of the fired beam had an equal and opposite reaction, causing Aerial to topple over, discarding the rifle.

"Ahh!"

Even though she had learned about it in class — Miorine let out a scream inside the cockpit.

"Did you think any amateur could handle a mobile suit?"

Guel's voice taunted as he fired Dilanza's chest-mounted beam vulcans. The photon bullets rained around Aerial, some finding their target.

"It's my life; let me do as I please!"

Miorine retorted as she fought back desperately. Despite her efforts, she was no match for Guel.

"I'll decide for myself!"

The Dilanza, dodging the Aerial's beam vulcans with his hover unit, struck the chest of the Aerial with the opposite side of the beam partizan's blade—the pommel.

"Ugh!"

Violently shaken inside the cockpit, Miorine felt her stomach churn, and she threw up.

The Aerial fell flat on its back onto the ground.

Back at the Benerit Group's spaceport, Vim was staring intently at his wristwatch instead of watching his son's fight.

"Two minutes left."

Meanwhile, in the classroom, four students gathered to watch the outcome of the duel.

Among them, Chuatury Panlunch had the coldest gaze directed at the tablet. Liliq, Till, and Aliya surrounded her.

"The princess of Management Strategy has no chance of winning."

Chuatury, also known as Chuchu, was from the Pilot department. She was convinced that a beginner couldn't pilot a mobile suit, let alone defeat Guel, who was the Holder.

The Dilanza pointed its weapon at the fallen Aerial.

"Take a good look at yourself. You're nothing more than a trophy."

Guel, intending to finish it, slowly moved the Dilanza forward.

According to the rules of Asticassia's duels, the fight wouldn't be over until the mobile suit's blade antenna in the head was broken.

Suddenly, an electronic sound echoed through Dilanza's cockpit, halting Guel's movements.

"An alert? What? An intruder?"

The sensors had detected an unarmed human within the tactical testing area, causing an interruption to the duel.

The intruder's face flashed on monitors throughout the school, baffling Guel.

"Who the hell are you?"

Naturally, Guel had no idea who Nika was.

The next moment, a student in a pilot suit, riding a Haro-equipped bike, charged toward the two mobile suits.

—*Exceeding speed limit. Please decrease speed.*

Despite the Haro's warning, the bike didn't stop.

Guel immediately zoomed in on the monitor. He recognized the face behind the visor — this time, for sure. It was unforgettable. The transfer student from Mercury, Suletta Mercury.

In the classroom, where Ojelo and Martin were watching the duel with Nuno, Nuno asked Nika, who had been carrying luggage,

"Why is it showing your name, Nika?"

Nika searched for words and smiled.

"I guess I helped."

When Nika encountered Suletta in distress, she lent her student handbook.

With Nika's student handbook, Suletta infiltrated the tactical testing area, commandeered a bike, and managed to reach Aerial. She leaped off the bike, ran towards the cockpit, and accessed the forced operation panel of the hatch.

With a burst of exhaust, Aerial's cockpit sprung open. Miorine, slumped in her seat, raised her head in surprise.

"Why are--"

Before Miorine could even finish saying "you," Suletta gave her a fierce headbutt, mirroring the intensity of the one Miorine had given in space.

The impact accidentally activated the external speaker function.

—*What are you doing?*

Miorine snapped, indignant about the sudden interruption.

—*Give it back!*

Suletta retorted with equal fervor.

—*What?*

—*Aerial is mine!*

—*I told you, this has nothing to do with you!*

—*Then fight in your own mobile suit!*

The argument between the two echoed throughout the school.

In the classroom, the students began to stir.

"What's going on?"

"Are they fighting?"

Even in the Duel Committee lounge, Shaddiq and the others exchanged glances and shrugged.

Inside the Aerial's cockpit, Suletta and Miorine wrestled and fought over the seat. Of course, it was all heard throughout Asticcassia.

—*Don't be so stingy! It's just another mobile suit!*

—*Aerial isn't just another one! We were raised together, as family!*

Suletta's tone was strong, which made Miorine furrow her brow.

—*Huh? Family?*

—*Why don't you let me fulfill my responsibility by winning?*

*Aerial and I will never lose to the likes of him!*

Upon hearing this, Guel was once again infuriated with Suletta. He opened a line to the Duel Committee lounge.

"The likes of him?" Shaddiq, I'm changing opponents again!"

"Give him the go ahead, Secelia."

At Shaddiq's order, Secelia immediately tapped away at her student handbook.

"Sure thing."

Simultaneously, the duelist's name on the screen changed from Miorine to Suletta, signifying the new match-up.

## 8. BRIDE

No sooner had the enforced halt lifted, the Dilanza powered the hover function of its legs to their max and sprung into a preemptive strike on the Aerial.

"Brother!" cried Lauda, but his voice was lost in the cacophony, unable to penetrate Guel's seething fury.

"I'll correct your ignorance, you country bumpkin!"

With a swift flick, the Dilanza shrugged off its partizan, switched its weapon to the beam rifle, and let loose a volley of high-energy particles.

The downed Aerial slowly clawed its way up from its prone position, the beams glancing past it.

"Straight ahead!"

Miorine's warning cut through the tense silence in the cockpit, her voice a tremulous note of apprehension of the imminent direct hit. Contrasting Miorine's panic, Suletta was a picture of tranquility, her calm belying the chaos of battle around her.

"My mother taught me, 'If you run, you gain one, but if you move forward, you gain two.'"

"What?"

"When you run, you gain one by not losing. But if you move forward..."

"You can win?"

Miorine was forced to sit on the left side of the seat.

Suletta, seated, turned her gaze upwards. The timidity that had so characterized her initial interactions with Miorine was gone, replaced now by an unwavering determination.

"Whether you win or not, there are two things you gain. Experience and pride. Not to mention trust!"

While Miorine sat there, dumbstruck by Suletta's sudden transformation, the internal circuitry of Aerial's Shell Unit, nestled

within its head and chest compartments, flared up in crimson defiance.

In response, an array of Gun-Bits, hitherto affixed to various parts of the mobile suit, sprung into action, encircling the Aerial at a dizzying speed before converging on its elevated left arm, forming a formidable shield. At this point, Guel chose to deploy another beam rifle attack. The beams, aimed with deadly precision, were all but set to land on the Aerial but were rebuffed by the protective force field of the shield. It splintered into luminescent fragments, scattering behind the Aerial and dissipating as they struck the walls of the combat arena. The resulting shockwave threw up a thick veil of dust around Aerial's feet.

Back in the classroom, Nika and the others watched, agape and utterly astounded, their understanding struggling to keep pace with the rapidly unfolding events. When the dust finally settled, the Aerial was revealed to be unscathed.

Lauda, who had been so certain of Guel's victory, involuntarily found himself leaning in, eyes wide with disbelief.

"A shield?"

While Lauda grappled with the surprising turn of events, Guel's fighting spirit roared back into life.

"She blocked it. In that case..."

The Dilanza discarded its beam rifle, drew a beam torch, and charged forward. The Gun-Bits, no longer maintaining their protective formation around the Aerial, whirled around in a wild dance. A shiver of premonition snaked down Guel's spine as his instincts kicked in, but before he could fully comprehend the implications, the tide had turned irrevocably.

Without warning, the eleven GUN-BITs let loose a blinding barrage of beams. The lethal shower pierced through Dilanza's shoulders, arms, and critical systems, showing no quarter. Pieces of the once formidable machine were blasted apart, creating a macabre display of scattered debris.

Left defenseless, Guel could only stammer, "What just happened? What kind of mobile suit is that?"

The Aerial donned its GUN-BITs again.

At this spectacle, Elan Ceres, a member of the duel committee, closed the book he'd been half-reading and stared at the screen with keen interest.

"GUND-ARM... Gundam," he murmured. His comment made Shaddiq's eyes widen as if he had just anticipated a wave of looming chaos.

With the combat far from over, the Aerial unholstered a beam saber from its back, extending the gleaming blade straight ahead. From his fallen cockpit, Guel could do nothing but stare at the menacing figure looming over him, beads of sweat trickling down his forehead.

"Wh-What... What the hell are you?!"

With a swift, merciless swing, the Aerial raised its beam saber high above its head and, in one fell swoop, tore through Dilanza's horn.

A shower of feather-like debris scattered across the battlefield.

Vim checked his wristwatch. It was 16:11 – more than 10 minutes had passed since Delling's ship had left the port.

It's time," he declared. He pulled out his communication device, and a subordinate's voice reached out to him.

"Mr. Jeturk."

"A last-minute intervention?"

"No. Your son was defeated in a duel."

"What?"

Vim was taken aback. Despite being strict— or precisely because of it— he had not doubted his son's victory at all.

His subordinate continued in a measured tone, "Even if you killed President Delling now, Master Guel won't be Mistress Miorine's fiance."

"Who was the opponent? Grassley? Peil?"

"No. It was..."

Vim's subordinate stumbled over his words.

Meanwhile, in the tactical test area where the duel had concluded, the victorious Aerial knelt on its right knee, silently awaiting its next command. Miorine, having climbed out of the cockpit and onto the Aerial's large palm, surveyed the wreckage of the defeated Dilanza. Victory belonged unequivocally to Suletta and her Aerial.

"Excuse me..." a voice drifted to her ears. She turned to find Suletta, the same nervous demeanor from their first encounter still apparent.

"I-I won." Suletta stuttered. Her student handbook, tucked in the cockpit of the Aerial, lit up, proudly displaying the results of the duel.

Extracting the handbook, Miorine confirmed the victor's name. Up to this point, she had dismissed Suletta as a mere annoyance. But now, she would remember her name.

"So it seems. Suletta Mercury..."

Miorine held up the screen of the handbook for Suletta to see.

"Huh? What the... How did you..."

Suletta started, her eyes widening at the sight of her grey pilot suit transforming into a pristine white, adorned with a golden mark. It was identical to the design Guel had previously worn.

With a gasp, Suletta gazed at her altered appearance.

"This attire is the emblem of victory. The emblem of the Holder," Miorine explained. Then, she added, "It's also the emblem of my fiancée."

"Wh-what?" Suletta stammered, unable to keep pace with the abrupt turn of events.

"I told you, didn't I? Those are the rules."

"But I... I'm a woman."

"I guess Mercury is rather conservative. That sort of thing is commonplace here."

Suletta was speechless, unable to form a coherent reply to the casually delivered bombshell. Capitalizing on her bewilderment, Miorine launched what felt like a follow-up attack.

"Nice to meet you, my groom."



## #2 Cursed Mobile Suit

**Strong reasons make strong actions.**

From William Shakespeare's "*King John*"

**[SECTOR]** The term refers to a region in space. In Ad Stella, precise spatial coordinates are used for space navigation, and the term "sector" is often used to describe relatively large areas, such as "the sector near the school front" based on reference points such as fronts and celestial bodies.

# 1. FRONT MANAGEMENT COMPANY

In the aftermath of the fierce duel in the tactical testing zone, Guel Jeturk found his mind trapped in a relentless cycle of defeat. Again and again, he saw his machine, the pride of his combat, humiliated by the unyielding Aerial.

"What just happened? What kind of mobile suit is that?"

His words, a disbelieving groan, echoed within him, the reverberations of his loss refusing to fade.

In the Duel Committee Lounge, a speculative murmur slipped from Elan Ceres, "GUND-ARM... Gundam."

No sooner had the name escaped his lips than Shaddiq Zenelli, an up-and-coming executive from the renowned Grassley Defense Systems, caught the implication. He quickly turned to Rouji, issuing a command.

"Rouji!"

"Yes! Haro."

Shaddiq's instructions couldn't be ignored. Even the seemingly inconsequential utterance from Elan couldn't escape his attention. On Rouji's vocal command, the Haro's lights blinked in affirmation.

—*As you wish.*

Soon, the Aerial's registration data was pulled up on Rouji's tablet. The Haro's AI had parsed the lounge's conversation with uncanny accuracy, inferring the desired action from a few scattered phrases.

Rouji scanned the data before announcing, "There's no match for its individual Permet code, but there's one machine that's similar."

"Ochs Earth, huh?"

Shaddiq's eyes didn't leave the Aerial's image on the monitor as he voiced his thoughts.

Over his shoulder, Rouji echoed his incredulity, "But that's impossible. I mean..."

"If that's the Witch's mobile suit, then... We can't just leave it alone."

Elan's words punctuated the room. The Gundam, called "GUND-ARM," was not only strictly forbidden from being manufactured or researched but also from being developed within any company affiliated with the Mobile Suit Development Council. It was inconceivable that such a thing would be officially brought into Asticassia, operated by the Benerit Group. It was simply impossible.

Yet, against all odds, the impossible had occurred.

Shaddiq sensed the seismic shift in their circumstances, a smirk unwittingly forming on his lips.

Suletta and Miorine—unconcerned about being seen from across the school—were still standing atop the towering hand of the Aerial within the tactical testing zone. A drone camera, operated by a Haro, filmed their silent tableau from a discreet distance.

Suletta, now in a pilot suit that had involuntarily transformed into the style of the Holder, wrestled with incredulity.

"Me? Your groom?"

"My lousy father decided without consulting me. I'm to marry whoever the Holder is."

"B-But..."

Even when told that it was Miorine's father who had decided, Suletta was at a loss. She had entertained countless dreams about her school life and many adventures she hoped to undertake, but matrimony was notably absent from that list.

"Don't worry. There's no way I'm doing that."

"Huh?"

The emotional whiplash left Suletta bewildered, with the unexpected title of fiancée thrust upon her, only to be dismissed as swiftly.

"All I want... is to go to Earth."

Miorine's murmured confession hung in the air, her back turned towards Suletta. When she finally faced her, her eyes brimmed with a steadfast resolve that left no room for doubt.

Across the academy, classrooms buzzed with animated whispers.

"Guel lost?"

"No way. I can't believe it."

Nika Nanaura, a member of the Mechanics Department, and her Earth House companions—Ojelo, Nuno, and Lilique—had their eyes glued to their student handbooks, broadcasting the live footage of the duel's aftermath.

"Wow... They build mobile suits like this at Mercury?"

The Dilanza that Aerial had defeated was the latest cutting-edge mobile suit manufactured by Jeturk Heavy Machinery, one of the three branches of the Benerit Group. Nika could only be in awe of Aerial, which had so easily defeated it.

The development and manufacturing of mobile suits were overwhelmingly advanced on the space side. When would the day

come when an exceptional mobile suit like the Dilanza could be created on Earth, where Nika was born and raised?

The Aerial, a product of Mercury, had vanquished the Dilanza.

Nika didn't know much about Mercury, but she knew it had a harsher environment, much closer to the Sun than Earth and that its primary industry was mining Permet. The engineers on Mercury must have made tremendous efforts. "We can do it on Earth too," Nika found hope in Aerial.

Suddenly, the footage dissolved into a sea of static, every screen blotted out by a burst of block noise.

"Hey, look...."

Chuchu, who was in another classroom, experienced the same with her student handbook. Martin, Aliya, and Till from the same Earth House looked at each other.

"Jamming?!"

The same anomaly occurred in the tactical testing zone at the same time.

An alarm sounded throughout the entire area.

The sky's footage was cut off, the lights were dimmed, and it became almost pitch dark. Multiple ALERT messages were displayed on the wall monitor, and below it read ACCESS CONTROL.

Suletta had no idea what was happening.

"Entrance and exit restrictions...what...?"

Blinding light spilled from above, dousing Suletta, Miorine, and the Aerial.

"!?"

—*Warning!*

A stern warning echoed from the overhead speakers, and mobile suits began descending ominously from the sky. Each landing sent ripples of powerful gusts, forcing the girls to huddle closer.

The squad, numbering five or six, encircled the Aerial, and a commanding voice barked from the leading unit.

—*Cease dueling immediately!*

The noise that Nika and the others saw was jamming emitted by this mobile suit to cut off communication with the outside world.

The mobile suit's shoulder was marked with a logo.

"The front management company?"

The front management company mainly managed and provided security for the Benerit Group's fronts and had officially adopted the mobile suit Demi Garrison, which stood before Miorine and the others.

—*Student ID Number LP041. Suletta Mercury. You and your mobile suit are to be taken into custody on suspicion of using a Gundam.*

As the security mobile suit announced this, it leveled its gun at the Aerial. If it were shot at such a close distance, the Aerial wouldn't escape unscathed, and the lives of Suletta and Miorine outside the cockpit would be in danger.

This is just a threat, Miorine understood.

But Suletta, who was standing next to her, was already in a state of extreme confusion and reacted only to the word Gundam. She had to protect Aerial.

"A Gundam? You've got it wrong! This is Aerial!"

"Lower your weapons!"

As the threat escalated, Miorine stepped forward to shield Suletta. Knowing the mobile suit would hear her thanks to the system's voice processing, her voice, steady and firm, cut through the cacophony.

"Your job is to manage the fronts. This is a school!"

The mobile suit responded with chilling apathy.

—*Rules set by the President take precedence over all others.*

"The President?"

Suletta's confusion deepened further.

But Miorine, standing next to her, knew exactly who the "President" referred to—more than anyone else in the universe, in a sense.

Miorine stared fiercely at the mobile suit, but soon a resentful expression flickered across her face, and she looked away.

Next to her, Miorine was perfectly aware of who the 'President' was, more so than anyone else in the universe, in a manner of speaking. Her face twisted into a grimace, her usually volatile temper flaring anew at the mention of the 'President.'

"That lousy father of mine..."

She seethed, gritting her teeth in helpless fury.

## 2. LISTENING IN

The storage hangar buzzed with activity in the front management district of the school's spaceport. Staff members meticulously inspected the retrieved Aerial.

"Weren't all the Gundam types disposed of?"

"It certainly doesn't look like an old machine."

"Don't those things take the lives of their pilots?"

"Yeah, but that girl is alive, isn't she?"

That girl—Suletta—was dressed in a patient-like garment and was seated in an interrogation room after undergoing thorough physical examinations.

The inquiry, relentless and monotonous, had stretched on for hours. Armed with the same persistent questions, an interrogator from the front management company bore into her.

"Suletta Mercury. Age 17. Student ID Number LP041. Piloting department... Your father is deceased, and your mother is currently assigned to Lagrange 1. Is that correct?"

The questioner, glaring at Suletta from behind a tablet with forced precision, inquired again.

"I already answered you," Suletta retorted, her gaze sinking to the floor. Her words spun in a grueling loop of repetition.

"Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Do you acknowledge that the machine you were piloting was a Gundam?"

"Her name is Aerial!"

Suletta's protests were systematically sidestepped, her words falling onto deaf ears. Having braved the harsh duel, this stretched-out investigation was a different beast altogether. With a sigh of defeat, she lowered her head.

"And that the use of machines equipped with the GUND Format has been frozen and prohibited by the Agreement?"

The interrogator's tone was dipped in accusation.

"I don't know... what you're talking about."

A dossier thudded onto the table in front of her, the deposition inside splayed open for her viewing. Clearly, it was intentional. The sharp sound echoed menacingly.

Suletta recoiled.

"Suletta Mercury. Are you not a member of the Vanadis Institute that developed the Gundams?"

The interrogator leaned in, elbows braced on the desk.

She was at a loss; every ounce of her energy sapped, left to tread a conversation she didn't comprehend.

Meanwhile, in the Benerit Group's conference room, company moguls scrutinized the interrogation video. Delling, onboard a courier ship, joined via monitor. Two of Peil Technologies CEOs, Nugen and Nevola, were engrossed in a hushed conversation.

"She's a Gundam pilot?"

"She doesn't look like a witch."

Sarius Zenelli rested his chin in his hand, his eyes never leaving the screen.

"Any links to Vanadis?"

In response to Sarius' question, one of the executives quickly searched for information.

"Her mobile suit is registered... to the Shin Sei Development Corporation of Mercury. We're still investigating--"

Next to the four CEOs of Peil Technologies, Vim's hand thundered down onto the table, his booming voice slicing through the room.

"If she's not a witch, then how do you explain this? Do you think a bunch of miners at Mercury could build their own Gundam?!"

His gaze swept over the company heads, his finger stabbing toward the monitor.

Sarius, who had been watching, offered an alternative.

"Or perhaps... it's the ghost of Ochs Earth."

The footage of the ongoing investigation of the Aerial continued to be displayed on the screen.

Vim roared, his anger barely in check, his voice a mirror of his son Guel's tone, "The duel results are void. Confiscate that machine immediately and send the pilot back to Mercury!"

"And then your son will reclaim the title of Holder, won't he?"

Sarius's retort hit Vim like a well-aimed shot.

Delling's visage dominated the central screen in the conference room, commanding the attention of all the executives.

—*Summon Shin Sei's representative. We will hold an inquiry.*

It was a decision that no one could interfere with.

### 3. EARTHIAN/SPACIAN

At Asticassia School of Technology, the rhythm of academia played on, oblivious to the web of corporate machinations.

Next to the school building, an oversized elevator showcased training mobile suits, the Demi Trainer. Students and teachers in mechanics uniforms approached, while nearby, mobile crafts designed like bikes and mobile suit towing vehicles stood on standby.

Within the confines of the training rooms, students tested their mettle against machines, and instructors meticulously recorded their

progress with tablets' impassive efficiency. Yet, despite the mundanity of the academy's routine, whispers of the previous day's duel stirred curiosity and conjecture.

"The duel results were voided."

"Well, she cheated, right?"

"I knew something wasn't right."

"What about the transfer student?"

"They're probably still interrogating her."

Over the hum of the student body, teachers continued their lectures, treating the whispers as an inevitable backdrop to their scientific discourses.

—*In other words, the organic complex purification method of the element 'Permetnium,' which was discovered during the lunar development era, has been established for the metal compound Permet...*

Meanwhile, in another corner of the school, a trio bound by shared sentiments towards the newcomer, Suletta, seemed swathed in a cloak of mild sympathy.

"I almost feel sorry for that Mercurian girl."

"Well, she made off with someone else's prize, after all..."

Their gazes drifted towards Miorine.

"Right."

Guel referred to Miorine as a 'trophy,' a blatant insult knowing her pride. A lesser fool might have mistaken the term for a compliment, but Guel had deftly wielded it as a cutting insult. Many people desire to be the trophy that numerous suitors vie for in marriage, sincerely and naively thinking it's a good thing. Guel truly understood Miorine as a person in that respect.

Of course, Miorine correctly took Guel's words as an insult. She didn't need anyone to tell her she was being treated as a trophy. That was why she attempted to escape to Earth to change her situation - only to be interrupted by Suletta!

No students dared approach Miorine; she was like an island, surrounded by vacant seats.

"Nanaura."

"Yes?"

Nika Nanaura quickly turned around as a teacher called out to her on the staircase landing.



"This arrived from the front management company. That transfer student took yours, right?"

The teacher extended a student handbook.

Nika took it and said, "I offered it to her. She was in trouble."

"The lending of student notebooks is against school regulations."

Every student received a student handbook. The handbook was more than a simple academic guide—it was a personal information terminal and an essential permit for campus navigation and mobile suit operation. It wasn't an item to be handed over casually, a trust Nika had extended to Suletta, the girl she barely knew.

"When will that girl be back?"

"An Earthian like you should stay out of this. Just concentrate on your studies."

With this stern instruction, the teacher left Nika standing on the landing, the derogatory 'Earthian' hanging heavy in the air. The term was initially used to refer to Earth residents. Even though they were born on Earth and were now in space like other Asticassia students, some teachers did not consider them equal to 'Spacians.'

Meanwhile, the school front bustled with activity, high-speed rails crisscrossing as vehicles zipped past ceaselessly.

For interstellar travel to other fronts, various courier ships are employed. One such ship awaited Shaddiq, who prepared to depart from the bustling platform. Elan was there to see him off, Sabina Fardin by his side—a housemate from Grassley House and an essential ally.

"Take care of the Dueling Committee for me," Shaddiq said handing off his responsibilities to Elan.

"You work awfully hard for a student."

"I'm just doing it because I want to." Shaddiq retorts, laughing it off.

"A witch trial at the head office?"

Shaddiq, who was called to the main office front, offers a wry smile, "Something like that."

Elan responds after a thoughtful pause, asking, "That girl... Could she really be a witch?"

Shaddiq, amused by Elan's rare curiosity, ribbed him, "What's gotten into you? Curious about someone besides yourself, Elan?"

He took a few steps away, then turned to look at Elan, "Don't tell me you're in love."

Elan averted Shaddiq's knowing gaze, his eyes betraying nothing of his emotions or intentions as they stared far into the distance.

"Falling in love is something I'll never do. No matter what."

Miorine stood amidst the ruins of the greenhouse, shuffling the remnants of shattered potted plants, misshapen equipment, and disarrayed toolboxes – all victims of Guel's reckless rage.

"Phew..."

As Miorine took a break, she heard footsteps from behind.

"Let me help."

Spinning around at the unexpected offer, she met the gaze of Lauda, Guel's younger sibling, standing against a backdrop of Felsi and Petra.

"It was your great 'ace' who broke these, you know," she remarked, not bothering to veil her resentment. What Guel had perpetrated was nothing short of violence, raw and unfiltered.

Lauda's brow furrowed. He seemed prone to defensiveness at any critique of his brother, yet he showed admirable restraint as he neared Miorine.

"Well, my brother told me to fix them."

"Does that mean he's sorry?" Miorine's words were coated in biting sarcasm, "And where is he now?"

She cast a sweeping glance around the desolate landscape. Guel was conspicuously absent.

"He's absent today."

"He probably got summoned after losing that duel."

With each of Miorine's sharp words, Lauda's expression soured. It was Felsi who broke the silence with a caustic retort of her own.

"Well, it's better than a parent who's aloof from their child!"

Her voice had an edge of raw spite as if the words had a personal sting. Petra chimed in to further provoke.

"Like father, like daughter. You just leave that transfer student dangling after she fought for you."

However, Miorine countered their remarks with a dismissive attitude.

"I never asked her to do that. I'll tell her when she gets back not to meddle in others' affairs."

Their smirks faltered briefly at Miorine's assertiveness, only to reappear, more forced than before.

"Since you don't seem to know, we'll fill you in. The Mercurian girl is going to be expelled."

The word 'expelled' hung in the air like a guillotine's blade. Miorine had been reaching for a wrench; the revelation caused her to freeze.

"They're going to scrap her mobile suit, too! I heard my dad say so."  
Felsi put extra emphasis on the word 'dad.'

Silently, Miorine retrieved the wrench, its metallic surface reflecting the cold light. She advanced towards Felsi, who instinctively retreated.

"Wh-What? You got a prob--"

Miorine's wrath, held in check by a tight rein, found an outlet as she thrust the wrench against Felsi's chest.

"You said it, right? Fix it, then."

Leaving behind the wreckage of the greenhouse, she set a course for the school. As she ambled away, Felsi attempted a parting shot, but the intense gaze Miorine cast over her shoulder rendered her speechless.

"And one more thing..."

Miorine paused for a beat before delivering her final warning, "If you touch my tomatoes, I'll kill you."

At a cafeteria table, Nika was sharing lunch with her fellow Earth House residents—otherwise known as fellow Earthians—Chuchu and Martin.

Martin Upmont, a third-year Business Strategy major and the Earth House dorm leader, broke the meal's rhythm to peruse his student handbook.

"Here it is. Shin Sei Development Corporation. Founded 33 years ago. Ranked D within the group. 151st place in sales?"

"Isn't that the bottom of the ladder?"

Chuchu—Chuatury Panlunch, the freshman and junior of the Earth House, a Piloting major—exhibited an amalgamation of shock and revulsion. The notion that a mobile suit from such a lowly organization could trounce the Dilanza was staggering.

"I'm impressed she got into this school. Still..." Martin mused.

"They made their own mobile suit."

Nika turned the thought over in her mind. If they could build something as impressive as the Aerial on Mercury, wasn't it possible on Earth too?

As a fellow Earthian, Martin knew what Nika was thinking. He sighed and crossed his arms.

"But unless it's approved, what good is it? If she had a bigger supporter, it might've been a different story."

"At our school, you're as good as the rank of the company that recommended you," Chuchu said, propping her cheek on her hand in frustration.

Even the student numbers assigned to each individual were based on the corporate rankings. The students with higher-ranked companies got smaller numbers. First-year pilot major Chuchu was MP039—M represented the year of admission, P for pilot major. Guel, a third-year from the same major, was KP001.

"I can hardly be proud of being born on Earth," Martin conceded to the harsh reality.

But Chuchu was not convinced.

"It's the Spacians who are holding us down!"

"Keep your voice down, Chuchu," Nika gently chided, an easy smile playing on her lips.

They shared the common bond of being Earthians and had thus become fast friends. However, they were all different in every other aspect—the environments they grew up in, the burdens they carried, and even their feelings toward the Spacians.

"I don't care if they hear!" Chuchu was defiant, puffing her cheeks as if to protest against Nika.

"Well, I do care," Martin, always the timid one, confessed.

Caught in this tug-of-war of contrasts, Nika was about to be put to a new test as two students approached their table.

It was clear from their expressions that they had come to pick a fight.

"Do you mind moving?"

"That's our usual table."

Chuchu was quick to argue back.

"Since when—"

But Nika interrupted Chuchu.

"It's fine. We just finished eating."

Nika stood up gracefully. On her tray, the food remained largely untouched.

One of the students spat something onto their tray—it was the gum they had been chewing.

"You're done eating, right? Throw that out with the rest."

The gum-spitting student sneered at Nika, a cruel smirk dancing in their eyes.

"Hey! Learn some manners, Spacian!"

Chuchu couldn't hold her tongue, jumping up, her fists balled for a brawl. Martin stood frozen at the sudden confrontation.

But Nika addressed them both with a calm voice.

"Let's go, Chuchu. Martin, too."

"Eh...?"

Chuchu, who was ready to brawl, found herself disarmed by Nika's natural yet visibly restrained smile.

Nika walked away from the scene, encouraging them further with her actions.

"W-wait, Nika!"

Chuchu hurried after Nika in a panic.

"I'll clean up right away."

Martin offered a wry smile to their challengers, gathering his and Chuchu's trays to follow in Nika's wake.

"Nika, why did you..."

In Chuchu's plea, frustration was overshadowed by a note of sorrow.

But Nika didn't turn around; she just kept walking, her expression unseen.

## 4. COUNTDOWN

After school hours, Miorine had found herself at the counter of the front management company.

"As I said, there's a possibility that was a forbidden machine."

The officer on the screen reacted with palpable annoyance, but Miorine stood her ground, pushing back hard.

"I'm only asking to see the pilot! She's my classmate!"

"It's not up to me."

"Who's it up to, then?"

"President Delling."

Once again, that name came up, and Miorine was taken aback.

"Now, if you would please leave."

Overwhelmed by a sense of powerlessness, Miorine's strength drained from her shoulders as she leaned on the counter.

Soon after, she found herself drowning in the cosmic void outside the window of the spaceport lounge, with her two omnipresent bodyguards playing their usual role in the backdrop.

One of them approached her.

"Mistress Miorine."

"Go back to class, right?"

"No. I have a message from your father."

The bodyguard extended a handheld device.

Without even taking it, Miorine said, "I don't want to read it."

"Then I'll read it for you. 'Miorine, I'm unenrolling you from the school.'"

"What?"

"I'll arrange a groom myself. Return immediately."

"What?"

Miorine, listening with her eyes closed, sprung up, her surprise morphing into raw indignation.

"That's all."

"Give me that!"

She snatched the device from the bodyguard, scanning her father, Delling's email, her fury igniting.

"What the hell is this? It was you who decided that my fiancé would be selected through duels. Suletta's the one who won the duel! No man chosen by that jerk will be a husband of mine!"

"It's no use saying that to me."

She knew that arguing with the bodyguards was like screaming at a wall. She needed to vent her anger in the right direction.

"He's always like this. He never consults me, he never explains... Whether it's enrolling me at this school

or forcing me to quit piano. Or deciding who I should be friends with. Even my own mother's funeral!"

Her voice rose, tears welling in her eyes as she hurled the device towards the lounge window.

Caught by surprise, the bodyguards didn't react in time.

The device floated in the zero-gravity, not in a parabola, but straight, hitting the window and softly bouncing off. The reinforced glass remained unscathed.

Kick-starting her exit with a swift boot to the bar stool, Miorine decided to ditch this place.

"Where are you going?"

"To the bathroom!"

The bodyguards, though exasperated, had to follow their charge. A swift conversation followed between them, one deciding to fetch the discarded device while the other shadowed Miorine.

"Don't let Mistress Miorine out of your sight."

A spectating figure on the lounge's second floor stood up. The sunglassed individual, having heard the exchange, hurriedly followed Miorine and the bodyguard downstairs. Unaware, they continued their pursuit.

"Die, die, die, die..."

Sequestered in a restroom stall, Miorine was killing virtual enemies on her student handbook, using the restroom as an excuse to escape her bodyguards.

Her game was interrupted by a knock, causing her to raise her head in surprise.

"You must be Ms. Miorine Rembran."

The voice outside halted her massacre.

Miorine paused her game, tuning into the voice.

Sensing her caution, the stranger outside murmured words only a collaborator would know.

"Designate Colony Coordinate XY72Z53."

"That's... the rendezvous point for my escape!"

The stranger outside had to be... Cautiously, Miorine cracked open the restroom door.

Feng Jun, the figure from the second floor, stood there.

Miorine, not recognizing Feng, eyed her warily.

Feng, undeterred, bowed politely.

"It's nice to finally meet you in person. You didn't show up to meet us the other day, so I came to check on you."

Miorine felt a flicker of relief at this.

"Is this some sort of after-sales care?"

"You did pay us, after all."

Feng, with an easy smile, offered her proposal.

"If you haven't changed your mind, would you like to escape now?"

"What?"

"If we act now, I can send you to Earth as you desire."

"To Earth?!"

Miorine exclaimed with excitement, but immediately averted her gaze from Feng.

"But..."

Miorine was reminded of Suletta.

"I can wait for 30 minutes. Make a decision you won't regret."

Feng's kind words only amplified Miorine's internal turmoil.

Suletta had helped her. She couldn't just abandon her.

But—another thought crept in. Miorine had been waiting for an opportunity to escape. This was her biggest chance to run away from her despised father. It might be her last.

On the game screen—the one Miorine wasn't looking at—a countdown had started. She had to decide whether to continue the game within 10 seconds.

8, 7, 6—

Should she go to Earth or stay here?

Looking at the indecisive Miorine, Feng judged that she wouldn't be able to decide and closed her eyes for a moment, preparing to leave quietly. But then,

"I'll go."

There were still three seconds remaining in the game countdown. Feng found it surprising, but she had already received the payment. She turned to gauge Miorine's resolve.

Her hesitation still lingered, but there was an undercurrent of determination as she pleaded.

"You've gotta get me out of here!"

It was clear; Miorine's heart had spoken.

## 5. GUEST

A small transport vessel launched through the gate, pulling away from the spaceport. Miorine's figure could be seen through the porthole.

"Is it really this easy?" she mused.

The once grand expanse of the school colony dwindled into the void, retreating from her vision.

Feng, in the pilot's seat, spoke to Miorine, "It's all about timing. We're lucky the spaceport controller was a collaborator of ours, and then you and I happened to meet."

"We'll be leaving the airspace controlled by this port in 5 minutes," Guston, in the co-pilot's seat, reported.

A note of finality laced Feng's words, "Once we do, we can't change our course. Are you sure?"

"Yes. I've made up my mind."

Any semblance of hesitation, any vestige of doubt that had once clouded Miorine's thoughts, had been swept away.

Elsewhere, aboard the Benerit Group's massive courier ship, Delling toiled over his digital workspace. As he scanned and authorized documents with a single touch, the tablet displayed his unmistakable signature – "Delling Rembran."

Beside him, Rajan chose this moment of silent productivity to commence his report.

"Mistress Miorine has disappeared again."



"What about the men watching her?"

"She shook them off. Shall we seal the port?"

"Have the immigration authorities spread a dragnet. I know she's bound for Earth, anyway. More importantly, when will the inquiry begin?"

Delling didn't even glance at Rajan. His disinterest in Miorine's fate was almost tangible.

Unfazed by his superior's dismissal, Rajan continued in a flat tone.

"We've just confirmed the arrival of the Shin Sei representative."

"I see."

With a sigh that seemed to echo the weight of his duties, Delling leaned back in his chair, pausing his relentless work. He closed his eyes, surrendering to a moment of introspection, before reopening them with a gaze that could freeze a sun.

The executive office of Jeturk Heavy Machinery was punctuated by the high-pitched reverberation of a slap.

Vim, the iron-fisted CEO, had just disciplined his son Guel, who was now hanging his head in silent submission.

"So a member of the Jeturk family lost a duel in a Jeturk mobile suit? Are you trying to destroy the company's reputation?"

"Forgive me, Dad."

Guel, undoubtedly the epicenter of frustration in this vast universe, remained silent. His obedience was in stark contrast to his demeanor at the school.

"This time around, I'll arrange to have the duel result voided. Don't embarrass me again!"

"Yes."

As Guel exited the office, a message from a subordinate pinged on Vim's terminal.

— — — *You have a visitor, sir.*

"Who is it?"

— — — *It's... The representative of the Shin Sei Development Corporation.*

"What?"

Why would the center of controversy visit Jeturk company? Vim frowned, pausing to consider his next move. The tea set on his desk exuded a comforting warmth, the fragrance of hot tea permeating the room.

The person allowed to enter was the representative of Shin Sei, adorned in white headgear. Her lips, the only feature visible beneath the headgear, were painted a vivid scarlet.

"It's been a while, Mr. Jeturk."

"We haven't seen each other for 3 years since your appointment as president, Lady Prospera."

"That's right."

Vim resumed his seat with a calculated air of indifference, crossing his arms in silent protest.

"If you want me to talk to the President on your behalf, the answer is no."

"Not at all. The opposite, in fact."

"What?"

"It's you who should ask me for a favor."

A mischievous smile appeared on Prospera's crimson lips.

Suletta remained alone in her confined room, floating gently while hugging her knees as if trying to conceal her vulnerability.

"Mom..."

Fear snuck into her voice, uninvited.

Then came the intrusive buzz of the room's alarm.

"Y-Yes?"

In the weightlessness of her confinement, Suletta, eyes still affixed to the floor, spotted an unfamiliar student floating at the doorway, something cradled in their hands.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Uh-huh..."

Suletta placed her hand on her stomach and nodded repeatedly. The door to the confinement room opened, and the student drifted towards Suletta.

"My name's Elan Ceres. Like you, I'm a student at Asticassia. The guard here let me do his job."

Elan casually introduced himself as he handed over a covered food tray to Suletta.

"Is it really okay?"

"Go ahead."

"I-It's so nice of you."

Lifting the cover, Suletta found bread and a variety of side dishes. Having been hungry, Suletta began eating hesitantly at first, but soon she was gobbling down her meal without a care for Elan.

Soon, as she continued eating, tears started flowing from Suletta's eyes. In zero gravity, her tears scattered like a celestial shower, unending. Elan, unmoved, watched on silently.

As if trying to hold back the tears, Suletta quickly drank from a bottle of water.

During that time, Suletta was momentarily oblivious to Elan. Suddenly realizing this, she hurriedly wiped away the tears from her eyes with her hand and looked at Elan with a bashful expression.

"Thank you very much."

"You're welcome," replied Elan, his expression unchanging.

"Why would you..."

"You interest me," Elan immediately responded without hesitation. Suletta widened her eyes.

"Huh?"

It was the first time someone had said such a thing to her.

Elan looked at Suletta with a serious gaze.

"Suletta Mercury... I'd like to learn more about you."

Suletta felt her cheeks growing hot.

## 6. HYPOCRITICAL

At the front of the Benerit Group, in their so-called deliberation chamber, Delling sat at the apex.

Below his gaze, Vim and the CEOs of Peil Technologies were visible. Next to the CEO of Grassley Corp, Sarius Zenelli, sat Shaddiq, freshly arrived from the school. Shaddiq, the adopted son of Sarius, had changed from his casual school attire into formal attire, his long hair neatly tied back.

At the center of this power matrix, a solitary figure, Prospera, held the room's attention. Despite the circumstances, she emanated a serene strength, an enigmatic smile playing on her lips. As an announcement echoed solemnly across the chamber, the tension became almost palpable.

"We will now begin the inquiry."

Delling opened his weighty mouth in continuation.

Today's topic was the Gundam. Its significance or danger, Delling knew too well. Thus he had decided to lead the deliberation himself.

"Lady Prospera, representative of the Shin Sei Development Corporation. Are you a witch?"

His question caused a ripple of disquiet amongst the CEOs. Swiftly, every eye turned towards Prospera. Yet, she remained undeterred, her response concise.

"No."

"Do you have ties to the Vanadis Institute?"

"No."

"Then how did you build a Gundam?"

Delling pushed further, his voice echoing in the vast chamber.

At this, Prospera smiled enigmatically, holding her ground.

"The Aerial is not a Gundam. It's a product of Shin Sei's newly developed drone technology."

"Did she say drone?"

Vim couldn't contain his surprise. His own corporation's machine, the Dilanza, had been bested by the Aerial. If it didn't involve illegal, prohibited tech – something as potent as the Gundam – it would be a huge blow to their brand, especially in the presence of their president, Delling.

At this moment, Sarius Zenelli nudges his son—rather, his adopted son—Shaddiq.

"Shaddiq."

"Yes, Father."

Shaddiq replied, his fingers flying over his panel, projecting images onto the screens before each individual. The Aerial's unit, two waveform graphs.

"During the duel, that machine's Permet influx values exceeded the standards. This is a unique characteristic

of the GUND Format, the core system of all Gundams," he explained, a sardonic grin playing on his lips.

Prospera interjected gently as if advising, "If that machine is equipped with the GUND Format, you should also have detected a data storm. Well?"

"There was none detected."

"Its control system is based on a conventional Permet link. I'm confident that it complies with all of the group's technology provisions."

Prospera's chest swells with pride.

A defiant Nugen voiced her doubt, "That alone doesn't prove it isn't a Gundam."

"You can't prove that it is, either," retorted Prospera, her voice cool.

Sarius Zenelli chimed in with a taunt, "Lady Prospera... You are merely using the lack of evidence as an excuse. Are you trying to tell us that black is white?"

"We're one of the smallest, but still a member of the Benerit Group. We are, of course, aware of the Cathedra Agreement. I ask for your trust."

Prospera taps her chest with her fist.

"I can't help doubting when you come dressed like that."

Vim shot back, his eyes full of distaste. Prospera merely shrugged her shoulders.

In a theatrical display, she disrobed her jacket to reveal her shoulder.

Vim furrowed his brows, clearly confused at her intention.

As all the CEOs watched, Prospera threw off her jacket and rolled up the sleeve of her inner shirt, revealing her right arm. With a push of a switch on her left hand, a prosthetic arm fell off.

There was a stir among the surrounding executives.

Ignoring the commotion, Prospera flung her prosthetic arm.

"Whoa!"

The one who caught it was Vim. Furious that she had thrown it his way, he glared at her.

Prospera, however, seemed unbothered. If anything, she acted as if she had anticipated this all along. She continued speaking with a composed demeanor.

"This arm, as well as the face behind this mask, were both claimed by Mercury's magnetic field."

As she showed the cross-section of her right arm, Prospera looked up at Delling from behind her mask.

Delling silently stared back at her. The other CEOs remained quiet.

"Environmental conditions on Mercury are severe. However, utilizing our drone technology, we'll be able to mine for Permet without putting anyone in danger. Please allow us to continue the Aerial's development. We are in need of the group's support."

The deliberation chamber fell silent due to the intensity of her statement.

As the CEOs of each company awaited the judgment of Prospera's request, Delling spoke.

"No. That thing is a Gundam."

"Why is that?"

Prospera's query was met with Delling's dogmatic reply, "Because I said so."

From the small part of her face that was visible, it was impossible to tell how Prospera felt about his assertion.

He continued with a commanding presence.

"Any objections?"



Everyone present remains silent, as usual. Even the opinions of the leaders of the three branches will not be accepted at this point.

"Then it's settled. The mobile suit shall be disposed of. We'll get rid of the student pilot."

As he said this, Delling stood up as if to pre-emptively deny any objections. Vim tried to call him back, rising from his seat.

At that moment, the door to the deliberation chamber opened.

There wasn't a single person in the room who didn't recognize the face of the newcomer.

Even Shaddiq knew it well.

Amidst the confused stares of the various company CEOs, the one who walked past a slightly smiling Prospera and stopped at the center of the deliberation chamber, under Delling's gaze, was Miorine.

She had defied her father Delling's instructions laid out in his email, choosing to present herself here rather than journeying to Earth or returning home. At her arrival, his countenance hardened instantly.

"What are you doing here, Miorine?"

Unable to meet her father's intimidating stare, Miorine addresses him while being watched by the crowd.

"I came to give you a piece of my mind. If you made these rules yourself, you shouldn't change them after the fact!"

Her small frame echoed with defiance as she continued her confrontation.

"You hypocritical loser of a father!"

## **7. CASE CLOSED**

At the spaceport dock of the Benerit Group headquarters, there sat the transport ship that had brought Miorine -- not to Earth, but here.

In the cockpit, Feng and Guston appeared bored.

"Weren't you supposed to take her to Earth?"

"I have to honor my customers' requests. And when it comes to the President's daughter, it can't hurt to be owed a favor."

"As calculating as ever."

Feng, having retouched her makeup, gave a wry smile.

"Space is in need of new rules."

In the deliberation chamber, Delling, the father whom his daughter Miorine had called a 'hypocritical loser of a father,' wore a countenance marred by discontent.

Double-standard - or hypocritical - is another way of saying that one can freely judge according to the situation. As the president of Benerit Group, the leading company in the industry, he handled and created standards whenever he needed them. There was no need to respond, let alone contradict, Miorine's observation.

However, he would not tolerate any contradiction, however slight, against his decisions as the president.

"Why are you standing there?"

"What?"

"The only people permitted to stand in this room are the powers-that-be from the top companies of the Benerit Group. But you are different. You are merely a student with no authority to speak of."

Delling mercilessly intimidated Miorine.

Miorine felt a stab of truth in his words. She didn't trivialize the corporate arena, nor did she intend to capitalize on her status as the President's daughter. But disagreement? That, she held in abundance.

Thus, she wouldn't back down.

She seized this rare opportunity and drove her words home without an ounce of hesitation.

"It's always the same with you. You look down and control my life without asking or explaining."

Yet, he stood unaffected by her torrent of words.

"Neither consultation nor explanation are necessary. I decide. You obey."

"!!!"

Miorine's expression hardens at his words.

"Did you think you could speak out against me because you're my daughter?"

"What's your problem?! You're a king?"

"That's right."

Miorine didn't expect her father to actually admit to being a king. Was it going to be like this? Miorine tried to hold back on the brink of giving up.

At this point, Delling signals to Rajan.

Rajan nods and approaches Miorine.

"I am vested with power. You have none. The powerless shut their mouths and obey. Those are the rules of our world."

Before her father's final words of ruthless reproach finished, Rajan grabbed Miorine's wrist, intending to take her out of the room.



But at that moment, Miorine raises her gaze firmly. Not yet. It's not over yet.

"If you move forward, you gain two..."

Rajan found himself unexpectedly thrown off guard. His grip loosened, he hadn't anticipated Miorine's vigorous resistance.

Miorine moved ahead, staring down Delling with a renewed vigor.

"In that case, I challenge you to a duel!"

Delling momentarily faltered, confused yet taken aback by Miorine's audacious challenge.

"If we win, you'll accept Suletta as my fiancé. If we lose, you can do as you please!"

Miorine has always been dragged into duels. This time, she is willingly diving into a duel herself.

"Were you unable to comprehend my words?"

Delling's disappointment was palpable. He was trying to take control of the argument forcefully.

But Miorine wouldn't lose to all of that anymore.

"I'm saying that I'll fight according to your rules! At least take responsibility for your own decisions! You're an adult, aren't you?"

Miorine's words carry overwhelming momentum, but more than that, they have a logical and persuasive force.

A heavy silence descended, the tension tangible.

If power is the rule, then a duel is the best way to reveal the difference in power. That's why Delling intended to decide the Holder—Miorine's fiancé—through a duel. And those present in this room, to varying degrees, all believe that power is the rule. So a duel is an appropriate solution.

Among the sea of serious faces, Shaddiq, a fellow student, admired Miorine's audacity with a broad grin.

Just as Delling is about to speak again, Vim raises his hand.

"May I speak? Even if it was accidentally, that machine defeated our company's Dilanza. Perhaps we should give it time to see what it can do."

Delling's brows furrowed at Vim's input. Vim had initially been a vocal advocate for the disposal of Aerial.

"What do you mean?"

Delling glared at Vim.

But Vim shows no signs of wavering. After all, Vim had recently tried to assassinate Delling himself.

"Recently, mobile suits from other companies have made market gains. That machine could be the key to recovering our market share."

When Vim calmly said this, Prospera added as if to support him.

"I believe the school duels will be an effective test of the Aerial's abilities."

Putting on her jacket, her gaze unwavering as it met Delling's. One of the four Peil Corporation CEOs lined up, Nugen, asked with a smirk.

"And will you provide us with the machine's technical data?"

"Of course," replied Prospera.

However, Sarius was firmly opposed.

"Hold it right there! Do you intend to violate the Cathedra Agreement?"

Ignoring him, Prospera looked at Delling and at his daughter. The CEOs of the various companies began voicing their opinions chaotically.

"I object!"

"How will you announce this to the outside world?"

"It could be valuable."

This is about ethics!"

"But..."

The council chamber quickly turned into chaos. Miorine stood firm amidst the uproar, her eyes locked with Delling's. And Delling, the magnate at the center of the storm, stared right back at her.

## **8. DUELING AGAIN**

Confined to her room, Suletta was idly floating in the corner, wearing something like hospital patient clothes, and reminiscing about Elan. Due to the weightlessness, it seemed like her heart was also floating lightly.

Suddenly, a loud knocking sound echoed through the door.

Startled, Suletta looked in the direction of the noise.

"Suletta!"

The room's seal hissed open, and in sprang Miorine. Propelled by the zero gravity, she launched herself towards Suletta.

"Ms. Miorine!"

Surprised, Suletta dropped the food tray that Elan had given her and caught Miorine as she came flying at her. They ended up pressed against the wall, looking at each other.

"What are you..."

"Let's do it. The duel..." Miorine cut her off abruptly.

"Huh?"

Suletta was confused, unable to make sense of what was happening.

But Miorine pressed on, her words forcefully emphasizing the dire stakes.

"If you lose, Aerial will be scrapped! And you'll be expelled! You have to win!"

Dumbfounded, Suletta hung in silence for a few eternal seconds, then comprehension dawned.

"What?!"

Around the same time Suletta's confinement was lifted, a ballet of destruction unfolded at Jeturk Corporation's space proving ground. Three mobile suits had begun their deadly dance. Two were Dilanza units.

Among the spangling sea of asteroids, a cutting-edge mobile suit, the Darilbalde, streaked through space, leaving a comet-like trail of cerulean luminescence.

On the nearby military vessel belonging to the Jeturk company, staff harvested a torrent of training data while a voice coolly relayed the battle situation to Darilbalde's pilot.

---Permet link established.

---Decision Making Extension AI has been connected.

---Confirming deployment of combat space network.

The Dilanza units unleashed a hailstorm of beam rifle fire, but each radiant pulse harmlessly fizzled into the void, missing Darilbalde by a hair's breadth. The superior unit seemed to predict and elude every threat with uncanny prescience.

---Whenever you're ready.

As a signal that certain preparations had been made within the unit, the Darilbalde rapidly accelerated and inserted itself between the two Dilanza units that were approaching.

Immediately after, Darilbalde's arms separated and, along with the two drones on its back, transformed into four blades. They spun in a lethal pirouette, cleaving through the Dilanza units.

Between the two explosions, Darilbalde's eyes ominously gleamed. The next opponent had already been decided.

## #3 Guel's Pride

**I cannot hide what I am.**

From William Shakespeare's "*Much Ado About Nothing*"

**[DUEL]** At the Asticcassia School of Technology, duels are—under the watchful eye of voluntary Duel Committee members from the student body—a means for students to battle for stakes in mobile suits. To minimize the risk to the duelist's lives, live ammunition is prohibited. Instead, they use beam weapons and close-range weapons with regulated output. Furthermore, settings are such that attacks on the cockpit and vital systems are not allowed, and medical staff are also stationed on-site.

# 1. LIST

At long last liberated, Suletta was moving through the gravity-free passageways of the school's front with Miorine. Fatigue was etched onto Suletta's face, starkly contrasting her usual vibrancy.

She would have to fight.

Miorine braced herself, issuing the solemn challenge to Suletta, "You have to win this duel, so you won't be expelled, and I won't be forced to marry."

The weight of defeat was immense; not only expulsion but also a forced marriage awaited Miorine, arranged by her father.

Suletta paused, her reply timid yet unwavering, "I don't want to."

"What? It only makes sense for us to fight together now!"

Lowering her gaze, Suletta whispered something almost inaudible, "My list..."

"Huh?"

Miorine frowned at the cryptic utterance.

Suletta hesitated before explaining, "I made a list of things I wanted to do when I went to school. Make friends, call them by nicknames, study in the library, eat lunch on the roof, and..."

Then, in the faintest whisper, "...go on dates."

"What's that?"

Confounded, Miorine leaned in, attempting to decipher Suletta's mumblings.

"I want to go on dates!"

The unfamiliar admission left Suletta flushed, her voice unintentionally escalating.

And then—a sudden jolt to her forehead. A souvenir of Miorine's swift flick.

"Yow!"

Suletta lost her equilibrium, the world around her spinning.

"You're sex-crazed."

Miorine remarked, her gaze holding no amusement.

Frantic, Suletta retorted, "I-I can't go on dates once I'm married!"

"Whyever not?"

"Cheating is wrong!"

Fantasies began to expand rapidly in Suletta's mind.

Miorine, seemingly unfazed, began to glide down the corridor, her touch against the wall propelling her forward on the moving walkway. Suletta, nursing her throbbing forehead, trailed behind.

"Calm down! It's not going to happen right away."

"Huh?"

"The legal age for marriage is 17. Which means it won't happen until my birthday, at least."

"R-Really?"

"I'm going to escape here and go to Earth, no matter what. You just have to play my groom until then. Let's make a deal."

Suletta watched, dumbfounded, as Miorine extended her pinky finger, their agreement symbolized.

Meanwhile, aboard the Jeturk Corporation's military ship, a fiery red unit was being fastidiously prepped in the hangar: the Darilbalde. Around it, mechanics buzzed with urgency, performing maintenance and initiating operational procedures.

The cockpit hatch opened, and the pilot emerged.

"Welcome back, young master."

The pilot casually removed his helmet. It was Guel.

"How did you like the Darilbalde?"

But Guel, the so-called "young master," suddenly seized the mechanic by the collar, expressing his simmering rage.

"What the heck did you do to this mobile suit?"

Yet the mechanic remained unfazed, explaining impassively, as one might to a petulant child.

"We added a 5th-generation Decision Making Extension AI. It's still a beta version, but it makes composite Bayesian predictions from previous combat data--"

A new theoretical model is created in Bayesian prediction, reflecting new information. It's a learning forecast. Jeturk's development team boasts that they have developed a more accurate AI that can predict further into the future by combining multiple different AIs.

"Am I not skilled enough to win?"

His boiling anger erupted, but the heated exchange was interrupted by a sharp slap across his cheek.

"Nngh."

Guel instinctively held his cheek and looked up.

There weren't many people in space who could slap Guel. The man floating before him was Guel's father and CEO of Jeturk Corporation, Vim Jeturk.

"Dad..."

"I gathered these staff members as well as the Darilbalde just to make you win."

Vim waved his hand, gesturing around.

The staff paused momentarily, gauging the situation between the father and son before returning to work. There was no time left until the decisive battle.

Vim continued speaking.

"There's no room here for childish pride! If you want to be treated like an adult, then win and reclaim the title of Holder!"

"Yes, sir."

Guel responded, the sting of his father's hand still echoing on his cheek. The memory of his past defeat to Suletta remained fresh, but all that mattered now was the upcoming victory—for the Jeturk Corporation's honor and his own.

## 2. CALL

The hairband Suletta received from her mother and the school-issued bag hung suspended in the zero-gravity space. For the time being, she was housed in a hotel room within the school's front.

Rotating gently as she donned her socks, she held a conversation with her mother through the speaker function of her student handbook, which lay open on the nearby desk.

"Say, Mom. What's a Gundam?"

—*What's this all of a sudden?*

Her mother's image was displayed on the screen.

"People from the Benerit Group say that Aerial's a Gundam. And they even call me a witch. Is it true?"

—*I don't recall raising you as a witch.*

"Neither do I."

Her mother smiled slightly.

—*Of course, I know about that past incident, and about Gundams. But you and Aerial aren't like that, Suletta. You're my precious daughters. Your mom will vouch for you.*

Her gaze was filled with love.

A warmth spread in Suletta's chest. With newfound enthusiasm, she zipped up her uniform to her neck and grinned at her mother's screen.

—*Now, don't you have to leave yet?*

"Oh, no! Well, good luck at work, Mom!"

—*Thank you. Good luck to you, too, Suletta.*

The hand of her mother, who squinted and smiled, had a headgear with four sensor-like items placed on it. It was the same headgear as the masked woman who was put on trial—Lady Prospera.

Walking to school, the air buzzed with gossip as students whispered about her, their words carrying the sting of judgment. Some spoke in hushed tones, while others made sure their words found her ears.

"Look, there she is. The Mercurian girl."

"The one who cheated?"

"I heard the duel's being redone."

The murmurs bore into her, weighing down her shoulders and sinking her heart.

"Ms. Suletta Mercury! Good morning!"

Whether she knew of Suletta's situation or not, Nika, one of her few acquaintances at the school, greeted her with an energetic cheer. Remembering her previous intervention, Suletta bowed deeply in gratitude.

"Th-Thank you for your--"

Nika was a motormouth of excitement and mechanical jargon.

"I was watching it! Your mobile suit was amazing!"

"What?"

"What kind of layer structure is it using for its swarm control? Is it a conventional one? Or is it based on a simultaneous spatial concept?"

Nika was a student in the mechanic department. Her eyes were sparkling.

"My mom said something about 'using successive spaces concurrently...'"

As Suletta recalled the story from her mother, she somehow answered.

Nika got even more excited.

"So that's it! Now I understand the concept-synthesizing schema. It enables it to clear the friction--"

Nika's excitement multiplied tenfold, drawing technical conclusions that Suletta could barely comprehend. Nika's enthusiasm was overpowering, but she radiated a warmth that made Suletta believe she was, indeed, a good person.



But their conversation was cut short by a sneering voice, "Hey! Mercurian wench!"

The students in the corridor quickly opened the way and distanced themselves from the arrogant voice.

Guel, the source of this callous remark, strutted over, his brother Lauda and their followers, Felsi and Petra, trailing behind him.

Suletta immediately retreated behind Nika, intimidated by his towering presence.

"Huh? Ms. Suletta?"

Though taller than Nika, she managed to make herself appear smaller, her fear creating a shield between them. Nika, who had never spoken with Guel and his gang, was also confused like Suletta.

Of course, Guel perfectly ignored the confusion of Suletta, Nika—and everyone around—and said what he wanted to say.

"Our last duel was voided. Now we'll settle things for real."

"Ms. Suletta?"

Guel's words were primarily directed at Suletta, but they were also intended to inform the whole school.

Suletta nervously peered out from around Nika's shoulder.

"W-Well, if that's the case, then... My opponent will be..."

"Me."

Guel pointed at himself with his thumb.

"That's a relief."

Suletta's honesty surprised even herself. Her words lacked malice, but Guel took them as an insult. His anger was a physical presence in the corridor.

"A relief?!"

Startled by the loud voice that seemed to pour oil on the fire, Suletta hurriedly hid behind Nika's back once again.

"W-Well, you know, I already won once..."

"Don't get carried away, you bumpkin!"

Guel's face was grim, his temple twitching.

At that moment, the school bell rang, conveniently interrupting the situation. Seizing this opportunity, Suletta quickly straightened her posture, bowed at a right angle, and said her goodbye.

"W-Well then, I'll be going!"

"Ms. Suletta!"

Suletta left the spot at a speed that didn't even allow Nika's voice to reach her.

Guel, left behind, audibly clicked his tongue.

### 3. ELAN CERES

Meanwhile, within the confines of the Jeturk Corporation, Lady Prospera - the woman with the mask - made her visit to Vim's chamber.

"Your help in the inquiry was invaluable. Thank you very much."

She handed over the media record to Vim. It contained evidence of the Delling assassination plot. In exchange for this data, Prospera had demanded a lifeline in the upcoming inquiry.

Vim's ego had not just bloated; it had puppeteered the inquiry like a seasoned performer.

"You blackmailed me. Don't be sarcastic."

"Let's not meddle in each other's business from now on."

Prospera, a smirk dancing on her lips, pivoted with an audacious swing of her heels, poised to exit.

"How did you know about the assassination attempt?"

Vim tried to corner her with the question, but Prospera dismissed him casually with a flick of her finger to her lips.

"Call it a trade secret."

"A country bumpkin playing strategist?"

Vim tightened his grip on the data chip, a grimace casting shadows on his face.

In the school's central courtyard, Shaddiq Zenelli found himself engrossed in a video call with his father, Sarius.

—*Why didn't Delling object to Shin Sei's request? Vim Jeturk's defending them bothers me, too.*

Shaddiq shared the results of his investigation with his father.

"Prospera Mercury, representative of the Shin Sei Development Corporation. She belonged to the Mercury Development Group, married in the field, and gave birth to Suletta Mercury. Injuries to half her body from a resource mining accident... So that explains the headgear and right arm."

—*She's officially in charge of development, too.*

Shaddiq responded with a laugh, "How would she find funds and infrastructure in that backwater? There's no record of her registry as a mobile suit engineer."

—*In that case, who could have built that machine?*

"..."

Shaddiq's usual light-heartedness faded.

On the other side of the lawn, the figure of Miorine could be seen zipping through the vegetation area on her electric bike equipped with a Haro.

—*Shaddiq. You look into the daughter.*

"Yes, Father."

With that, Shaddiq closed his student handbook. He lay back on the grass, gazing up at the sky, a smile slowly appearing on his face.

"Things are getting interesting."

He contemplated his father's words, a seed of intrigue planted within his mind.

Miorine meticulously surveyed the aftermath of Guel's havoc in the greenhouse after school. Indeed, everything had been beautifully repaired by Lauda and his crew.

"All done."

The words emerged from her lips, adorned with a fleeting smile as she surveyed the tomatoes, still verdantly defiant.

"I'll leave the fertilizer here."

Suletta stood tentatively at the entrance, remembering Miorine's stern warning earlier – "Do not enter." Yet now, as she hesitated with two bags of fertilizer, Miorine casually beckoned her in.

"Bring it to me."

"You don't mind if I come in?"

"Go ahead."

Such an inconsequential exchange for Miorine, yet for Suletta, it was an olive branch extended, a delightful surprise that swiftly whisked her into the greenhouse.

"Does this mean we're best friends?"

"Huh?"

Miorine maintained her stern demeanor, causing Suletta to backtrack, "Sorry!"

"Well, whatever we are, if you lose that duel, it's over for both of us."

"I'm sorry."

Suletta clutched her knees, responding solemnly as if reflecting on her actions.

It was at this juncture that Elan's serene voice punctuated the conversation.

"Suletta Mercury."

"Mr. Elan, right?"

While this interaction unfurled, Miorine observed, a nutrient cartridge slotting into her shovel. The dynamic between Elan and Suletta raised her eyebrows. When had they become acquainted?

Suletta descended the steps of the greenhouse and quickly walked up to Elan.

"Th-Thank you for..."

"I came here to summon you to a Dueling Committee meeting."

"A committee?"

Suletta's confusion warranted clarification. Elan was notoriously reticent.

"This guy's a member of the Dueling Committee," Miorine chimed in.

"I didn't know how to reach you."

As Elan said this, he pulled out his student handbook.

"May we exchange contacts?"

Could this be his only motive for the visit? Suletta's heart fluttered, unbidden. Yet Elan remained stoic, his expression unchanged as they swapped details.

"Number 12 on my list came true."

"Your list?"

"Exchanging contact info with someone. It was something I wanted to try when I got to school."

Elan hadn't even thought of making such a list.

"What else is on your list?"

At Elan's question, Suletta - for whom even this casual conversation with a boy of her age was a first-time experience - started counting on her fingers with sparkling eyes.

"Making friends, calling them by nicknames..."

"Going on dates."

Miorine interjected from the sidelines, adding a hint of mischief.

"Ms. Miorine!"

Such things, she didn't have to say it here... Suletta's voice rose in alarm, but Miorine, feigning ignorance, simply tapped her shoulder with the shovel.

"I hope..."

Elan's voice interrupted her flustered retort.

"Huh?"

Elan, his countenance a constant stoic facade, whispered his wish.

"...you'll fulfill many wishes on your list."

## 4. DUELING COMMITTEE

As the ornate, golden elevator doors, etched with geometric symbols, parted, the Duel Committee's luxurious lounge, with a breathtaking panorama of the academy under an endless sky, was unveiled.

As Suletta and Elan crossed the threshold, they were met with an obsequious greeting from Shaddiq, who gave a courteous bow.

"Welcome to the Dueling Committee Lounge. My name is Shaddiq Zenelli. Nice to meet you, Mercurian Miss."

With Shaddiq's sleek, extended hand and the lounge's expansive view, Suletta was visibly overwhelmed, her eyes darting around the room in surprise.

"Nice to m-meet..."

Her polite acknowledgment was abruptly halted by the sight of the brooding Guel lurking in the corner of the room. Her greeting morphed into an involuntary yelp.

"Heee~"

Catching the intimidating stare of Guel, Suletta instinctively recoiled, taken aback by his unexpected presence.

"Tch."

Guel dismissed her with a derisive snort, turning his face away.

"Shall we begin?"

Elan ushered the conversation forward with an air of nonchalance.

"B-begin what?"

Suletta, however, was left floundering, oblivious to the imminent proceedings.

With an indulgent smile, Shaddiq elucidated.

"The oath. For the duel."

The lounge's expansive window transmuted into a gargantuan screen as the glass took on a smoky hue. The academy's crest materialized on the screen, along with the legend, "Asticassia School of Technology."

In front of the screen, Suletta and Guel faced each other. Elan, officiating the oath, stood between them while Shaddiq, Secelia, and Rouji—fellow committee members—observed the ceremony from the sidelines.

"Both parties, deposit your souls on Libra's scales. The duelists are Guel Jeturk and Suletta Mercury. The location will be the 7th tactical testing sector. The one-on-one code will apply. Any objections?"

"None," Guel responded languidly.

"None."

Suletta was a bundle of nerves, a novice to this ceremonious ritual.

"Suletta Mercury, what is your stake in this duel?"

"Huh? Uh..."

Elan's inquiry caught Suletta off guard. She had observed a duel before yet had given little thought to her own wager.

Shaddiq interjected with a piece of timely counsel.

"Our duels require you each to place something on the line.

Money, an apology, a woman..."

"You're the only one who'd bet women."

Despite Guel's snide comment, Shaddiq merely laughed it off.

"I'm not as bad as you think. And I know they'll always demand I give the girls back."

"Huh? What?"

Suletta's confusion grew at the cryptic exchange between Shaddiq and Guel.

"Suletta Mercury."

"Oh, right!"

Suletta regained her composure at Elan's voice. She had been asked what she would wager. Squaring her shoulders, she addressed Guel.

"Um... please apologize to Ms. Miorine."

Guel, still standing with an air of defiance, remained nonchalant.

"Guel Jeturk, what is your stake in this duel?"

"Same as last time."

In other words, if Guel won, Suletta would be expelled, just like last time.

Elan lifted his palms towards the sky and clasped them together in front of his chest.

"Alea jacta est. The duel is approved."

With the ceremony complete, the display reverted, and the window's opacity receded, revealing the school once more in its grandeur.

Suletta expelled a sigh of relief, a momentary calm before the storm. From her perch on the couch, Secelia broke the silence.

"How nice for you, Mr. Guel. When you have powerful parents, you can even undo the results of a duel."

Secelia's provocative words earned her a cold glare from Guel, but she remained unfazed.

"You'll have no excuse if you lose this time. If I were you, I'd reconsider."

"If you want to duel me, just say so, Secelia!"

Guel's words were loaded with anger, but Secelia continued to provoke him with a teasing grin and a hearty laugh.

"I'm giving you advice. I don't want to see your market value drop any lower. Or has it already bottomed out?"

"Tch!"

Guel was finally unable to hold back and took a step forward, only to be halted by Suletta.

"Stop it! No!"

"Huh?"

Secilia fixed her gaze firmly on Suletta. The entire committee, taken aback, turned their attention to her.

"Mercurian Miss?"

Suletta's feet had frozen, but she steeled herself, refusing to avert her gaze from Secilia, mustering the courage to try and calm the situation.

"L-Laughing at someone who doesn't run away is... It's wrong!"

Guel was left in stunned silence, simply observing Suletta.

Later, in the elevator ride down, Suletta found herself alone with Guel. It was he who broke the awkward silence.

"Why would you say something like that?"

"Huh?"

"Don't you want to laugh at me, too?"

Suletta's back was turned towards Guel, her reflection faintly visible on the elevator's golden surface. After a moment's pause, she found the courage to face him.

"It's because 'If you run, you gain one.'"

"?"

The elevator doors opened, and they stepped out. The floor was bathed in the golden light of the setting sun.

"F-For example, if you're facing a strong enemy, by running away, you'd gain safety and security."

"I wouldn't run."

The pair paused, their conversation echoing in the golden light.

"But if you fight, you might lose!"

"I wouldn't lose!"

Guel declared, his chest puffing out with a hint of pride, his voice barely above a whisper.

"The last time was a fluke."

"It wasn't a fluke."

"If I hadn't let my guard down, I would have won."

"Which is another way of saying you lost, right?"

"..."

Caught off guard by Suletta's unexpected retort, Guel was at a loss for words, but she pressed on.

"But either way, it's okay."

"What? What's okay?"

"If you move forward without running, you gain confidence in yourself, or experience, or recognition. You gain a lot more than you would by running. That's why 'If you run, you gain one. And, if you move forward, you gain two.'"

Guel was momentarily touched by Suletta's sentiment but brushed it off with a nonchalant wave of his hand.

"That's quite a philosophy."

"My mother..."

Suletta began to speak in fits and starts.

"My mother taught it to me. My mother is always strong and kind."

With the tips of her fingers on both hands lightly touching each other, she smiled warmly. Whenever she talked about her mother, she was never at a loss for words. Guel quietly listened to Suletta's words. His irritation from earlier had faded, replaced by a distant look in his eyes. Unconsciously, he reached up to touch the cheek that had been struck by his father, but his hand stopped before it made contact, balling into a tight fist instead.

"A good parent, huh?"

His voice was surprisingly gentle. Suletta, pleased by the compliment about her mother, bounced back with a cheerful, "Yes. My life's goal is to be like--"

She looked up, ready to respond with full vigor, only to find Guel had already walked off. She thought they were starting to understand each other. As she watched his retreating figure, Suletta muttered to herself.

"I don't get him."

In the hangar of the Jeturk House school ship, preparations for the young master's victory were underway.

A message pinged onto the student handbook of Guel's younger brother—Lauda Neill. It was from their father, Vim Jeturk. Strategic instructions for the duel emphasizing that no means should be spared to ensure Guel's victory.

"..."

Lauda's expression hardened.



Oblivious to his brother's internal strife, Guel arrived at the hangar where the Darilbalde, his mechanical gladiator, slumbered. Felsi and Petra, beacons of unwavering support, were first to greet him. A throng of dormitory students congregated around Guel, among them Kamil Kaysink, the chief mechanic of Jeturk House. Despite his privileged status as the young master, Guel was revered by many dormitory students, his virtuous character outweighing the trappings of his birthright.

"Mr. Guel!"

"Welcome back."

"Your machine is ready!"

"Please give that bumpkin a beating she won't forget!"

The ebullient Felsi, ever the cheerleader, earned a warm smile from Guel. As the camaraderie brewed, Lauda wove into the scene, his fingers mindlessly twirling his locks as usual.

"Brother. This isn't a duel just for yourself. You haven't given up on being the ace pilot of Dominicus, right?"

"I haven't. And I'm going to win at any cost."

Guel smiled confidently. Perhaps it was because he was surrounded by his housemates, but the flicker of confidence that had been momentarily extinguished now blazed in his eyes.

## 5. VOW

"Permet link established. Armament, all green. I ate properly, too."

At the spaceport hangar of the school front, preparations for the duel were advancing methodically. The Aerial was relocated to the launch lane, its entrance into the vacuum-sealed sector signaled by the yawning doors. Inside the cockpit, Suletta is carrying out a final check. She was already perfectly suited up in her pilot suit, visor down. Her stomach is also in great condition.

"Suletta?"

Miorine's face, framed by her school-issued normal suit, flickered onto the sub-monitor. Positioned nearby the Aerial in the hangar, she maintained communication with Suletta.

"M-Ms. Miorine!"

"I registered myself in your contacts."

"How could you just..."

It felt as if Miorine treated Suletta's belongings as her own. Suletta displayed a hint of annoyance. After all, being betrothed didn't mean...

Unfazed by Suletta's expression, Miorine didn't bother to apologize.

—*Look, don't you get it? Your future and mine depend totally on this duel's outcome. Don't forget the deal we made.*

Miorine emphasized her point by holding up her pinky finger on the monitor. The gesture wasn't exactly how Suletta envisioned friendship, but, somewhat reluctantly, she held up her own pinky in return.

"Right."

Before she could truly absorb the weight of the conversation, the locks of the container holding the Aerial were released, and it accelerated for launch.

In the lobby of the school ship's dock located beneath Jeturk House, Lauda solemnly greeted Vim, who had just arrived. Following Vim, Lauda moved along the long corridor leading to the school ship. His thoughts were solely on his older brother, Guel. Would he win and reclaim the Holder status?

"Dad, only students are allowed to be involved in duels."

"This is company business. Anyway, did you make the arrangement?"

"Yes, but..."

"But what?"

"My brother doesn't need tricks like that to win."

In Lauda's voice, trust in his brother was evident.

A symphony of dueling preparations echoed through the underground railway of the school front, the cacophony accompanying the transport of multiple containers.

The duel was about to begin. In the cafeteria, on the terrace of the courtyard, students were buzzing with anticipation, peering at student handbooks and tablets, keeping a watchful eye on the proceedings.

"Have they started?"

"Any minute now."

"I wonder who'll win?"

"It's got to be Mr. Guel!"

At Earth House, Nika and her friends—Chuchu, Martin, Ojelo, Nuno, Till, Liliq, Aliya—were clustered around a monitor, tracking the unfolding event.

"Once Jeturk House gets serious, there's no stopping them."

The pessimistic remark from Martin, their House head, fell on deaf ears as Nika remained fixated on the monitor.

The container holding the Aerial adjusted its course toward the current dueling area—the seventh tactical test sector. As the ejection port of the test zone was unlatched, the container made its entrance.

The Duel Committee lounge was full of members. At the center of them, Elan began to speak.

"With mutual consent by both parties, we will now begin the duel. As always, victory will go to the first one to break the blade antenna of their opponent's mobile suit. The observer shall be Elan Ceres from Peil House."

As the container unfolded, revealing the Aerial's pristine, gleaming body, a communication from Miorine infiltrated the cockpit.

"You can come out of your MS container. State your name and student ID number."

"Right! LP041. Suletta Mercury, Aerial, launching!"

With Suletta's voice, the Aerial ambled forward, descending into the duel arena amid a plume of dust.

—*Both parties, face off.*

Their witness, Elan, initiated the duel.

Guel's face appeared on Aerial's monitor.

An unexpected communication from Elan disrupted Suletta's stupor.

—*Suletta Mercury.*

"Y-Yes?"

—*Please recite the duel vow.*

"T-the vow?"

—*I taught it to you just now!*

An exasperated Miorine interjected. Suletta scrambled to recall the words.

"Oh! Um... Victory is never decided by mobile suit performance alone..."

Guel, frustrated with Suletta's stumbling, took over, continuing the sentence with an air of annoyance.

—*Nor by the skill of the pilot, alone.*

In unison, though jarringly disjointed, they completed the vow.

—The result itself is the only truth.

"T-t-t-The result itself is the only truth."

Despite the clumsy synchrony, Elan declared the start of the duel with clinical precision.

—*Fix release.*

With the declaration, the entire tactical test sector metamorphosed into a digital wasteland through projection mapping. Simultaneously, the Aerial blasted off with a fierce jet of propulsion. Red markings appeared, flashing and pulsating on the shell unit of its torso.

"I'm going to win, and I'll stay at this school with Ms. Miorine!"

## 6. PRIDE

The duel exploded into action as Aerial unleashed an aggressive, pre-emptive assault. Two of the rapid-fire GUN-BITs merged into the rifle, immediately blasting luminous shots at the feet of Darilbalde.

"That's a diversion. The drone-like things are coming from three o'clock...?"

Just as Guel was about to retaliate with his javelin, the Darilbalde, indifferent to Guel's intention, made a sudden move and changed direction. The sheer force pinned Guel against his seat. Inside the cockpit, the autopilot program was running.

"What the..."

Frustrated by his lack of control, Guel's face tightened.

Suletta answered back, her beam rifle spitting energy projectiles in a frenzy of light. The Darilbalde danced through the deadly storm and retaliated with a javelin throw.

Again, Aerial's GUN-BIT morphed, this time into a shield, and managed to deflect the javelin at the last possible moment.

The javelin, spinning as it flew, paused mid-air, aiming at the Aerial, and promptly pierced right beneath her.

"What just happened?"

Something was different? Suletta pondered, a gut feeling of inconsistency stirring within her.

She pounced on the opportunity of the Darilbalde's momentary defenselessness, locking her target and releasing a volley of energy rounds.

"I'll be hit!"

Upon seeing the approaching beam, Guel's eyes widened.

The beam was evidently aimed at the corner. Just before it made contact, the shield drone attached to the Darilbalde's shoulder intervened, dissipating the beam.

"He deflected it?"

Suletta blinked in surprise. This was nothing like the previous encounter with Guel - the movements were sharp.

Guel, equally bewildered, watched the lever dance of its own volition.

"This thing..."

Everything was out of control. Regardless, the Darilbalde landed back where the javelin was. Retrieving its weapon, a light flashed in the head unit's eye site.

"It's not a Dilanza?"

Vim, watching the course of the battle on the Jeturk dormitory ship with Lauda, said, "Understand that an outdated Gundam is no match for our company's Darilbalde."

In the heat of the battle, Suletta's voice crackled over the comms to Miorine, "Is that a different mobile suit from before?"

"That just means they're serious. Don't lower your guard!"

The Darilbalde split its javelin into two, switched to dual wielding, and went on the offensive. Furthermore, the two drones connected to its back deployed beams in a saber formation. Shortly after, the Darilbalde made a slashing attack on Aerial.

Aerial fired beams, but they were blocked by the drones. She dodged the twin blades' onslaught, neutralized the relentless drones, and skillfully maneuvered the Aerial with its thrusters.

"She got behind him!"

At the Earth House, Ojelo, who was betting on Aerial, shouted. Other students, including Nika, watched the monitor with intense focus.

Suletta, who hailed from Mercury, was a Spacian. But unlike Guel, she didn't belong to one of the three branches. Nika and others believed that Suletta — and Aerial — might be able to bring change.

Having taken the rear, Suletta targeted the Darilbalde's antenna and let loose a blast.

But a drone threw itself in front of the beam, throwing her aim off.

She couldn't hold back her disbelief.

"No way!"

In an elegant, deadly ballet, the Darilbalde whirled around, coordinating with its drones, and launched an impossible combination attack with its javelin, something not possible without its decision making extension AI.

While the Aerial fended off the fierce attack with its shield and evaded, it lost its balance. The separated javelin attacked again. Suletta had no choice but to create distance.

From the outside, it seemed Jeturk had the edge. But inside the cockpit, Guel was in turmoil. His hands weren't even gripping the controls anymore. The control had been completely hijacked by the AI. He stared at the oscillating lever with disgust and slumped.

"Are you saying you don't need my will at all?"

He spat out the words, bitterness dripping from every syllable.

As the tension escalated, a beam from the Aerial surged towards the Darilbalde.

And then, the sprinklers.

In a sudden burst of water, the battlefield was drenched; the beam lost its strength as if melting away and dissipated just before it hit the shield.

Suletta and Guel, from their respective cockpits, registered the anomaly, the new variable in their heated duel.

"?"

"It dissipated."

Suletta leaned forward, looking out of the cockpit.

"Is this water?"

Her experience had never extended to phenomena like rain.

The heavy shower cascading from the colony ceiling caught the attention of those in the Dueling Committee Lounge. Shaddiq looked on, a ghost of a smile on his face.

"Is it the heat management system?"

"Yes. With that much water being dispersed, beam weapons will inevitably be degraded."

An announcement echoed throughout the tactical testing sector.

—*Abnormal heat detected within dome. Emergency water cooling in progress. I repeat..*

Unyielding, the Aerial fired another beam, but it was devoured by the rain, dissipating into nothingness. Bewildered, Suletta could only stare.

"Ah..."

Aboard the Jeturk school ship, Vim gloated in front of the monitor.

"Take a good look! My plan was right on the money!"

Lauda listens on in silence, wearing a bitter expression.

Meanwhile, the drones continue to return to the main body of the Darilbalde one after another.

Although the levers are still moving automatically, Guel was taking in the spectacle with a bitter triumph.

"Too bad for you. Lady Luck is on my side this time!"

To Guel, the rain was a mere coincidence, an unexpected ally.

Armed and ready, the Darilbalde charged, javelin raised high. The Aerial countered with its beam saber, clashing against the formidable adversary. Sparks flew as metal met energy, but it was clear the Aerial was being pushed back.

"Suletta!"

Miorine's voice echoed, but it was too late. The javelin found its mark, tearing through Aerial's armor and severing the right arm at the elbow.

Suletta gritted her teeth against the jolt in the cockpit.

"Guh...!"

Witnessing the turn of events in Guel's favor, Miorine made her move.

"There's no way the system would start spraying water without an anomaly. Those Jeturk House thugs. They'd really go this far?"

The monitor in the Dueling Committee Lounge displayed the Aerial being pursued by the Darilbalde's drones, with the suit itself further attacking via hover. Suletta was effectively trapped. Elan watched, his expression unreadable.

Miorine's face filled the monitor as she interrupted the communication.

"Stop the duel immediately! You should only resume after you've corrected the system error!"

However, Elan's response was cold as ice.

"Duels are never held on equal terms."

Miorine balked at his nonchalance, "What are you saying?"

He remained indifferent.

"It's up to students' patrons which mobile suits and which support staff they can access. Even if this accident were set up on purpose, that would still be part of his strength."

Frustrated, Miorine agrees with Elan's perception.

"In that case, you'll allow me to be part of Suletta's strength, won't you?"

She turned, her eyes landing on a mobile craft waiting near her.

Drenched in a deluge, Aerial nimbly dodged relentless onslaughts. Amidst the chaos, Miorine's voice crackled through the comms into the battered Aerial's cockpit.

"Suletta, do you read me?"

"Ms. Miorine?"

"I'll stop the squall! Just hang on until then!"

Miorine clamped her student handbook onto the cockpit, powering up the mobile craft. The startup sequence unfurled across the monitor. Seconds later, sparks ignited from the exhaust port.

"But how?"

"Just don't let him beat you!"

The mobile craft lurched skyward, Miorine's pilot skills rudimentary at best. It yawed, scraping against walls and flooring, but she would not be deterred. Staggering, she continued down the corridor towards the elevator.

"My lousy father... This time, I won't let things turn out as he pleases!"

With a grimace, Miorine clenched her teeth and held out.

A metallic arm extended, prying open a hatch to the storage bay. The craft careened into the monorail tunnel, latching onto a descending rail.

"A mobile craft?"

The sight caused a stir among the students onboard. Unauthorized use of educational equipment, intrusion into off-limits areas, and property damage were all violations, but Miorine was desperate.

Meanwhile, Suletta continued to struggle.

"'Hanging on' is easier said than done..."

The Aerial, devoid of its beam rifle and right arm, reduced to defensive maneuvers, was trying to fend off attacks while sporadically firing its vulcan.

Elan watched the scene, a statue of cold calculation.

"Suletta Mercury, if you really are a witch, you can survive this situation."

The Aerial's remaining arm flung its saber, parrying the Darilbalde's flanking attempt.

"I've got to hang on. I've got to hang on. I've got to hang on. I've got to hang on."

With concentrated nerves, Suletta muttered Miorine's words like a spell.

Drawing its beam saber with its left hand, the Aerial prepared.

"I will hang on!"

Suletta murmured, Miorine's words a mantra. The Aerial's beam saber sliced through the air, cutting the Darilbalde's impending strike short. Sparks ignited the field.



Thanks to the spell, Suletta barely escaped a perilous situation. But the swing's momentum had its toll; the saber slipped from the Aerial's grip.

"Eehh?!"

The Darilbalde lunged, targeting the Aerial's vulnerable horn. In a feat of agility, the Aerial evaded.

"She's safe!"

Ojelo, betting on the Aerial, involuntarily let out a sigh of relief when he saw Suletta avoid a fatal blow.

"But it's still only a matter of time."

Martin let out a resigned sigh.

The members of the Earth House, including Nika, continued to watch the match with bated breath.

In the Duel Committee Lounge, Shaddiq cheerfully made a statement.

"It looks like the game is over."

Secelia concluded with a nod, "In the end, the winner is always the one with the stronger backing."

But there was one student who never doubted Aerial's victory and was desperately struggling: Miorine.

While piloting the mobile craft, Miorine steadily advanced deeper and deeper into the monorail passage of the tactical test sector. When she reached the ceiling frame in the front, visible against the outer wall of the shaft, the control room came into view.

Occupying the room were Felsi and Petra, their cheers for Darilbalde bouncing off the walls as they watched the unfolding duel on their handbooks.

"Darn! That was so close!"

"Heck, she dodged again. What?"

But the sudden rumble silenced them, making way for a mobile craft that thundered in headfirst.

The monitor of the mobile craft showed Felsi and Petra hugging each other in fear.

"I knew it would be you two."

Miorine's voice echoed in the control room.

"Miorine?"

"Using a mobile craft isn't fair!"

—*Look who's talking!*

But their protests were drowned by the approaching danger as Miorine advanced, the arm of her craft towering menacingly above them.

"No, please, we didn't do anything!"

"W-w-w-wait!"

Their pleas fell on deaf ears, and mere seconds later, the tactical test area sprinklers fell silent.

In the cockpit of the now one-armed Aerial, Suletta looked up, standing stationary at the edge of the precipice.

"It stopped?"

"Hey! What's going on?"

Vim yelled, but there was nothing Lauda could do.

The control room, its glass was strewn across the floor in the aftermath of the chaos, held one remaining link to the console - a tablet, its screen displaying the ceased discharge of the cooling water.

After Felsi and Petra fled, Miorine had dismantled the craft, choosing to sit amid the ruins of the control room. She surveyed her student handbook with a smile that betrayed more than satisfaction - it was a proclamation.

"Suletta? All that's left now is for you to win."

## **7. DECISION MAKING EXTENSION AI**

"Thanks, Ms. Miorine!"

Suletta expressed her gratitude as the deluge ceased, invigorating her with a surge of revitalized power.

"Aerial... Now it's our turn!"

As Suletta spoke, GUN-BIT sprang into action, lining up in a forward-pointing formation. Aerial drew another blade. Propelled by a muscular leap, Suletta darted forward, her azure arc radiating an iridescent glow, flinging beams toward the advancing Darilbalde.

The rain was no more; no attenuation of her onslaught. Cornered, the Darilbalde found itself relentlessly hounded by GUN-BIT. An unexpected reversal sent tremors of excitement through the Earth House. One mechanic student, second-year student Ojelo Gabel, was especially enthralled.

"Go! It's 8.6-to-1 odds!"

The clandestine betting on duels had become a favored pastime in the academy, and a majority of stakes this time were leaning towards Guel. A victory for Aerial, therefore, would mean an extravagant win for Ojelo.

Even Chuchu, hitherto observing the duel with frosty indifference, leaned forward, her fist punching the air.

"Blow the Spacian away!"

"She's not from Earth either."

Martin interjected quietly, but of course, the fervor of Chuchu and the others drowned his words.

Now, with both arms lost, Darilbalde found itself on the defensive. It evaded Aerial's relentless assault with the GUN-BIT, controlled by the Darilbalde's expanded AI. However, it was strange that not a single attack hit. Guel realized that he was being guided.

But the AI detected the heat sources of the guided bits in advance and initiated an abrupt stop unrelated to Guel's intentions.

"You fool! Don't stop!"

Despite Guel's realization of Suletta's strategy, the AI dismissed his protests.

Upon reaching the predetermined spot orchestrated by Suletta, the lying-in-wait GUN-BIT cluster took aim and fired, obliterating the shield drones and right shoulder armor. A mighty explosion sent fragments of Darilbalde's crimson armor scattering in all directions.

"No way you'd be tricked by a decoy that cheap!"

The Darilbalde's AI, which was integrated into the system, had been outmaneuvered by Suletta.

Had Guel been in control, he could have evaded that assault. Yet, even in its damaged state, Darilbalde continued its autonomous actions. Guel found himself lacking the will to grasp the control lever.

It was then that his father, Vim, appeared on the sub-monitor.

—*Guel! What are you doing? Finish her off!*

"Dad? How did you..."

The duel was supposed to be solely student-led. Instantly, Guel pieced together the puzzle - the rain and the AI were all machinations of his father.

"Was that heat management thing your doing? Dad! Why won't you believe in me?"

It wasn't anger driving him now but a sorrow so profound it eclipsed rage, slowly crushing Guel's spirit. His father stood unwavering, trampling over his son's emotions.

—*If you want me to believe, then crush that Gundam!*

"Do you think I can't win if I play fair?"

—*That's the child in you talking. The result is all that matters!*

Guel struggled against his roiling emotions, his teeth gritted, while the battle raged on. Aerial advanced from the precipice.

—*Brother, just focus on the battle for now!*

"You're only saying that for Dad's sake!"

—*Why don't you understand this duel is bigger than just you?*

*Children should do as their parents say!*

"Shut up!"

Guel smashed the student handbook connected to the cockpit, fragments flying in every direction. The monitor's feed abruptly cut off. Concurrently, the Darilbalde's eye camera, as the suit was on the verge of getting back up, flickered out. It collapsed, sapped of strength.

—*The Decision Making Extension AI has been disabled.*

Vim's fury erupted at the operator's report.

"That fool!"

Though the Darilbalde stood motionless, Suletta maintained her vigilance.

"An error? But..."

Aerial closed in, its beam saber held high. The Darilbalde lifted its face once more, a spark rekindling in its eye-sight. It was as though its fighting spirit had been revived. It deployed a beam saber from its arm, challenging the Aerial to a fierce melee. Suletta was attuned to the different pressure compared to before and reacted quickly.

"!?"

Control had been switched back from AI to manual. The Darilbalde began pushing Aerial back.

"This is my fight!"

Drenched in sweat, Guel maxed out the thrust on the main thruster. All other noises receded into the background, leaving only his voice echoing.

"It's mine. Only mine!"

With a sudden surge of speed, he pushed Aerial back, staging a dramatic retreat.

"His moves are different from before!"

Capitalizing on the momentum of the push, Aerial executed a judo Tomoe Nage, sending Darilbalde skyward. But, mid-air, the Darilbalde regained control of its posture. Guel fired the wire-guided restraint gear "Shackle Claw" from its legs, ensnaring both of Aerial's arms.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

Guel let out a primal roar.

The Darilbalde soared higher, whirling Aerial around with the wire.

"This guy is strong... But Aerial and I won't lose!"

Fighting against the centrifugal force, Suletta used the main thruster to slow down. Aerial braced itself against the partition.

"After all..."

"Guel Jeturk cannot lose!"

The Darilbalde drew itself up in a two-sword stance.

"There's still so much left on my wish list!"

The Aerial grabbed its saber with its remaining hand, aiming for the Darilbalde's antenna, and lunged forward from the partition. The Darilbalde blocked the strike with its left arm while seizing the saber with its right, slashing back. Aerial, however, pinned that arm, charging at it from the chest. As Aerial landed and regained its balance, the Darilbalde's red antenna was conspicuously snapped off.

On the monitor watched by all the students, "WINNER SULETTA MERCURY/ AERIAL 1 win 0 loss 0 tie" was displayed.

Into the artificial sky, a rainbow light filters in.

"Ms. Suletta, you're really amazing."

Nika murmurs, seemingly touched.

## 8. PROPOSAL

Inside Aerial's cockpit, Suletta was practically breathing through her shoulders.

Sweat trickled down the interior of her helmet visor.

Just then, a message arrived on the sub-monitor. It was from Elan.

—*Congratulations!*

"Uh..."

Merely seeing those characters was enough to flush Suletta's face.

Yet before she could even savor the moment, messages started flooding the same monitor with a torrential force.

—*So cool!*

—*How lucky!*

—*Mercurian girl, Go go!*

Praise, mockery, teasing - a barrage of various messages unfolded one after the other.

"Huh? What?"

Overwhelmed by the flood of messages, Suletta was thrown into confusion and hastily sought help from Miorine.

"Ms. Miorine! M-My screen is filled with words! So many words! So many words, many words!"

"Why did you release all messages? I said, only from registered contacts."

Once Suletta left only Elan's message, the window was refreshingly empty, and she could finally catch her breath.

"Phew..."

"You won. We won."

"Right."

"Now you won't be expelled!"

Miorine's voice was effervescent.

"Then Aerial and you are both... safe?"

Suletta exaggeratedly signaled safe with her body.

"That's right! Take that, you louse of a father!"

Miorine showed a radiant and playful smile, unlike anything she'd shown before.

Seeing Miorine openly laughing and genuinely enjoying herself, Suletta felt a surge of hope.

"G-Good news, right, Mio-Mio?"

Suletta decided to try it out.

"Excuse me?"

But Miorine's expression instantly turned menacing, and she spoke in her usual scary tone.

"I'm sorry!"

"What the heck is "Mio-Mio"?"

"Calling a friend by a nickname was near the top of my list, so... It's cute, isn't it?"

Suletta was fidgeting, hoping for a positive reaction from Miorine.

But Miorine was unyielding.

"Rejected. It's super lame."

"Th-Then how about--"

"Rejected!"

"I didn't even say it yet!"

It was at this point that Suletta noticed Guel standing outside the cockpit, silently staring at her.

Guel had descended with a sense of unease, although he himself wasn't sure what exactly that unease was.

Suletta decided to open the cockpit. She thought she should properly greet the person who had shown such an impressive fight.

Stepping out of the cockpit, Suletta descended onto Aerial's palm and landed in front of Guel.

"E-Excuse me... I-I'm sorry!"

Suletta bowed her head deeply, but Guel didn't quite understand why he was being apologized to.

"I underestimated you. Well, you were, you know, really strong."

Suletta's words were a shock to Guel.

Guel's eyes sparkled.

Immediately after, Guel grasped Suletta's hand firmly.

"Eek!"

She involuntarily stiffened. However, Guel knelt down on the ground, still holding Suletta's hand and looking into her eyes. Suletta was jittery, not knowing what would happen.

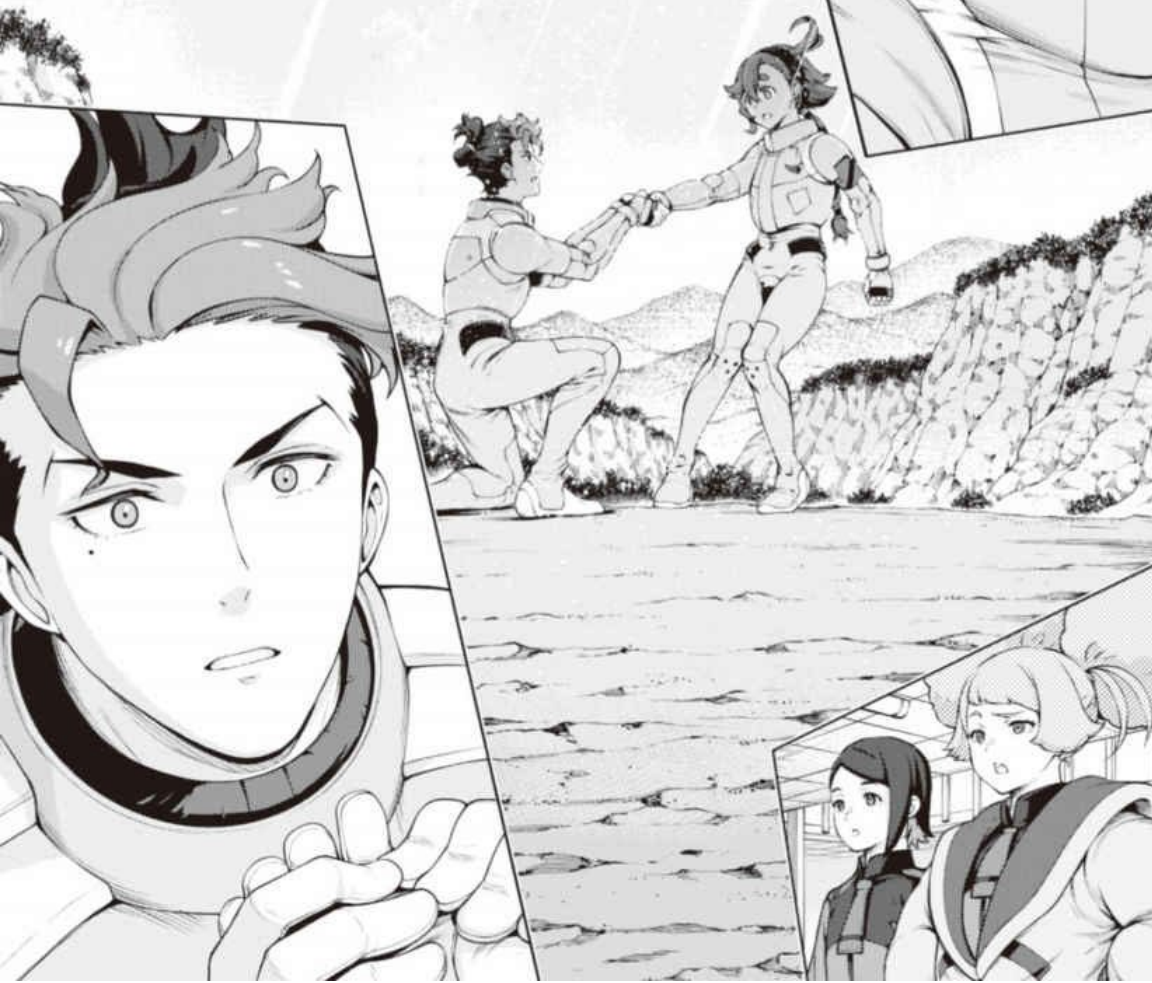
"Suletta Mercury... Will you marry me?"

Guel's gaze was unwavering.

Suletta couldn't tear her eyes away from him.

After a prolonged silence, Suletta, finally understanding Guel's words, could only reply...

"What?"





## **Novel Edition Original Episode** **#1** Yushura's Amusement Park

### **This is, and is not, Cressid!**

From William Shakespeare's "*Troilus and Cressida*"

**[HARO]** A spherical base unit used by the Benerit Group for infrastructure tasks. It can be given a broad range of functions by exchanging various attachments, enabling it to provide many different kinds of services. Furthermore, the main body of the Haro device could also be customized with the right technical skills. Rouji Chante, a first-year student in the Mechanics department, had modified the voice of his Haro device from its default settings.

# 1. PRACTICE

— *Nice to meet you, my groom.*

Those words uttered by Miorine Rembran continued to echo deep within Suletta Mercury's heart.

Ever since that moment, Suletta had countless conversations with Miorine, feeling a sense of understanding after each. Yet, petty disagreements would always arise—though not quite disagreements. Suletta was just trying to be friendly, but the more she tried to express her feelings, the more she seemed to go in circles, ultimately only succeeding in ticking Miorine off.

"Student number LP041, Suletta Mercury, do you have a partner?"

The teacher's question snapped Suletta out of her daydream.

"Y-yes! Yes, I-d-d-do have a buddy!"

She realized this was no time for absent-minded daydreaming; the exercise was about to start. Suletta looked around in a panic.

Today marked the start of a major exercise involving all students of all departments and grades at the Asticassia School of Technology.

Hundreds of three-meter-square simulator boxes were arranged in the vast zero-gravity area designated as the exercise space. In front of each box, a pair of students stood ready in airtight suits.

"Suletta! Over here!"

"Ms. Miorine!"

Suletta kicked off the floor, pushing against a box to float over to Miorine.

Miorine extended her arm and pulled Suletta in.

"I did send the box number to your student handbook, remember? You need to be more mindful."

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry..."

Suletta's heart sank as she was already being scolded by her supposed bride-to-be.

"But what exactly are we doing today? There was no advance notice."

It turned out the students were merely told to pair up and gather; the nature of the exercise was kept under wraps.

A little distance away was Nika Nanaura from the Mechanics department. Catching Suletta's eye, Nika offered a cheerful wave. Suletta, of course, eagerly waved back. Nika's buddy was the eccentric Chuatory Panlunch—nicknamed Chuchu—with her unique

pink pompom-shaped hair. Upon noticing Suletta, Chuchu simply turned away with a huff.

— *Alright, everyone, please enter the simulator.*

The instruction echoed through the exercise area.

Following Miorine into the simulator, Suletta heard a soft electronic sound as the hatch locked behind them.

"Eh? Wh-what?"

"Don't panic. Seems like the assessment has already started."

Miorine subtly pointed to a camera tucked away in a corner of the ceiling with her eyes.

"R-right!"

Cameras were scattered everywhere, seemingly recording every move they made. With human teachers unable to evaluate each student's performance, it appeared a 'value assessment program' would assign their scores.

The teacher's voice reverberated from a speaker in the ceiling.

— *This exercise will simulate a situation where you are stranded on a small communications vessel that has experienced an emergency shutdown. A distress signal has already been sent out, and a rescue team will arrive in five hours. Your task is to take whatever actions you deem best during this time. However, extra-vehicular activities are not necessary for this exercise. Any student who leaves the simulator box within the time limit will be disqualified.*

"Five hours, huh..."

"The... best...?"

With different thoughts swirling in their heads, Suletta and Miorine each wore puzzled expressions.

— *Let the exercise begin.*

The buzzer sounded, and the room light turned red.

"Ms Miorine, should we put on the helmets?"

"Good call. We don't know the condition of the ship either."

The two of them put on the helmets near the cockpit seats and held hands, opening the "communication channel."

"And now—"

"Uh, should we talk?"

"We can't do *that* for five hours."

Miorine sighed noticeably.

"I-I'm sorry..."

"Don't apologize for everything."

"O-okay..."

Miorine briskly left the cockpit area.

Feeling downcast, Suletta followed.

"Um...?"

"We're checking the structure of this place. There might be a task hidden somewhere."

"I-I see!"

In the first cabin they entered, there was a hatch on the floor, and the entire lower section was a cargo hold.

Various supplies were lined up, and there were also refrigerators and freezers.

As Suletta tried to open one, Miorine stopped her.

"No, that won't work. The power is out, and the rising temperature inside might spoil the perishable food we're trying to keep cold."

They decided to return to the cabin and discuss.

"There's no engine room, so we can rule out any tasks about engine repairs. That would give an advantage to the Mechanics students anyway."

"I wonder if Nika and Chuchu are working hard."

Nika was an acquaintance of Suletta and Miorine. Suletta intended to bring up a relevant topic, but Miorine continued to discuss the task, indifferent.

"Focus on us, not others. What's the cockpit like?"

Prompted by Miorine, Suletta sat in the cockpit seat.

"It's a regular pilot simulator."

"I see... Oh, can you perform a hull inspection?"

"Yes! Um... this is it, 'Inspection Mode!'"

"You know a lot about ships, don't you, Suletta?"

"Not really, but back on Mercury, I had to do a lot myself."

"Hmm, I see. Interesting"

"Do you want to hear more about Mercury!?"

Suletta turned around eagerly, but Miorine was indifferent again.

"Let's finish our work first."

"But we've only been at it for fifteen minutes."

"Can we send out another distress signal? No, make it every thirty minutes."

"I-I think we can!"

Suletta set the console to automatically send signals.

"Now the rescue team can locate us."

"The inspection is also finished. There is no damage to the hull!"

"NO ABNORMALITIES" was displayed on the main monitor in the cockpit, and the emergency lights switched back to regular lighting.

"We might actually run out of things to do. I don't think the test is about killing time, but..."

"Food!" Suletta suddenly exclaimed.

"Food?"

"Um... aren't you hungry?"

"I see, food... Perhaps that's the key to this exercise. We know for sure that rescue will come. If we don't get the nutrition we need, we won't be able to handle an emergency situation."

With that, Miorine sat in the cockpit and listed the available food on the console.

"We can't access the data from the refrigerator and the freezer. We have to open them and check."

Suletta peered from the cargo hold's hatch and said,

"Uh, the electronic heater might be broken. The indicator light is on."

"Huh? Oh, you're right. There's an error message. Is there a water heater around?"

"Yes, yes! This one seems to be working fine."

"It does, doesn't it."

When Miorine tapped the cockpit monitor, the ship's AI suggested a method for repairing the electronic heater.

"Suletta, do you think we can fix this within 4 hours?"

"I... I'm not very good with repairs..."

"Not even a little?"

"I'm sorry! It's, I mean, I'm really bad at it!"

"Well, I can't do it either. This clearly favors the Mechanics students."

"So, do you think there's a task that's geared towards the Business Management students?"

Asticassia School of Technology has three departments: Pilot, Mechanic, and Business Management.

"Maybe it's about the food."

"Huh?"

"We're stranded, so we have to calculate our power consumption. Cost calculation is fundamental in management."

"That's amazing!"

Suletta was thoroughly impressed.

With her face poking out from the floor of the cabin, Suletta stared at Miorine in the cockpit. Miorine seemed to be quickly focusing on the identified task. Suletta wondered if there was something she could do as well.

"Ms M-Miorine!"

"Hm?"

"There might be another source of food!"

"Where?"

"Under you, Ms Miorine!"

Suletta came out of the hatch and entered the cockpit.

"W-Wait a moment."

"Ms Miorine, please move."

Suletta pulled a yellow box from under the seat.

"It's a first aid kit."

"H-here you go!"

Suletta handed over the kit.

Inside the kit were bandage tape, various medications, purified water, and plenty of emergency rations in tubes.

"Well done, Suletta."

"Ehehe."

"Now we have more options, though it's going to be a hassle to compare costs."

"Uh, what?"

"It's fine. We have to find all of this, then compare and consider to decide the best course of action. However, it seems like eating emergency rations would be the most efficient in an emergency."

"Should we eat now?"

"Glutton."

"Wha-whaaat?"

"We'll eat later. I want to properly calculate first. Probably—there's still something left."

"I see—"

Just then, the simulator shook violently, and the lights went completely out.

"What?!"

"I-I'll check!"

In the cockpit, Suletta swiftly took a seat, running her eyes over the various console displays.

Red warnings lined the screen.

"We're heading straight into a dense debris field!"

The debris referred to here was space debris, or 'space junk.'

As Miorine looked on, wreckage of mobile suits approached at high speeds, colliding with each other. What looked like an arm smacked against the hull, causing the simulator box to jolt violently.

"Whoa!"

"I had a feeling something would happen!"

"I'm going to evade!"

"But the engines are shut down, right?"

"I'll use the attitude control thrusters!"

Suletta, seated in the cockpit, had a different air about her, reminiscent of her aura during her duel with Guel – a sense of determination.

"Miorine, take a seat in the cabin!"

Miorine nodded vigorously.

"Please!"

In a rush, Miorine left the cockpit and seated herself in the cabin.

"Suletta, can you handle this?"

"It's completely different from the Aerial... but I'll give it my best!"

While the Asticassia School of Technology's Pilot department was considered elite even in the academy, their specialty lay in mobile suits and mobile crafts, and their training in piloting a vessel like this was only basic, just like the other departments.

"I guess the test lasts five hours because of events like this."

Miorine peered into the cockpit, hoping to assist Suletta.

Suletta was already busy dodging and piloting through the rapidly encroaching asteroids while also keeping an eye on the radar monitor. Miorine's unfamiliarity with navigation might only serve as a distraction, so she began to review the ship's information again on the terminal at her cabin seat.

The upper level contained the cockpit, cabin, and bathroom. The lower level was the cargo hold. There was plenty of air, water, and power. Even though there's still plenty of time, taking a shower is clearly out of the question.

If they were to use the shower, it might be to thaw the frozen space food supposedly in the freezer. But to warm the frozen packs, the temperature of the shower wouldn't be enough, and it would only waste water and power. Besides, eating frozen stew wasn't nearly as appealing as emergency rations.

The more she thought, the more Miorine was convinced. Securing and efficiently consuming food must be the primary challenge here.

Securing food under any circumstances was an essential skill for survival in space. It also served as a task that each specialty could utilize.

"Whoa!"

A violent shock made Miorine inadvertently exclaim.

"I'm sorry! We've hit something!"

"Never mind! If you can't dodge it, no one can!"

That was more of Miorine's wishful thinking, but in reality, their scores so far were in the top 1% of all pairs.

Putting safety first—which is of utmost importance in space—perhaps Suletta should remain in the cockpit and eat emergency rations while on guard.

But that would put too much burden on Suletta.

"We have three hours left..."

The drill would probably end on time. Although it's common for rescues to be delayed, it's best to assume that this drill has a time limit. Otherwise, the concept of a rescue ship arriving would be pointless.

"Suletta! What about communication with the rescue team? Are they aware of our position?"

"Um... yes! The line has been connected all along!"

Hearing this, Miorine made her decision. Relying solely on Suletta, considering her principles and the score of the practical training, wouldn't be optimal.

"Suletta! Once we're through this, we'll have dinner together!"

"Huh...! Yes! Whoa!"

Suletta tilted the ship to avoid a gigantic asteroid.

"Got it? Focus on piloting for now!"

"Ri-right!"

After a while, the interior lighting returned to normal.

"It looks like it's over."

"Yes! I've also increased the sensor sensitivity!"

"Right. We might hit something again... It's my turn now."

"I thought we were going to eat together..."

"I've been thinking about what and how we should eat optimally. We're going to work together."

"I-I'm looking forward to it!"

The pair moved to the cargo hold and began to examine the cooking tools mounted on the walls.

"Our options are limited."

"So, we either eat emergency food or fix the electronic heater to warm and eat the frozen packs, right?"

"If we can fix the electronic heater, the packs are the most efficient. It uses a bit of electricity, but it gives us more calories in return. Plus, we can make a warm meal."

"But there's just over two hours left..."

"Yeah, that's why I'm thinking of another way to warm up the packs."



The Asticassia School of Technology that Suletta and the others attend was established by the Benerit Group with the goal of nurturing individuals who can actively contribute in space.

Even in AS 122, space is still dangerous, and there is a possibility that the shuttle they ride in could stop due to engine problems.

Nika and the others had reached the same conclusion as Miorine.

"Phew, it's fixed."

"Nika, you're amazing!"

What sets Miorine's team apart from Nika's is that they chose to repair the cooking equipment. For Nika, a mechanic, a malfunction of this degree was trivial.

"It took some time, though."

"We still have an hour, so we're fine!"

At the same time, Suletta and Miorine were struggling.

For more than an hour, they had been wrestling with hot water. They intended to warm up the frozen packs with hot water instead of a shower or heater. However, the water coming from the kettle was quite minimal for safety reasons, and they were trying to collect it in the helmets they had removed. This was not going so well in the weightless environment, and barely any water was getting on the packs.

"Hot!"

"Mi-Miorine, are you okay?!"

The water splashed a little onto Miorine's nose.

"Never mind me, Suletta, just hold on to it properly!"

—*Five minutes left till the end.*

"This is tough! Shall we switch to emergency rations?"

"We've come this far; I don't want to give up."

"That's, that's right."

"Can't be helped. It's still cold, though."

Miorine began opening the packs of space food. Inside was a stew they had both chosen.

When Suletta put a spoon into it, there was a crunchy sound.

"Then, I'll be the taster..."

"I'm eating too!"

Both put it in their mouths at the same time.

"Mmm!"

"Ngghhh!!"

Most of the stew was frozen, and the carrots and potatoes were so hard they couldn't chew at all.

At this point, the buzzer for the end of the exercise sounded, and the hatch at the entrance opened.

"Oh..."

"..."

—*Your scores will be sent to your student handbooks.*

*Dismissed.*

Miorine briskly walked ahead, leaving Suletta behind.

"Um, I'm sorry!"

"Why are you apologizing? I'm the one who messed up."

Their evaluation was slightly below average.

Their piloting score was nearly perfect, and their meals were above average, but they received the lowest rating for communication.

"It's because I couldn't express my opinions... So, it's not your fault, Miss Miorine!"

Miorine sighed and said, "Yeah, yeah, I get it."

"M-miss Miorine!"

But Suletta's call was in vain as Miorine merely continued walking away.

## 2. YUSHURA MIRZAKHANI

After their exercise, Suletta trudged alone through the extensive academy grounds. In her otherwise unfortunate circumstances, it was a silver lining that the academy was vast, and every place she went was a new experience, ensuring that she was never bored, even when alone.

Making a round trip of the school, Suletta finally came to rest at a café terrace near the spaceport's zero-gravity section. It wasn't exactly "sitting" per se, but rather floating gently between the tables and chairs.

"Oh... I wish Miorine could be a bit more kind..."

"What are you moping about?"

Startled by the voice cast down from above, Suletta sprang up in surprise.

"M-M-Ms Miorine!"

However, something was off.

Miorine wasn't looking directly at Suletta.

"Do I...look like Miorine to you?"

"What? Huh?"

Suletta prided herself on her observational skills. That's how she noticed Miorine drifting in space.

The silver hair, hidden earlier by her bangs, was identical to Miorine's, but the face was completely different. The clothes weren't the Asticassia uniform but a cape, and she had a decidedly more mature aura about her.

A graduate? A visitor? An upperclassman or a teacher she hadn't met? Why was she imitating Miorine's hairstyle?

Lost in her thoughts, the person she thought was Miorine chuckled.

"My apologies."

"Wh-Who are you?"

"I'm Miorine's childhood friend, Yushura Mirzakhani. This, this is my disguise!"

Yushura said, reaching up to touch her left ear with her right hand.

In the next instant, Yushura's hair sparked with faint electricity, shifting from silver to a vibrant gold, her hairstyle changing to a ponytail draped over her left shoulder.

From the end of the ponytail, a metallic-like fluid flowed into Yushura's hand, forming a silver sphere. The surface of the ball trembled softly.

"Wha- Your hair...how did you...?"

"My natural hair color is this. Haro."

As Yushura tossed the ball, the tip of the wand called Haro opened its mouth to swallow it, concealing it within.

"That surprised me! Even the length has changed, right?"

"Yes. It's our new product, 'Ferrohair,' using magnetic fluid. It's still under development by my company for use by mobile suits, but I had it adjusted for today. Would you like to try it?"

"No, thank you! I... I like my hair the way it is!" Suletta declined, flustered.

Suletta hastily protected her head with her hands, barely covering it. She was a bit interested, but since she had just met this person, she felt more nervous than intrigued.

"It's a lovely red, isn't it?"

Then, Suletta realized she had yet to introduce herself.

"Ah, um, I'm Suletta Mercury! I-I'm in the same grade as Miorine..."

"You're friends, right? You mentioned Miorine earlier."

"Y-Yes! But why disguise yourself as Miorine?"

"I wanted to surprise her when I ran into her. I just happened to surprise you first."

"That's a prank, isn't it!"

"Yep. That's it."

"But, um... are you really Ms Miorine's childhood friend?"

Behind Yushura, a bodyguard-like figure in a black suit was quietly standing.

Suletta didn't know the details but knew Miorine had many enemies. She decided to proceed with caution here as her prospective groom.

"Ah, you're being cautious."

"N-no, not at all!"

"What can I do to earn your trust?"

"Well, um..."

"Let's start by showing you some old photos of us. Haro."

At Yushura's voice command, the Haro on her staff began projecting something onto the nearby wall.

"T-this is Ms Miorine... and you, Yushura?"

"Yes, that's right."

"So, so cute...!"

"Oh, you should exchange contact information with me."

"Y-Yes, sure!"

Yushura brought her Haro stick closer to the student handbook that Suletta had held out.

Their respective contact information appeared on the screens of both the student handbook and the Haro.

"You see the function in the address book that shows mutual friends, right?"

"Ah, there it is! It's Miorine and Yushura, side by side."

"So, do you believe now that Miorine and I are still in touch and are childhood friends?"

"I-I believe you!"

"Then, a handshake!"

"A handshake, of course!"

Yushura gracefully took Suletta's hand.

Suletta immediately noticed — though she didn't mention it to Yushura — that Yushura's grip was incredibly weak, even more slender than Miorine's delicate hand.

All this while, Yushura's mechanically-operated cane stood on its own beside her. Atop it was the Haro, looking almost like a wizard's staff. Every now and then, it adjusted its position in response to the air conditioning flow, maintaining a comfortable distance from Yushura in the zero-gravity environment.

"This? It's a mobile support staff equipped with a Haro. I'm a bit weak, and I struggle to move in a gravity environment."

The moment Yushura placed her right hand on the Haro, air spewed out from various parts of the staff. Yushura began to float, twirling in a figure eight before gently landing in the same position.

"That's amazing!"

Suletta was completely captivated by the magic that Yushura kept showing. She really seemed like a wizard.

At this moment, the black-suited figure who had kept their distance approached them.

"Miss, it's time. We should head over to Miorine's place soon."

Yushura crossed her arms,

"Wait a moment, Yaya. I'm changing the plan a bit. I want to talk with Suletta a bit longer."

The butler, called Yaya, silently nodded and stepped back.

Yushura turned to Suletta with a smile,

"I think it'll be more interesting to meet Miorine later."

"Interesting?"

"Interesting is important, right? I base everything on whether it's interesting or not."

"I-I do too! I love fun things!"

Yushura skillfully maneuvered the thrust from the Haro stick, landing right in front of Suletta's eyes.

"I think we're going to get along great!"

### **3. SHIP**

"Suletta."

As students milled about and passed each other, the voice that called out belonged to one of Suletta's few friends, Nika Nanaura.

Beside her was Chuatury Panlunch, affectionately known as Chuchu. Her bubblegum pink hair sparkled with feisty charm as usual.

"Who's that with you?"

"This is Ms. Yushura! Ms. Yushura, this is Nika, and Chuchu."

Suletta began the introductions, but Chuchu interjected with a snarky comment, "Let me guess, another high-society Spacian gal?"

"Chuchu, that's rude. Hello, are you here for a tour?"

Upon picking up on Yushura's mature air, Nika offered a polite greeting.

Yushura responded with a gracious smile, "I forgot to mention it to Suletta. I am Yushura Mirzakhani, the Chief Technical Officer of Langlands Corporation."

Suletta stammered to continue the introduction, "She's... she's Miorine's childhood friend, and I-I-I just met her earlier..."

But Nika interrupted, her eyes wide, "Langlands Corporation? The one famous for magnetohydro technology?!"

"You're familiar with it?"

As a Mechanics department student, Nika was deeply interested in cutting-edge technology.

"Seeing as you're a friend of Suletta's, I'll show you something special."

With a flick of her Haro stick, two silvery spheres appeared, and Nika and Chuchu's hairstyles were swapped instantly. Nika's hair had turned into a bubblegum pink pompom, while Chuchu's was transformed into a blue-highlighted bob.

"Wha-!?! What just happened!?"

"What's going on!?"

Nika and Chuchu stared in shock.

"Is this a product of Langlands?"

"Yes, a new release."

"Could you... Could you tell me more?!"

Technical jargon started to fly around, much of it going over Suletta's head.

"Ah, once Nika gets started on tech talk, she never stops."

Chuchu rolled her eyes as if this was a common occurrence.

After their discussion, Yushura waved her Haro stick again, returning Nika and Chuchu's hairstyles back to normal.

"Hold on. Why is Suletta the only one in a white uniform?"

"W-well, that's..."

"Did Suletta cause some trouble and was made to wear it as punishment?"

Yushura eyed Suletta suspiciously.

Suletta's uniform was white with a golden emblem, quite distinctive at first glance. Yushura didn't really believe it was a punishment; she was merely jesting.

However, Suletta, taking her seriously, began to fluster.

Seeing Suletta in distress, Nika jumped in, "Suletta didn't mess up anything. It's quite the opposite. Suletta is the top pilot at the school; she's a Holder."

"Holder?"

As Yushura threw more questions, this time, it was Chuchu's turn to answer.

"In this school, we engage in duels, in mobile suits, staking something on the line. Suletta won a duel against the previous Holder, Guel, wagering Miorine."

"A duel for Miorine? Suletta did that?"

Suletta recollected that fateful day.

"I-I proposed the duel..."

How she mustered such courage that day was beyond her comprehension. But it all started from that moment when she moved forward two.

"Suletta proposed the duel!? That's amazing!"

"Eh, uh, well... heh heh"

How to react in such situations still baffled Suletta.

"What does it mean to wager Miorine? Does it mean you receive something from Miorine?" Yushura's questions continued.

"Suletta became Miorine's groom," Nika clarified.

Yushura gasped, "What!? A groom? Of Miorine? Really?"

Yushura's piercing gaze rested on Suletta, who recoiled under its intensity.

"Y-yes... um, that is... right."

"Congratulations!"

"Th-thank you...?"

"You question that? Are you not happy?"

"N-no... I'm happy."

"I've wanted to get closer to Miorine, too," Yushura muttered, her gaze fixed on Suletta. "You must really care about Miorine."

"Um... yes?"

Yushura's words echoed in the air like a personal musing, yet also as an explanation to Nika and the others.

"I decided not to see Miorine today," she confessed.

Nika and Chuchu exchanged puzzled glances.

"I want to see her, but I don't."

"What do you mean?"

"I... I want to talk more with you guys. Especially with Suletta."

Her unwavering gaze was locked onto Suletta.

"M-me?"

"Of course! You're Miorine's bridegroom, right? Suletta Mercury," Yushura said, still locking her gaze on her, "how about we go to the port? I have a ship there."

"A ship?"

At the spaceport a mid-sized ship adorned with gold ornamentation on a blue background was moored. Its rounded hull boasted a showy yet dignified charm.

"Come on, everyone, get on board."

Yushura's ship was surprisingly large for a personal vessel. It even had a cargo hold large enough for one mobile suit.

"Can we board?"

But Yushura's next words were unexpected.

"I invite you to my front with this ship."

"What?!"

The trio echoed in disbelief, imagining a simple tea party aboard the ship.

Nika, usually the serious one, expressed her hesitation. "While I'd love to go, I have to be back at school by the end of the day..."

"Don't worry. This ship is super-fast. It's our latest model," Yushura assured, puffing out her chest.

"Come on now, everyone, don't be shy!"

"Well, then..."

Suletta couldn't contain her excitement about an outing with her dorm mates.

"I guess I'll take you up on your offer," Nika chimed in, eager to board the state-of-the-art ship.

Seeing the excitement of her friends, Chuchu sighed.

"Fine. If Nika is going, I will too."

## **4. LAPIS GARDEN**

Yushura led the way as Suletta, Nika, and Chuchu entered the ship, before Yaya closed the hatch behind them.

The cabin they were led into was spacious, with comfortable sofas and tables arranged generously. Just as Suletta let her guard down, a chair slid towards her, and she was made to sit.

"Wha!"

Startled, a soft apparatus sprang out of the chair, automatically gripping Suletta around the waist.

Peering at the underside of the chair, Nika remarked, "This is the latest seat drone. Impressive, just as one would expect from the cutting-edge Langlands Corporation..."

Suletta and Nika could only look around, wide-eyed.



"Hmph. It's just a typical Spacecian ship," Chuchu snorted dismissively.

Amidst all this, Yushura seemed to be enjoying herself.

"We'll be taking off soon."

"Please fasten your seat belts," urged Yaya, but at that moment, a low rumbling sound echoed through the ship.

Suletta quickly held her stomach, but it was already too late.

"Uh..."

"Oh," Yushura noted, looking at her.

Nika, noticing the blushing Suletta, silently smiled.

"Did you skip lunch?" asked Yushura.

"Ah, now that you mention it! Yes, that's... right," Suletta replied.

She had been planning to invite Miorine for lunch after class as part of her to-do list, which included "Having a meal with friends."

However, Miorine had gone alone, and with her encounter with Yushura, she completely forgot about her hunger until her stomach reminded her. She realized she hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, aside from a single bite of frozen stew.

Standing up, Yushura said, "I'm sorry. I'm not someone who usually gets hungry. What about you, Chuchu and Nika?"

"Nika and I were about to head to the cafeteria--"

"To be honest, I'm a bit hungry..."

Yushura smiled mischievously as she got up.

"Let's have a meal together. I'll make sure to prepare extra for Suletta. Yaya, help me."

"Understood."

With that curt response, Yaya left the living room more swiftly than Yushura.

In a matter of minutes, dishes were brought to Suletta and the others. The ship was in a zero-gravity environment, and instead of plates arranged on a table, the food-like objects seemed to be floating around. These were not the usual cubed meals but an assortment of colorful meals encased in sparkling gelatin – vegetable pastes and sautés – creating an ambience akin to being surrounded by balloons and candy globes.

"Um, is... this... edible?" Suletta hesitantly asked.

Watching Suletta's hesitation, Yushura chuckled and encouraged her, "Go ahead, dig in."

"But..."

"But?"

"Miorine said not to eat something offered by strangers..."

"Haha, that's so Miorine. Go on, dig in."

"... "

"What's wrong?"

Suletta and the others were rooted to the spot by the strange and fantastical sight.

They couldn't help but compare this meal with the frozen stew they had with Miorine.

While that experience might one day become a cherished memory, Suletta couldn't help but stare hungrily at the fresh and appetizing dishes before her.

"I see, I see. Miorine would love this."

"Huh?"

"Just like this, look."

Yushura puckered her lips as though leaning in for a kiss, drew a long breath, then sucked in a nearby jello with a slurping sound.

Slurp! Slurp! Slurp!

Suletta and the others imitated, tasting the jelly one after the other. This was indeed a peculiar scene, yet it had a certain charm, making them all break into laughter. Each bite held a surprise, sometimes sweet, at times bitter - it was as if they were in a dream.

"mm-eli-mm-cious!"

Suletta had intended to exclaim, "Delicious!" but her mouth was still full.

Yushura gave Suletta, who was blushing, a warm look and said, "Good, I'm glad. Now, everyone, eat up!"

Even in the far-off reaches of space, away from Earth, it's possible to acquire various substances, including light energy from the Sun and water and oxygen from asteroids. As Yushura explained this, Suletta blurted out.

"Mi-miss Miorine also gr-gr-grows tomatoes!"

Yushura's expression reflected a slight surprise before she uttered, "I see. Tomatoes, huh?"

Chuchu, who had been silent for a while, slowly bit into one.

"So good."

"!!"

At Yushura's smile, Suletta also felt a sense of happiness.

— *We will soon arrive at the Front, Lapis Garden.*

As Yaya made this announcement, the spaceship's interior walls switched to display the external view.

"Look, there. That's my rock garden."

Floating before them was an asteroid that looked like a parfait with white rocks topped by pale blue gems. Both the rock and the gem were about ten kilometers in length.

"Wow..."

Suletta's eyes reflected the twinkling star, literally making her eyes sparkle.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Ye-yes! I've never seen anything like it!"

"It seems like it originally was a much larger asteroid, and that blue crystal part grew inside it."

"Wow..."

As the ship neared the asteroid, buildings made on the rock part started to come into view.

"Um... What is this place?"

Nika asked Yushura.

"It's the Front that I inherited from my great-grandmother."

"You inherited a *Front*? You really are the heiress of the Langlands Corporation..."

"It's much smaller compared to your school's Front. And technically, it's owned by the company."

Yushura's humble words, however, only irritated Chuchu further.

"Are you bragging?! You Spacians monopolizing both space and Earth!"

"Chuchu!"

Nika reprimanded Chuchu once again. However, Yushura, standing before them, seemed to have a unique perspective towards Earth.

Yushura looked at the blue crystal and pondered,

"I wonder if there is something in the universe or on Earth that can truly be called 'mine!'"

"!!"

Chuchu, who had been about to declare that Earth belonged to the Earthians, choked on her words.

But Yushura's words didn't seem to be a sarcastic remark towards Chuchu. Instead, they seemed to be directed at herself as she silently stared at her own planet.

"Mine..."

Suletta gently touched the hairband on her head.

It was her treasured possession, given to her by her mother.

Suddenly, an announcement echoed through the cabin. It was Yaya's voice.

— *We are now entering the Lapis Garden Spaceport.*

## 5. AMUSEMENT PARK

Crossing the gate into the inner sanctum from the Lapis Garden Spaceport, it was, quite literally, a whole new world.

"Wow..."

Suletta gasped spontaneously, the artificial gravity of 1G pulling at her.

The space was filled with what seemed like tracks, snaking and sprawling in every direction. Spinning carousels, constructs larger than any building, resembling gargantuan clocks - while most of it appeared mechanical, they were unlike the familiar mobile suits or heavy machinery. The vista brimmed with peculiar curiosities as far as the eye could see.

Suletta cocked her head.

"Wha, what—what is this place? What is all this?"

"This is an amusement park! Well, more precisely, it's an amusement park still under construction. Over there is a roller coaster, this here is a merry-go-round, and that big one over there is a Ferris wheel!"

As Yushura waved her wand, a symphony of activation sounds echoed from various attractions and the amusement park filled with buoyant music.

"Amuse...ment park...?"

"Is this your first time?"

Yushura waved her wand again, and cheerful music began to flood the park.

"It's my first time, yes. We, we don't even have schools on Mercury."

"We have places like this on Earth too..."

Nika sounded a bit forlorn as her voice trailed off.

"But they're all in ruins now."

Chuchu cast a glare at Yushura.

Yushura nodded in agreement, "I'm trying to make my amusement park a place where every child can freely play."

"But the children on Earth... They can't do that!"

Nika hastily stepped in front of Chuchu.

"I'm sorry. Chuchu doesn't mean to blame you, Yushura."

"Do you think it's pointless too, Nika? Just because a Spacian is showing off a bit?"

"Chuchu!"

"I understand what Chuchu is trying to say. But I'm not a magician, just an employee of a company. I'll do what I can within my means."

Yushura stated brightly. Nika could feel a certain resolve in her statement. Chuchu clicked her tongue in annoyance.

At that moment, a loud voice echoed from behind Suletta and the others.

— *Welcome to Lapis Garden!*

"Wah!"

Suletta turned around to find a guidance Haro had come up to them.

Seeing the strange Haro with its nose-like feature and the area around its mouth colored red, Suletta inadvertently bowed her head in greeting.

"Suletta! We have those back at Asticassia too!"

Chuchu said, rolling her eyes, but then burst into laughter.

The atmosphere in the room lightened considerably. Yaya, who had been silent until now, chimed in with an explanation.

"That's the amusement park's mascot character, 'PieHaro.' If you get lost, look for PieHaro."

"U-understood!"

Yushura leaned towards Yaya and said, "Since it's just the five of us today, let's have as much fun as possible!"

Suletta and the others decided to start with the roller coaster. PieHaro explained,

— *It's the largest one in all of space.*

Suletta and the others climbed aboard, leaving Yaya behind.

"Aren't you going to join us, Yaya?" Nika asked.

"I'll be waiting here."

Yushura took Yaya's hand.

"Yaya, it's Nika's asking us to join. Besides, I'd love to ride along, too."

"Understood."

Suletta, Nika, and Chuchu took the front row seats in the vehicle while Yushura and Yaya sat in the row behind them. The ride began its slow ascent along the tracks.

"Oh, oh, oh!"

"This might be exciting!"

"This isn't a big deal at all!"

Almost immediately, the vehicle shot down at high speed.

Everyone except Yaya was in a complete uproar.

"Kyaaaah!"

"Ahahahahaha!"

Nika was the one screaming the most, and Yushura was the one laughing the hardest.

By the time they stepped off the roller coaster, Suletta and Chuchu were thoroughly exhausted.

"That was... terrifying..."

"An empty cockpit like that... unbelievable."

"And you two are in the piloting department."

Nika, who seemed entirely unaffected, looked after the two but soon burst out laughing.

"What's up, Nika?"

The wind had mussed Chuchu's pom-pom hairstyle, but after she took a few steps, it went back to normal. Suletta couldn't help but join in the laughter.

"Suletta, you're not supposed to laugh!"

"I-I'm sorry, Chuchu!"

Going out to play with school friends—another item was ticked off Suletta's list. But visiting an amusement park? She couldn't even have imagined such a place when she was on Mercury.

"When I come to places like this, Miorine might... well, she might smile."

"Hm? Aren't you and Miorine already friends? You're her bridegroom, right?"

"Well, I-I like to think so, but... Miorine always seems to be angry with me."

Yushura put her finger to her cheek thoughtfully and said, "I see, I see. She's the type who constantly thinks about her own responsibilities."

Suletta shared the story of her first meeting with Miorine.

—*Responsibility! Take responsibility!*

"Haha, that *might* mean she was angry with you, Suletta."

"Y-you think so?"

Time meandered by in their leisurely conversation.



## 6. NO GOING BACK

"We should start heading back soon. We have class tomorrow."

Fun times always seem to pass in the blink of an eye.

Nika noticed this as she checked her student handbook.

"Nika, you're always so serious," chuckled Chuchu, a double-scoop ice cream cone in one hand. For all her complaining, Chuchu might be the one enjoying herself the most.

"Don't worry," Yushura responded with a confident smile. "We have a mass driver here."

"What?!"

Nika's eyes lit up at the mention of the magical words.

As the name suggests, the mass driver is a device used to transport mass and is found only on limited fronts, like major industrial complex fronts. The mere fact that one existed in this amusement park was irresistible to Nika.

"So, spend another thirty minutes with me," Yushura said with a beaming smile.

"Hey, I don't mind. I still haven't tried that ride over there," shrugged Chuchu.

"I'd like to see the mass driver..." Nika added.

"And I..."

Suletta started to speak, but upon glancing at Yushura, she stopped mid-sentence.

Yushura was looking down, but her gaze was locked onto Suletta.

Both Nika and Chuchu noticed the change in Yushura's demeanor. They lined up on either side of Suletta, watching her closely.

"Um..."

Suletta began, but Yushura slowly raised her head.

"Suletta, I've known for a long time that you're the Holder. I also knew that you became Miorine's bridegroom."

"Huh?"

Yushura continued speaking in a somber tone.

It was as if she had turned into a different person from a moment ago.

"Suletta... I've always wanted to meet you. Today, I actually came to Asticassia to see *you*."

"What? I thought you came to see Miorine..."

Suletta looked at her, bewildered.

"First, I must do something with you, Suletta."



"W-what is it?"

"A duel! Yes, that's right!" Yushura turned abruptly toward Suletta.

"Whaaaat?"

Such words were completely unexpected, especially far away from the school front.

"I was Miorine's bridegroom before you, Suletta."

"R-really?!"

"We made that promise back when that picture was taken..."

"That... that sounds like quite a long time ago, doesn't it?"

"Do you think promises break as time passes? Miorine broke it, didn't she? Has she turned into a liar?"

The smile was gone from Yushura's face.

But nonetheless, having Miorine, her bride, called a liar was something Suletta could not keep silent about.

"Miorine would never break a promise!"

Everything happened because Miorine's father, Delling, took matters into his own hands.

"I know about Miorine's father too. But this is a challenge between you and me, Suletta."

"W-what?"

"You'll put your qualification as the groom on the line. I'll stake that ship."

"N-no, no, no! I'm okay without the ship. If you could just let us ride it one more time..."

Yushura gave Suletta a creepy smile.

"If you win, you can use the ship to return. If you lose, you'll stay here forever. That goes for Nika and Chuchu as well."

The two who were hanging on every word of the conversation raised their voices.

"Forever?!"

"What have you been on about all this time? If we don't return, it will cause a huge commotion!"

Chuchu laughed it off casually.

But Yushura looked amused as well, "I can take care of the expulsion process."

"Expulsion?" Nika's face tightened.

"You're yanking our chains!"

Chuchu stepped forward to confront Yushura.

Yaya stepped in between them.

"Please refrain from getting close to the young lady; you are a guest."

"The hell is *your* problem? You wanna fight?"

"If you insist."

This time, Yushura stepped in front of Yaya.

"Chuchu, Yaya is my bodyguard and has mastered various martial arts. It's better not to do anything *rash*."

"Ah, you're bluffing!"

Chuchu suddenly lunged at Yaya.

"!!"

Nika tried to stop Chuchu, but by the time she realized what was happening, Chuchu had been flipped over by Yaya twice and gently placed on the ground.

"Are you satisfied now?"

"Damn...!"

Suletta and Nika rushed over to Chuchu, who was being tossed on the ground.

"Chuchu!"

"Chuchu! Are you okay?!"

"Argh, I'm fine!"

Chuchu quickly got up. She didn't seem injured at all. However, her pride had been severely wounded.

At this point, Yushura spread her arms and made a declaration.

"Now, Suletta! Let's duel!"

After exchanging glances with Nika and Chuchu, Suletta faced Yushura alone.

"A-alright! If I win, you'll let us go home! And also..."

"And?"

"Please take back what you said about Miorine being a liar!"

"Of course, that's fine! So, let's start right away—"

"Hold on!"

The one who shouted was Chuchu.

"I want in on this too!"

Chuchu was glaring at Yaya, who was standing behind Yushura. She seemed to want revenge for earlier.

Seeing Chuchu, Nika, and Suletta, Yushura's face brightened.

"That sounds much more fun!"

## 7. PRIME NUMBERS AND UFOs

"Do I really have to go through with this?"

Nika murmured with an anxious look.

In response to Chuchu's wish to fight with Yaya, Yushura proposed a best-of-three competition, eventually landing Nika as the first to fight.

"Go get 'em, Nika!"

"Well... At least it's not a duel of mobile suits, but I can't believe I have to..."

Nika, looking perplexed, entered the attraction.

The inside was a stark white square space. As Nika passed through the entrance, the shutter swiftly lowered.

— *I wish you the best of luck.*

Yushura's voice echoed through a speaker.

"Ah, thanks. So, Yushura, you're my opponent?"

— *No, no. You're up against a Haro stick. It's a best of three, remember?*

"Wait, I'm up against a Haro?!"

— *Don't worry, don't worry. We'll use a 'skill adjustment program' to make your abilities match.*

"Alright, I'll give it a shot."

As Nika's opposing door opened, in sauntered a Haro stick. It seemed designed to maintain balance even under gravity, propelled by thrusters.

When the shutter dropped, multicolored balloons inflated and floated up from the floor.

"What are these...?"

The balloons were holograms, gently bobbing in all directions. The surfaces of these balloons had numbers like 7 or 30 on them.

— *The rules are simple! Touch a balloon with a prime number, and you get that many points. If it's not a prime number, you lose that many points.*

"That feels like the Haro has a significant advantage."

— *Don't worry. We've adjusted its calculation abilities to match yours. Same for physical abilities.*

"Then, how will the winner be determined?"

— *Is that a philosophical question?*

"No, a technical one."

Yushura chuckled softly.

"What?"

— *Ah, sorry. I've been thinking about fighting with Suletta, but I find you, Nika, quite fascinating. Miorine must be jealous.*

"Could you answer my question, please?"

— *What determines the winner always varies, doesn't it? In my opinion, in most cases, the one with the better luck wins.*

"Probability... fatalism, maybe. I don't mind that. Alright, I'm ready anytime."

— *Then... Begin!*

At Yushura's signal, the balloons surged out, filling the space.

"17! 29!"

When Nika touched them, the balloons burst and vanished.

A prime number is a number that cannot be divided evenly by any number other than itself. For example, 5 is a prime number, while 6 is not, as it can be divided by 2 or 3.

Nika considered herself good at math or mental arithmetic, but whether 251 was a prime number—of course, she didn't have it memorized—and she decided it would be better to score with a smaller number.

"You got this, Nika!"

"Wow, Nika's winning!"

Chuchu and Suletta were cheering on her from outside the attraction, watching the monitor.

Yushura and Yaya were also checking the monitor next to them.

"Nika, you're doing great... Oh!"

Chuchu pressed her face against the screen. In a stunning twist, the Haro stick had suddenly scored 433 points, taking a significant lead over Nika.

"That's ridiculous! No human would know if 433 is a prime number!"

"Huh? No, look, I think the Haro stick is just guessing."

Suletta turned to Chuchu and pointed at the screen.

This time the Haro stick had touched 861, resulting in an equal deduction from its score. 861 could be divided by 7.

"You're right. Good catch, Suletta."

"Ehehe."

It seemed Nika had noticed the opponent's strategy, hesitantly reaching out to touch a balloon numbered 1151.

The score luckily turned in her favor.

"Yes!"

But just as Nika rejoiced, the score for the Haro stick exceeded ten thousand.

"No way..."

The Haro stick didn't budge any longer in front of Nika, who was filled with despair.

— *Ten seconds left!*

In front of Nika, numerous balloons inscribed with numbers over ten thousand floated, but she had no idea if they were primes.

Yushura's earlier words were a hint for this game.

"Chuchu, Suletta, I'm sorry if I lose!"

Nika reached out towards the balloon marked 14377 in front of her.

However, the balloons moved randomly. The 77773 brushed gently against Nika's forehead, marking the end of the game.

"Aaaaargh!"

"Are you serious?!"

Suletta and Chuchu were in an uproar.

Nika was afraid to check her score.

"No way! "

Nika had beaten the Haro stick by over sixty thousand points. 77773 was a prime number.

— *You win! YOU WIN!*

"Haha! That's our Nika!"

"Am-amazing! Nika!"

"If I win next, it'll be 2-0, and we win."

As Nika exited the attraction and joined the other two, Yushura approached, clapping.

"Nika, well done. That was fun."

"We ain't here to entertain you, Yushura! If I win next, that means we win, right?"

Yushura turned around.

"Yaya, can you beat her? I want to fight Suletta last. That will be more exciting, right?"

"Yes. I will win for my lady."

Hearing the two of them, Chuchu became even more fired up.

"Run your mouth all you want. Let's get this started already!"

The second match would take place in an attraction called "UFO Battle."

Chuchu and Yaya each attached a large, disk-shaped drone device to their waists — essentially cosplaying as UFOs — and faced each other in a large dome.

On the disk was a control lever and also a trigger to shoot paintballs.

"Chuchu, you look *SO* cute!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Chuchu responded in an annoyed tone, but she looked quite pleased.

Yaya gave a slight nod to Yushura.

"Let's begin."

Like the tactical exam area of Asticassia School of Technology, the dome's wall projected the battle information, and a countdown began.

"Go for it, Chuchu!"

"D-do your best!"

"Here I go!"

With the sound of the start buzzer, Chuchu and Yaya activated their drones and flew up high.

— *The rules are simple here too! The first to hit the other with a paintball wins! Chuchu, are you ready?*

Yushura's voice echoes throughout the dome.

"Yeah!"

— *Then let the match begin!*

At the same time as her voice, Chuchu smartly fired a burst of paintballs.

However, Yaya nimbly twisted and dodged all the shots.

The two closed in on one another in a crisscrossing pattern.

"You've been practicing a lot, haven't you?"

"I haven't."

— *Chuchu. In order to spice up the fight, I'm adjusting the program even now, but the evaluation is that your piloting skills are slightly superior, so Yaya's drone output has been increased by 5%. Have I overcompensated?*

"Well, duh, my skills are superior!"

The aerial battle grew more intense.

They rapidly approached each other, exchanging shots, and just before they were about to collide head-on, Chuchu dodged first.

Seeing this, Yaya took a twisting trajectory, getting positioned directly above Chuchu's drone.

"Damn it!"

Chuchu pulled the control lever with all her might, but it was too late.

Yaya calmly pulled the trigger.

"Do forgive me."

The paintball shot straight through the cockpit where Chuchu was sitting.

With her pink pompom hair flattened by the sky-blue paint, Chuchu stepped out of the cockpit.

Nika quickly raced over.

"Chuchu! Are you hurt?"

"Nikaaaaaa!"

"You were so close."

"Damn it!"

The paint splattered onto Nika's face and uniform, but she didn't care and patted Chuchu's head.

Suletta gathered her courage, put her hand on Chuchu's shoulder, and said,

"Chu, Chuchu, it was a close one!"

Chuchu glared at Suletta.

"Heeee!"

Suletta was frightened, but, Chuchu quickly spoke up.

"Win the next match, no matter what!"

While saying this, Chuchu flicked Suletta, and all three of them ended up smeared with paint.

Yushura appeared above them, riding her Haro stick.

"Oh my, oh my."

"Don't look down on us!"

Chuchu shouted up at her.

"All three of you, stand still."

Immediately after, a strong wind blew from the Haro stick. The paint dried in a flash and was blown away.

"Wow."

"Is this paint also a new product from Langlands?"

In response to Nika's question, Yushura landed on the ground.

"Yes. Our company used to specialize in painting technology."

"Used to? So it's different now?"

"I'm thinking of moving in a new direction soon."

Yushura smiled at Suletta and said,

"Now it's our turn."

"Y-yes!"

## 8. CONTAINER

"This'll be *my* revenge match! Bring it on!"

"But, Chuchu, you're still alive," Nika interjected with a well-timed comment, turning her attention to Suletta. "Suletta, give it your all!"

"I-I will do my best!" Suletta stammered and turned back towards Yushura, beginning to stride toward her.

"I will... do it!"

Yushura smiled, suddenly taking Suletta's hand and leading her into the heart of the attraction.

Nika and Chuchu, along with Yaya, relocated to the spectator seats.

The third match was to be held in the largest attraction space yet.

This section was a zero-gravity area, with a star-filled sky displayed on full-panel monitors, giving the illusion of being in the vastness of space itself. Yushura, holding Suletta's hand, navigated through the stellar seas using her Haro stick.

"Am-amazing!"

The G-forces were different from the roller coaster earlier, offering a different kind of thrill.

"Do you like it?"

"Y-yes! W-whoa!"

Yushura sped up, gracefully reaching the center of the space.

Two cuboids about twenty meters tall, adorned in hues of pink and light blue, hovered slightly apart. Designed to fit the amusement park, the rounded corners and vibrant colors gave them a fitting amusement park vibe.

However, they weren't inflated like balloons; even landing on the light blue one with momentum, it barely budged. It was significantly heavier than Suletta and her companions.

And yet, this scale—this enormity—was something Suletta had grown accustomed to since birth.

"This is... a mobile suit container, right?"

"Correct. Suletta, you'll use the light blue one."

With that, Yushura effortlessly drifted over and stood atop the pink container, speaking into the microphone of her Haro stick.

— *Suletta, we'll fight using what's inside these!*

"We're fighting in mobile suits?"

— *You won a duel in a mobile suit, right? Then I also have to win in a mobile suit!*

"But I can only use the Aerial..."

— *Don't worry! We have two prototypes of our under-development model. We'll adjust abilities as usual.*

"U-uh... That's not the issue..."

Ignoring Suletta's protest, Yushura continued to lay out her plan.

— *This is the first time showing these to someone outside the company, so I'm a bit nervous. Yaya, if you please!*

"Yes, my lady."

Behind the chic spectator seats, Yaya operated a tablet, remotely opening the container.

Chuchu watched the opening container intently while Nika questioned Yaya.



— Yaya, are you sure you're controlling the output of the mobile suit properly?

Yaya responded, looking up from the tablet.

"Rest assured. We're using the duel rules of Asticassia as a reference. We've set an attack control system to prevent direct hits to the cockpit, and even if it does get hit, we've limited the beam output to the lowest level, so it will cause no harm."

"But it's still dangerous!"

"We have a medical team on standby. Everything is done to fulfill the Miss's wishes. I merely seek to make them a reality."

The resolve in Yaya's words suggested an unyielding determination that outsiders couldn't understand.

Even if Nika and Chuchu protested vehemently here, they would likely be overruled by Yaya.

"Suletta, be careful...!"

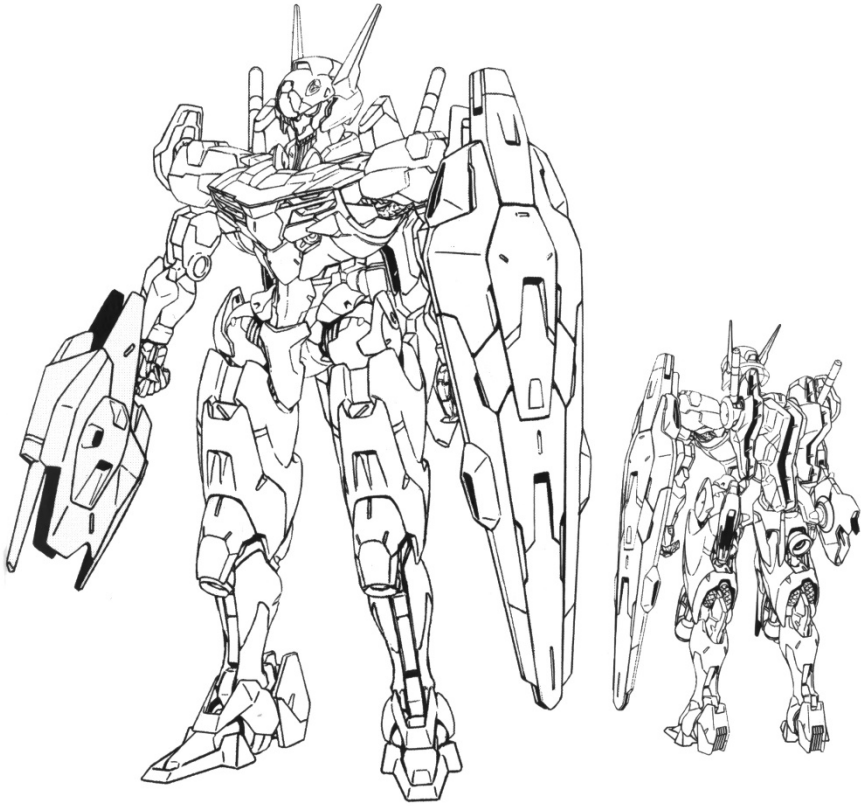
"Knock 'em dead!"

Suletta gripped the edge of the container and peered inside.

"W-wow..."

"Use the helmet and pilot suit inside the cockpit."

The doors of the container began to slowly open.



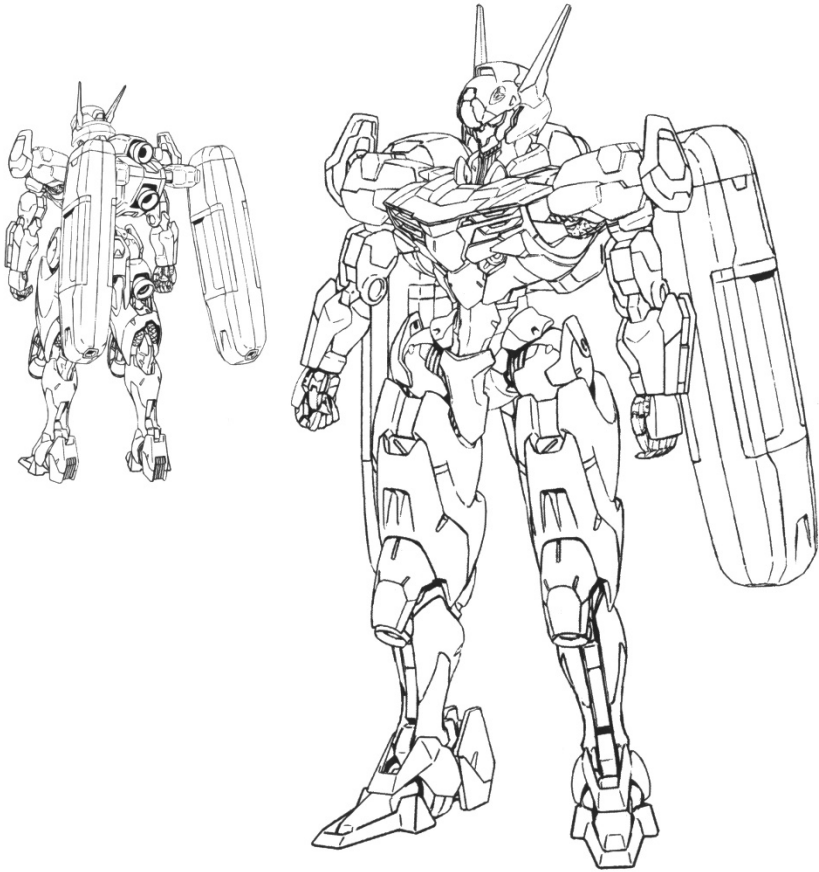
## GUNDAM LFRITH

Model Number: XGF-02

Head Height: 18.0m

Weight: 49.3t

A prototype machine developed by the Ochs Earth Corporation. This is one of the "GUND-ARM" mobile suits which adopted the innovative technology known as the GUND FORMAT. It is equipped with a shield made up of swarm weapon systems called GUND-BITs.



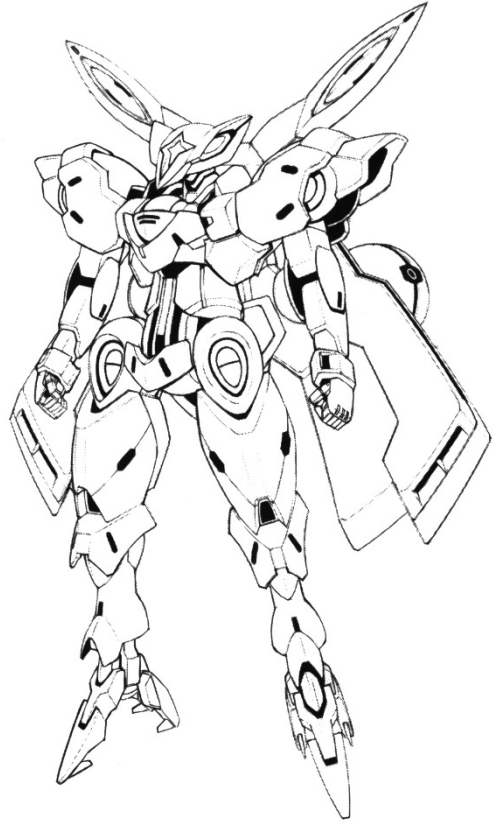
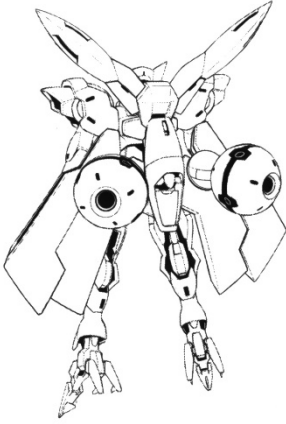
**GUNDAM LFRITH  
PRE-PRODUCTION MODEL**

Model Number: XGF-01

Head Height: 18.0m

Weight: 49.1t

A mass production version of the Gundam Lfrith manufactured by the Ochs company. Large launchers loaded with GUND-BITs are mounted on its back.



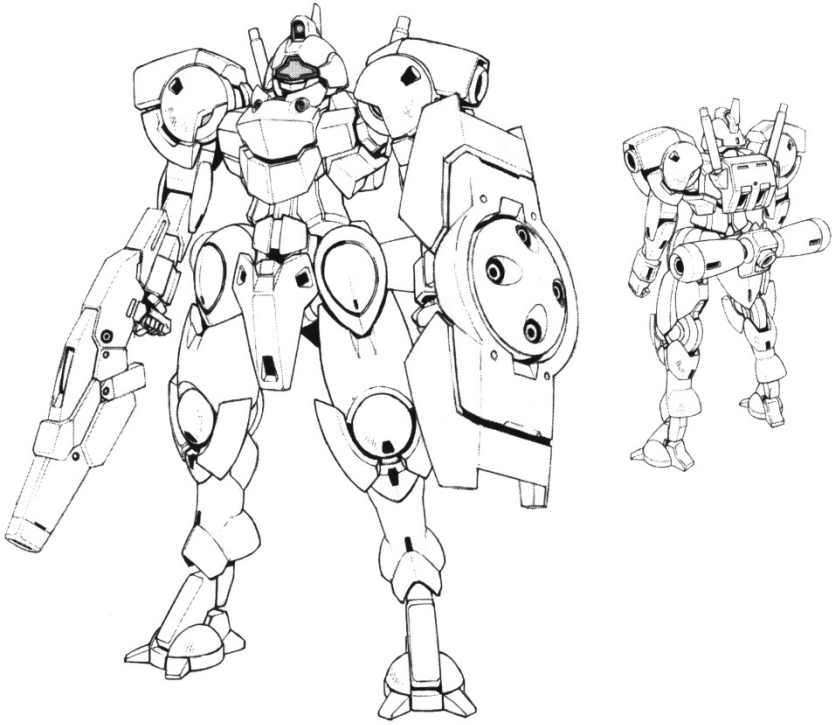
## **BEGUIR-BEU**

**Model Number:** CEK-040

**Head Height:** 18.3m

**Weight:** 55.1t

A mobile suit developed by Grassley Defense Systems. The latest technology is incorporated throughout this high-performance machine. It is assigned to the Mobile Suit Development Council's Dominicus special forces team.



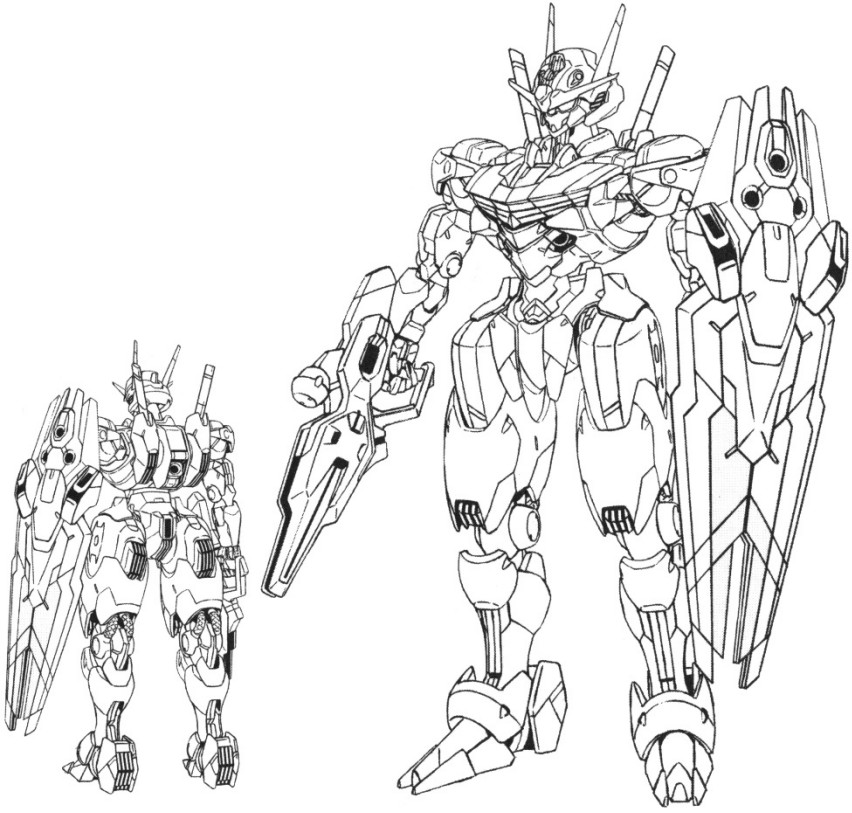
## HEINGRA

Model Number: CCP-068

Head Height: 18.6m

Weight: 54.7t

A mass-produced mobile suit produced by the Grassley company. It is used by the Dominicus team as an escort for the Beguir-Beu.



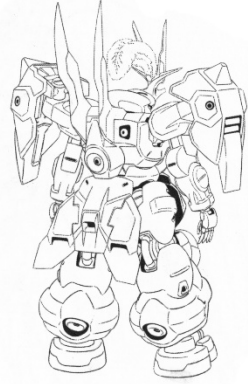
## **GUNDAM AERIAL**

**Model Number:** XVX-016

**Head Height:** 18.0m

**Weight:** 43.9t

A mobile suit that Suletta Mercury brings with her to school. It is equipped with a shield made up of GUND-BITs, a next-generation remote-controlled swarm weapon system.



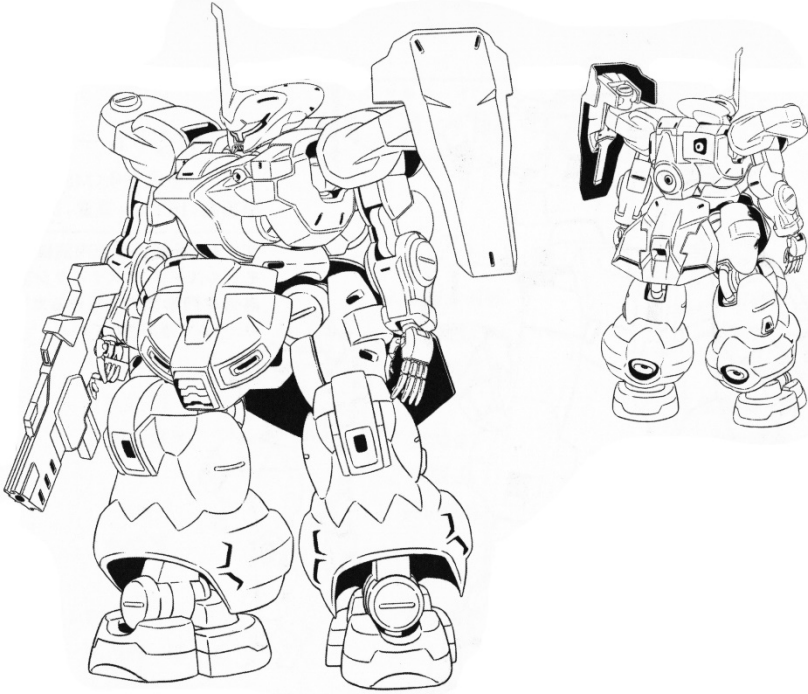
## **GUEL'S DILANZA**

Model Number: MD-0032G

Head Height: 18.2m

Weight: 89.4t

A version of the Dilanza tuned for Guel's use. As well as performance enhancements, it also has a magenta color scheme and splendid decorations.



## **DILANZA**

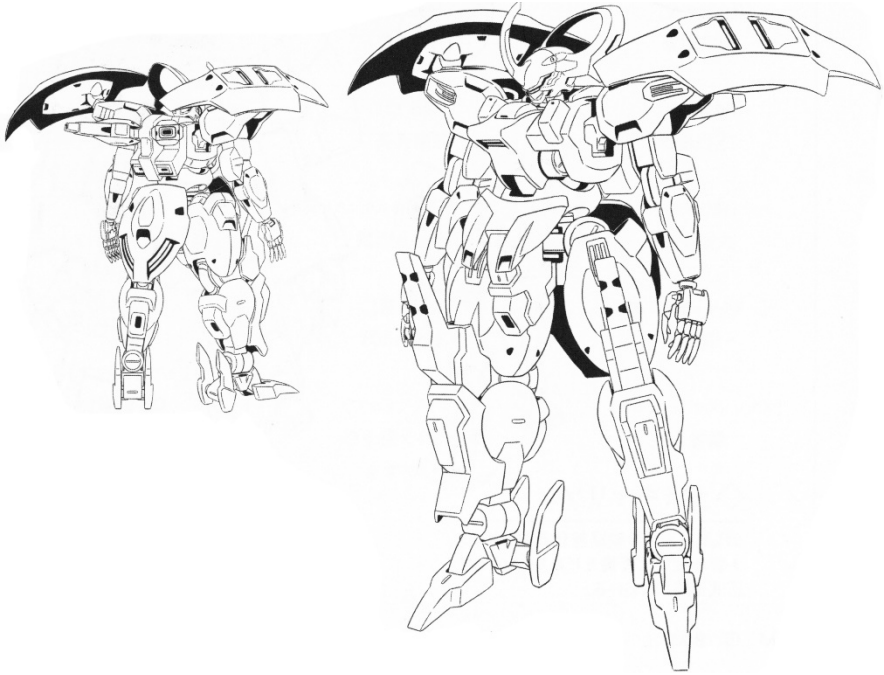
**Model Number:** MD-0031

**Head Height:** 18.2m

**Weight:** 85.3t

A general-purpose mobile suit made by the Jeturk company, with outstanding power. Thanks to a design policy of actively adding components, its style is heavyweight-class.





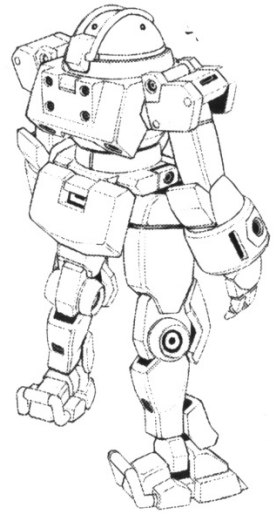
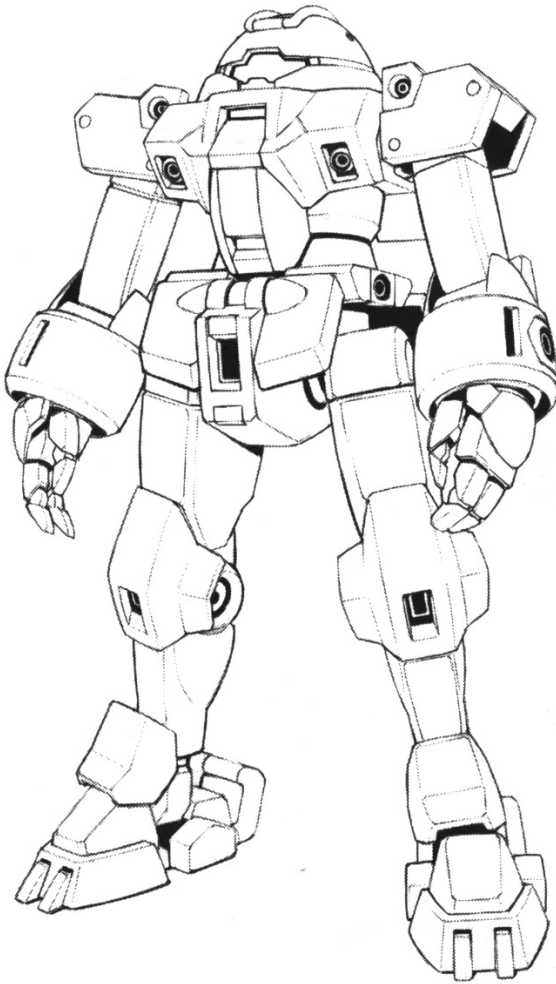
## **DARILBALDE**

**Model Number:** MD-0064

**Head Height:** 18.7m

**Weight:** 72.8t

A fifth-generation demonstration machine made by the Jeturk company. It carries a new type of drone weapon which can operate autonomously thanks to its Decision Making Extension AI.



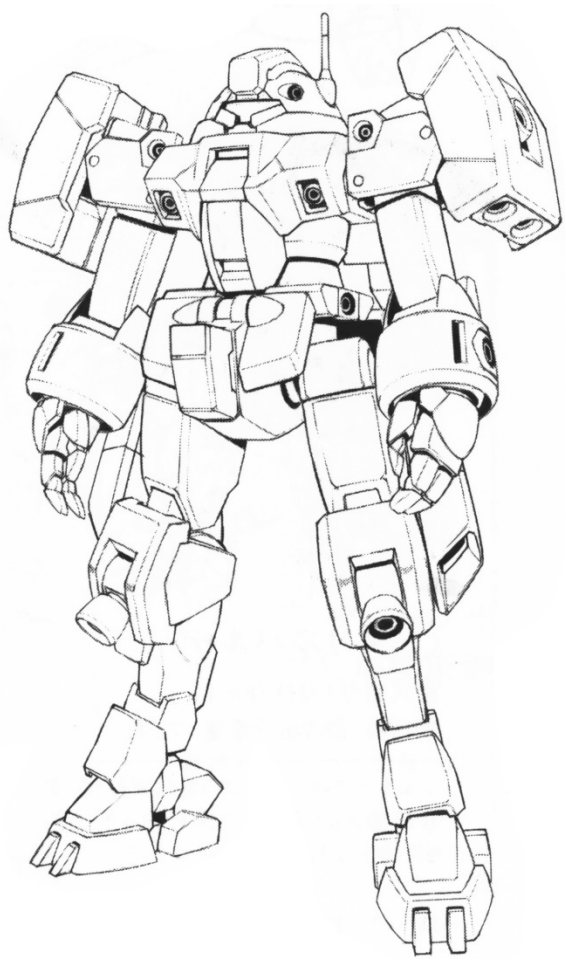
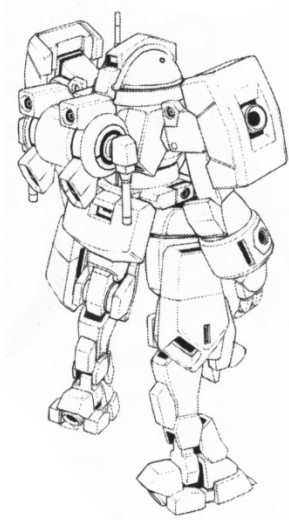
## **DEMI TRAINER**

**Model Number:** MSD-121

**Head Height:** 16.2m

**Weight:** 59.3t

A mobile suit used for training at the school, manufactured by the Burion company. It is used throughout the curriculum of the Asticassia School of Technology.



## **DEMI GARRISON**

A version of the Demi series specialized for combat. It has been formally adopted by the front management company as a security mobile suit.

## AFTERWORD

This work is a novelization of the animated series *Mobile Suit Gundam: The Witch from Mercury* - hereafter referred to as the "main story." This first volume includes episodes #0 to #3, as well as an original episode #1 unique to this novelization, and extra materials at the beginning and end for your enjoyment.

This novelization was made possible through the cooperation of the main story staff. I would like to express special gratitude to Director Hiroshi Kobayashi, screenwriter Ichiro Ohkouchi, and setting researcher Seiichi Shirato for their constant guidance and support.

And—unique to this novelization—I serve as a member of the animation team in the capacity of science-fiction (SF) researcher.

Generally, an SF researcher in the field of animation or games uses science fiction or scientific knowledge to enrich the world-building of the work. As world-building depends on the story, in many cases, I participate in story meetings as well. My first job on the show was coming up with the name for the "Ad Stella" space calendar. In reality, Director Kobayashi refined my longer initial proposal, and through discussion in meetings, we finalized the details.

The conversation about creating a novelization came somewhat later. As the days of meetings for the animated main story continued, the specifics of the novelization also fell into place.

Assuming dual roles as an SF researcher and the person in charge of the novelization has created a synergistic effect in both directions. This ended up being even more beneficial than I had initially anticipated for both myself and the work itself.

From an SF researcher's perspective of the main story, the novelization offers more accurate, comprehensive, and in-depth descriptions. The fact that I can ask questions of Director Kobayashi, Ohkouchi, and Shirato during script meetings provides an ideal environment for the novelization.

On the other hand, as the person responsible for the novelization, I often come up with SF ideas during the writing process. These ideas are fed back into the main story while also being reflected in the novelization and in original episodes unique to the novelization.

As for the original episodes, I only started thinking about them after I began writing the novel. In this first volume, there's episode #1, Yushura's Amusement Park, which, like the main story, will continue in the next volume.

These are not standalone episodes but rather ones recorded alongside the novelization. Thus, I have delicately set the distance from the main story as an SF researcher as well. At the same time, by stepping away from Asticassia, I have made quite a few new settings. The cooperation of the main story staff was critical for this as well, and I received help from Shuuei Takagi for the design of Yushura and the Haro-mounted Stick.

In this book, a large number of materials are included at the beginning and end. These were made possible by the efforts of all involved. The cover illustration was created by Lin Junbun, who is in charge of concept art for the main series. The characters and mecha in the show are undoubtedly an integral part of the charm of the world of the series.

Let's keep this afterword as a brief greeting. After all, the story has only just begun.

Near White Base, 2023.  
Yuya Takashima