

# THE 08<sup>th</sup> MS TEAM

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM

Original Plan by  
**Hajime Yatate**

Written by  
**Ichiro Okouchi**

**VOLUME.01**



**Zeonic|Scanlations**

Copyright © 1999 by Ichiro Okouchi.  
Copyright © Sotsu, Sunrise, and Kadokawa.

**This book is a fan translation produced as a personal project.**

The original Japanese text and all associated rights remain the property of the author and publisher.

This translation is not licensed, authorized, or affiliated with Kadokawa in any way. It exists solely out of admiration for the original work and in the hope of making it accessible to readers who otherwise would not have the opportunity to experience it.

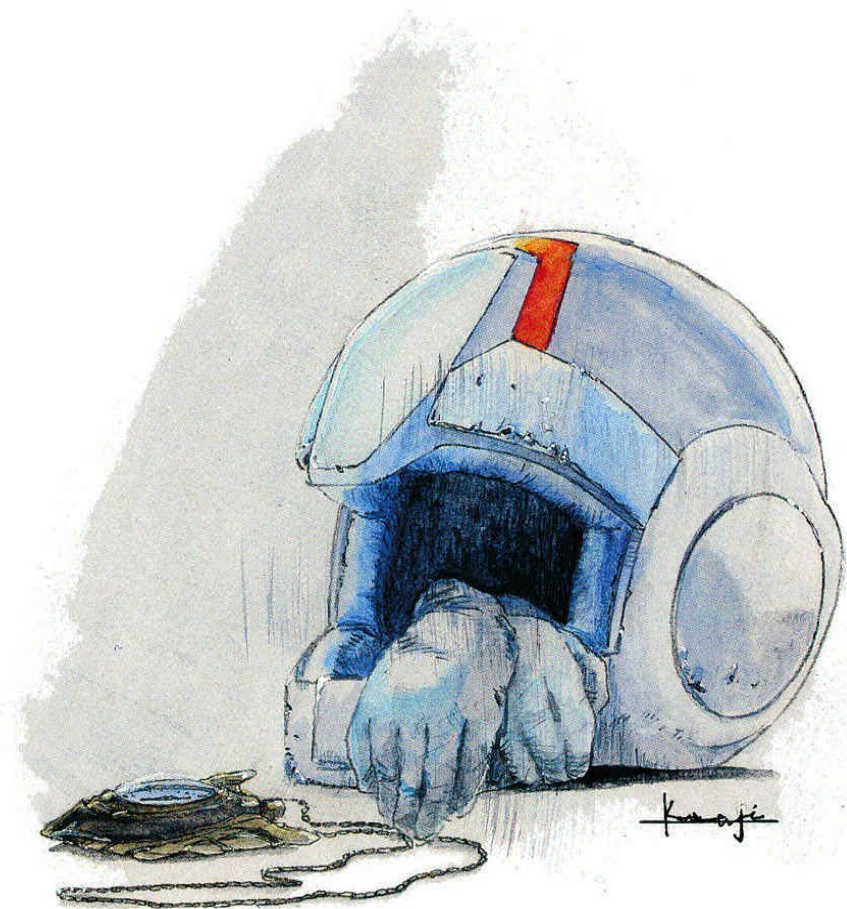
*This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.*

Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko "Mobile Suit Gundam The 08<sup>th</sup> MS Team Vol.1"  
Released 1999.04.27

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

Novel Translation and Book Layout by Zeonic|Scanlations

**First Edition:** April 2025  
**Revised Edition:** March 2026



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter.01</b>	Takeoff.....	005
<b>Chapter.02</b>	Chance Meeting.....	017
<b>Chapter.03</b>	A New Posting.....	028
<b>Chapter.04</b>	Impatience.....	047
<b>Chapter.05</b>	Prisoner.....	065
<b>Chapter.06</b>	The Reaper.....	078
<b>Chapter.07</b>	A Formidable Enemy.....	098

I was running, clad in a brand-new spacesuit.

This must normally be a bustling shopping district. Storefronts and billboards lined the street, but now I was sprinting down it, searching frantically for any sign of life.

Not a soul in sight.

Nothing stirred.

Only an eerie yellow fog rolled through the streets ahead.

*Someone... there had to be someone...*

I pressed on, lungs burning, past the retail district. The traffic lights blinked their meaningless patterns as I made for the station entrance.

Then I saw them.

Bodies. Dozens of them, scattered across the ground like fallen leaves. I

I skidded to a stop beside the nearest one, a salary man about my father's age. His chest heaved with labored breaths as he locked eyes with me, pure desperation in his gaze.

"Hold on, I've got you," I said, though I wasn't sure he could hear me through the helmet. He clawed at my suit with trembling hands, silently begging for help.

"Ah... aah..." His voice came through my helmet's comm system as little more than a rasp.

"Stay with me..."

His fingers scrabbled weakly at my visor.

Then, in one horrible moment, his hand went slack and slipped away.

As it fell, his fingers left a crimson streak across my field of vision.

Blood.

*Oh god, it was blood.*

The red line painted across my view, the man's crumpled form beyond it, the sickly yellow gas swirling all around us, it was too much.

A horrified scream tore from my throat before I could stop it.

# Chapter.01

## Takeoff

A Zeon artillery round detonated nearby, slamming into the earth with a thunderous crash.

A burst of soil and debris billowed upward in a choking, dusty cloud, swallowing everyone's field of view. Spotting the momentary cover, Joe hoisted himself out of the trench and bolted forward once more. Sergeant Vic Morrow and their medic, Stephen, scrambled out right behind him.

Gunfire and shell bursts reverberated through the air as the three of them sprinted across ground churned up by earlier bombardments. The impact craters and loose rubble threatened to trip them at any moment, but they kept running.

At last, the dust cloud began to clear.

Joe, leading the group, slid headlong into a fresh shell hole carved out by Zeon artillery. Right on his heels, Morrow and "Doc" dove in, settling beside him. A split second later, a volley of bullets cut across overhead, close enough to whistle past their scalps.

"That's quite the fireworks show, just for a scrap of an outpost," Joe muttered. His cigarette, burned down to a stub, angled precariously from one corner of his mouth.

"Zeon always goes overboard," Doc said, his voice low and weighted. "Poison gas, colony drops... these bastards don't know the meaning of restraint."

Stephen "Doc" Rogers had lost both parents in Side 4. His younger sister had married and moved to Australia. Now the mention of Zeon's excesses left a pall of grim silence.

Eventually, Stephen broke it with a forced laugh, as though trying to chase away the oppressive mood. "That's why we're here, to teach 'em a little moderation."

His father, who perished in Side 4, had always said that when a man feels grief or frustration, he should meet it with a smile. Doc was strong that way. Joe felt a surge of pride in having a soldier of such resilience under his command.

Another wave of shellfire began, deeper and more insistent this time. Successive blasts rattled the earth like localized quakes, each concussion punching them in the gut. Joe coughed into the dusty air and took another drag on his dwindling cigarette.

"Feels like we're back in some old war movie..."

The invention of Minovsky particles had all but hurled warfare back by generations. Because these particles blocked electromagnetic waves, radar and similar systems were rendered useless, forcing humanity to rely on visual combat once more. Tactics deemed relics of a previous century, like

trench warfare, had become viable again, so in some ways, war now looked as if it had regressed a hundred years.

Except, of course, for the mobile suits.

"Captain, a Zaku is heading our way," Sergeant Morrow warned, just a slight tremor in his voice. Even a veteran of countless battlefields would tense up at the thought of facing a mobile suit.

Unfortunately, the Federation still had nothing to match those loathsome giants called Zakus. Old Type 61 tanks and Fly Mantas were being thrown at the problem in droves, but that was little more than a desperate stopgap.

Somewhere across the windswept battlefield, a shout rose: "Sieg Zeon!" The arrival of a Zaku had obviously invigorated the enemy troops.

"Those damn loudmouths..." Sergeant Morrow spat, seething.

Joe gave a knowing smack to the anti-tank rocket launcher slung over his shoulder.

"Don't worry. We'll shut them up soon enough."

It was a Stinger, not specifically made for fighting mobile suits, but Joe had earned himself a reputation for taking them down with it.

Mobile suits were certainly formidable weapons, but dirtside, however, gravity restricted their range of movement in ways space combat did not. Though they were still far deadlier than any tank or aircraft.

"Doc, Morrow, soon as the next barrage hits, we're making a run. We'll slip underneath that Zaku and give it a taste of this." Joe's grin was grim but confident as he patted the launcher.

"Roger," Doc said.

"You got it," Morrow chimed in.

Almost the instant they responded, Zeon's artillery hammered the earth again, each impact thudding in their bones and shaking the loose soil around them.

"Move out!" Joe shouted.

He spat the stub of his cigarette and lunged from the crater, sprinting toward the Zaku's rear for one solid shot that would take it down.



"Excuse me, Ensign, is that *Captain Joe* you're watching, sir?"

Shiro Amada, an Ensign, turned around as he lay sprawled in his seat, eyes on his handheld TV. A bulky soldier stood next to him, his rank insignia read "Chief Petty Officer." He looked around thirty, his rumpled uniform suggesting a long familiarity with military life.

"Yeah," Shiro answered, propping himself up and lowering the volume.

"Think it's childish?" he asked, glancing at the other man.

"Not at all," the Chief answered with a friendly smile. "I used to watch Captain Joe too. I even tried copying how he'd hold his cigarette."

"You don't say." Shiro grinned brightly. At twenty-four, that boyish smile made him look as young as a teenager.

He was watching an episode of *Captain Joe*, a long-running military drama about Earth Federation Forces Colonel Captain Joe and his squad. Shiro had been following it since he was a kid, this show had been popular for over a decade now.

"This must be one of the newer episodes," the Chief said, leaning in. "It even has Zakus in it."

A decade earlier, back when the Chief watched the show, mobile suits hadn't appeared at all. Only half a year ago had those hulking metal behemoths become widely known to the Federation as real weapons of war.

"Yeah. A friend stationed in Side 7 sent me this. But it's not just Zeon that has mobile suits now. The Federation does too..." Shiro trailed off suggestively.

"The Federation has mobile suits?! That's news. I've heard the prototype GMs only just arrived on actual battlefields."

"Before long, Joe himself might be piloting a mobile suit," Shiro teased, flashing a mischievous grin.

Just then, a sudden flash flared outside the shuttle's small circular window.

Shiro jumped to his feet, pressing his face to the glass. Beyond the hull lay the silent darkness of space. Off to the right, the blue planet Earth was coming into view, but he could see nothing else that might produce light.

"What was that?"

As Shiro stared, puzzled, another flare burst. It was a flash like a flare or a tracer, and in that glare, he could have sworn he saw two humanoid shapes.

"Mobile suits?"

"That's impossible!" The Chief's outburst made sense. In theory, the shuttle was traveling through Federation-controlled space. Yet from the window, the two mobile suits out there were clearly locked in combat. Orange lines of fire crackled between them from time to time.

Stranger still, only one of them seemed to be returning fire. The other silhouette, apparently a Federation GM, wasn't shooting at all.

Suddenly, Shiro launched himself out of his seat.

"Are they out of ammo? A jammed weapon? Either way, that GM is toast if this goes on."

Without a second thought, he dashed into the narrow corridor and headed straight for the forward compartment door, the one marked "No Unauthorized Entry Except in Emergencies." He yanked it open and burst into the cockpit.

Inside were the shuttle's pilot, Ensign Rolfe Sedan, and his co-pilot, Warrant Officer Elen Willard. Sedan was pushing forty, with a calm, measured demeanor, clad in a neatly worn flight jacket. Elen, by contrast, was a young woman in the navigator's seat, eyes glued to her console with growing tension.

"Ensign, we need to turn back! If we don't, that GM'll be shot down for sure!" Shiro shouted.

"I'm aware," Sedan muttered, voice taut with frustration. "But this shuttle's just a transport. Even if we went back, we have no way to lend actual support."

"You're just going to let our ally die?"

"My mission is to see this craft safely to Earth," he replied firmly.

Though they were both the same rank, Sedan held command here. This was his shuttle; nobody outranked him on board. Not even a higher-grade officer could override his authority while aboard his vessel.

"There's no way to adjust course," Elen added, frowning at Shiro's reckless demand. She was a civilian recruit, and one glance at her expression made it clear what she was thinking: Even if we flew toward that Zeon mobile suit, what good could we do in a transport shuttle?

Still, Shiro wouldn't let it drop. He couldn't stomach doing nothing while someone fought and died right in front of his eyes.

"There's a Ball stored on board," he insisted. "I saw it when I came aboard."

"Don't be ridiculous. That thing—"

"Please. I won't put the shuttle in danger," Shiro pleaded, stepping closer, his gaze unwavering.

The Ball, officially the SP-W03 space pod, modified for combat, was barely considered a mobile suit, more a support craft. Most Federation soldiers sneered at it, calling it "the flying coffin" or "the one-eyed target." It was hardly a match for a Zaku.

But the look in this young officer's eyes said he'd go anyway, even if it meant breaking orders and launching alone.

"So naive..." Sedan thought with a small, rueful smile, recalling his own early days in uniform.

"All right. But if you're shot down, we'll withdraw immediately from the combat zone," Sedan said at last, not meeting his gaze. It was permission to sortie, in so many words.



The craft stowed in the shuttle's rear hangar was an RB-79K, an early production model of the RB-79 Ball. Later on, the standard Ball would gain fame in space by virtue of how cheaply and quickly it could be mass-produced, often deployed alongside GMs for combined operations. But this early RB-79K prioritized performance over production efficiency, boasting better armor, a larger propellant capacity, and stronger output.

Still, at the end of the day, it was a Ball. Hoping to defeat a Zaku with it was...optimistic at best.

"Releasing you now, are you set?" Sedan's voice crackled through Shiro's helmet. The comm line was a bit static-laden, possibly due to inadequate maintenance.

"Roger. Open the hatch," Shiro said, adjusting the volume as he strapped himself into the cramped pilot seat.

"Hatch opening in five seconds," Elen Willard's voice came through loud and clear. Shiro eased off the volume now that he had it right.

"Four... three... two..."

"Unlock the docking clamps," Shiro said.

"Unlocking clamps," Elen confirmed.

"...one... zero!"

"This is Shiro Amada. I'm heading out," he declared.

He pressed down on the Ball's pedal. Its rear thrusters let out a brief, controlled burst, and it drifted away from the shuttle.

"No way I'm just gonna watch an ally get slaughtered..." he muttered in the claustrophobic cockpit, clenching the controls. "I've had enough of tragedies like Side 2."



"What? The Ensign's going out there?"

"Yeah, says he's gonna launch in a Ball to help!"

"He's insane! A heap of junk like that's not gonna beat a Zaku."

"Damn rookies, always so gung-ho..."

"Don't drag us down with you, kid."

The same Chief Petty Officer who'd been reminiscing with Shiro moments ago slammed his helmet against the bulkhead in a burst of frustration. Michel Ninorich, a Petty Officer, looked on silently but shared the sentiment.

This was a simple transport shuttle, traveling without an escort. The Federation simply didn't have the resources to assign fighter craft to every run, even in supposedly safe territory. And yet, here in Federation-controlled space, there was an enemy mobile suit. A Zaku, no less.

Mobile suits were fearsome machines around sixty feet tall. One look at the One Week War and the Federation's humiliating defeat at the hands of Zeon was proof enough of their destructive power. Unfortunately, the Federation only realized how dangerous mobile suits were after losing half the human race, some 5.5 billion lives.

Minovsky particles rendered all radar useless, turning older guided weapons into mere scrap. Modern warfare had reverted to close quarters, visual engagement. Armed with the unstoppable might of mobile suits, Zeon had swept through the Federation's old-style fleets as if toying with them. From space, these giant forms had closed in too fast for the Federation's big, lumbering ships to respond, sinking battleship after battleship until they even managed a planetary invasion.

And now, one of these dreaded giants was out there, apparently ready to swat this shuttle aside if it so desired. Small wonder the troops felt bitter. They had no illusions about the Federation's odds in a dogfight. Seeing Shiro head out alone in that Ball incited both anger and dread.

"Look!" someone said, pressing his face to a porthole. "He's taking off!"

Others crowded around, jostling for a glimpse. Michel hurried to a nearby round window. Sure enough, an orange, spherical craft, the RB-79K Ball, was drifting away from the shuttle.

He grimaced. It looked nothing like a real mobile suit, more like a hastily repurposed construction pod with a cannon slapped on top. Hardly the kind of machine that would inspire confidence in a desperate battle.

"Give me a break," Michel thought. "If the Ensign wants to die, that's his choice. But I don't want to be caught in the fallout... B.B., pray for me, pray we actually reach Earth in one piece."



The fight still raged between Zeon's Zaku and the Federation GM. Though "fight" might be too generous a term as the Zaku had the GM pinned in a one-sided chase. It was more like a hunt.

Fortunately, the area was strewn with wreckage from a Federation fleet battle, scattered debris that offered the GM some cover. But it was only a matter of time before the end came.

Shiro approached the battlefield cautiously in his Ball.

"Dammit... can't breathe..." he muttered, fidgeting with the collar of his normal suit, a new term for spacesuits since mobile suits had become standard. He worried there was a problem with his oxygen supply.

But the readouts said everything was fine. He was just so tense that it felt suffocating.

He'd piloted a mobile suit in simulations and training, Balls, GMs, even the Gundam in a simulator. But this was his first real combat deployment, and so suddenly too.

He'd seen "combat" once before in Side 2, but that had been no real battle, more like a massacre. Just thinking about it made his stomach clench.

"Come on, focus..." Shiro exhaled sharply, banishing the memories.

He was no reckless hothead; he did have a plan. The Ball was worthless in close combat, but in a firefight at range, it could at least trade shots with a normal mobile suit. If he could distract the Zaku long enough for the GM to slip away and rearm at the shuttle, they could come back two-on-one. That might even the odds.

"There!" A bright line streaked across the darkness from behind a chunk of metal. Then a flare of light, an explosion.

"Don't be dead..." Shiro prayed. But the GM evidently survived, because a second orange tracer flared soon after.

"Hang on a little longer," he muttered, as if chanting an incantation. He pulled out the long-range scope mounted beside his headrest. Twin 180mm cannons sat atop the Ball; if one of those shells struck true, even a Zaku would be in trouble.

A shape flitted between the wreckage. Shiro dialed in his aim. Two circles in the scope wavered, trying to lock onto the Zaku. Just a bit more...

Suddenly, the Zaku turned, its singular glowing mono-eye pointed directly at Shiro.

"He spotted me!"

Shiro squeezed the trigger. But it was too late. The Zaku vanished from his crosshairs in a blur of motion.

"Damn it!"

He shoved the scope aside. A long-range scope limited peripheral vision, fine for slow or distant targets, but useless against a foe moving that fast.

"Where'd he go?" Shiro scanned the forward monitor. He didn't have to look far.

The Zaku was already right in front of him, looming large and accelerating fast.

"S-so fast..." Shiro gasped. This was no run-of-the-mill Zaku.



"A Ball?! That's suicide!"

Chief Petty Officer Terry Sanders Jr., the besieged GM pilot, groaned as he watched the newcomer arrive. The new arrival was only a support pod, not built for one-on-one mobile suit combat. Especially not against that Zaku...

"Hey, you in the GM, can you read me?" A young man's voice crackled through a wave of static, presumably from the Ball pilot.

"We've got a transport holding to your eight o'clock. If you can still move, use this chance to get out," the voice said urgently.

Sanders angled the GM's visor to eight o'clock. Sure enough, there was a Federation-marked shuttle. But...

"Don't do it. That Zaku's way beyond what a Ball can handle," Sanders replied. If he fled, the Ball would be all alone against an insanely skilled opponent. Even if Sanders came back after reloading, would the Ball last that long?

"Trust me, I've got this," insisted the voice. But from the GM's perspective, the Ball's cannon fire was being easily dodged. The Zaku was simply too fast.

"You'll be killed, kid," Sanders said grimly.

He'd already seen Ed Tierney, a petty officer, die under the Zaku's ruthless speed. Their squad leader, Ensign Frank Behrens, lost a leg on his GM. He was still alive, but not in fighting shape, and two more Zakus had gone after him. In a routine patrol that should've been harmless, they'd run into a tuned-up Zaku and two regular ones. It was a three-on-three ambush, but the difference in skill and performance was night and day. Zeon still had a major head start in mobile suit piloting.

"What's the matter, can't move?" the younger voice asked.

Sanders's GM was functional, but he couldn't stand watching more Federation allies die one after another. "Forget me. Get away from here. You'll be slaughtered."

"It's not so easy to take me down," the voice insisted.

"That's insane, no Ball can beat that Zaku!"

"You never know until you try."

"I do know," Sanders retorted.

"Enough, leave it to me."

They were going in circles. Sanders was about to ram his GM straight into the Zaku as a last-ditch measure when the voice became more formal:

"This is Ensign Shiro Amada. Identify yourself, soldier."

That gave Sanders pause. Ensign. A senior officer? Reluctantly, he answered, "Chief Petty Officer Terry Sanders Jr., Seventh Fleet Mechanized Composite Battalion."

"Understood. Then, Chief Sanders, I'm giving you an order. Return to the shuttle."

"..."

"You won't obey an order, Chief?"

"Understood," Sanders finally said. The chain of command was absolute.

But he wouldn't just cut and run. He'd rearm and come back. In the meantime...

"Stay alive, Ensign," Sanders murmured. He turned the GM away from the carnage.



An orange flash sizzled past the Ball's hull. The Zaku was firing 120mm rounds from its machine gun.

Shiro slammed the left thruster pedal, simultaneously letting off round after round from his 180mm cannons in an attempt to keep the Zaku at bay.

It was razor-close. The Zaku, brandishing a heated axe-like weapon called a heat hawk, zoomed through the space where the Ball had been moments before.

Shiro's forehead beaded with sweat. He reflexively tried to wipe it, only to knock his gloved hand against the helmet visor instead, momentarily forgetting he even had it on.

"Damn it..." he hissed.

He'd told Sanders he could handle it, but in truth, his odds were almost nil. This was clearly no standard-issue Zaku. Its agility was far beyond any simulator or textbook scenario he knew.

"Actual combat's a whole different beast..."

What Shiro didn't realize was that this was an MS-06RD-4: a high-mobility test unit with a Rick Dom's legs grafted onto a standard Zaku's frame. Its pilot had no qualms about pushing that engine output to extremes. No wonder the Ball's 180mm cannon had no chance of lining up a clean shot.

He tried anyway, firing shell after shell that only vanished into the void of space. The Zaku seemed to slip effortlessly aside.

Shiro's original plan, to exploit the Ball's advantage in a long-range duel, was out the window. This Zaku was too fast; the Ball's slow-firing cannon with its narrow arcs couldn't track it. Meanwhile, the Zaku's machine gun scattered bullets in wide bursts. Though each individual round was relatively weak, the Ball's thin armor was more than vulnerable enough.

The Zaku barreled in once more. Shiro twisted the Ball's thrusters, pivoting wildly to evade, but the Zaku easily matched him move for move. The thrusters on its legs allowed incredibly precise directional control. It felt as if the Zaku was magnetically locked onto him.

He couldn't escape.

The Zaku swelled in his monitor until it filled the screen, about to collide. Its right arm shot forward, brandishing the superheated edge of the heat hawk. The blade glowed a molten red, like fresh-spilled blood.

"Noooo!" Shiro bellowed, an unholy mix of battle cry and fear.

The heat hawk came slashing down.

Shiro yanked the left control stick all the way back. There was a jarring crash. His body slammed against the cockpit's right wall.

But the Ball was still intact.

By a miracle, the Ball's manipulator arm had caught the Zaku's descending right arm. It was a desperate block at best, and the hydraulics groaned in protest. The torque of the Zaku's heavier build was already bending the Ball's flimsy arm.

Out of time, Shiro tried to swing the 180mm cannon up at point-blank range. But the enemy pilot was too quick, ditching the machine gun in his left hand and grabbing the Ball's cannon barrel instead, wrenching it upward so it couldn't aim.

"Damn you!" Shiro snarled.

The manipulator arm's servo motors whined, metal screaming. The Zaku was about to snap it like a twig, then the hawk would carve straight through the Ball. And yet...

"This is my chance!"

The greatest threat so far was the Zaku's unmatched mobility. But right now, it was practically pinned to him. If he could just seize the moment...

"Gotcha," Shiro growled, slamming his hand onto the switch for the Ball's work winch. Normally used for space construction tasks, the RB-79K still had one mounted on its forward hull.

A grappling claw attached to a wire cable shot out. But the Zaku pilot, apparently seeing it coming, smashed his left elbow into the Ball's side, forcing the whole craft to tilt to the right. The claw missed the target's torso, merely grazing the left flank.

"You're not getting away that easy!" Shiro roared, yanking the lever in the opposite direction to reel the cable in.

"C'mon... make contact!" Heart hammering, he watched the wire spool back. And then, a metallic click echoed through his helmet speakers. The claw latched onto the Zaku's back, snagging in one of the rear thruster nozzles. Instantly, the thruster angle shifted. The Zaku kicked its legs to

regain control, but the collision of forces whipped the Ball around, the cable winding around the Zaku like a snare.

"Yes!" Shiro pulled the trigger on his 180mm cannons. One shot, two, three... The third shell tore through the Zaku's leg. The machine spun off-balance, flung violently into a sea of drifting wreckage. Entangled together, both machines crashed against the hull of a ruined Magellan-class battleship, slamming into the plating in a devastating impact.

A jolt of pain rattled Shiro's skull, and for a moment, darkness flickered at the edge of his vision. When he came to, he saw the Zaku pilot ejecting from the cockpit.

"Oh no you don't!" Shiro shouted, pushing back his console screen. On the RB-79K, the entire front window could open into a hatch. He had no time for second thoughts.

He confirmed the sidearm on his belt, then sprang out into open space. If his hunch was right, staying in the Ball was too dangerous.

He spotted the enemy pilot in a red normal suit, drifting toward the upper portion of the shattered Magellan.

"Zeon bastard... I won't let you escape!"

He kicked off the Ball's hull, launching himself after the pilot.

A heartbeat later, the still-bound Zaku exploded behind him.



## Chapter.02

### Chance Meeting

The moment Sanders's GM returned to the cramped transport shuttle, the entire interior burst into chaos.

Warrant Officer Willard, in the cockpit, frantically recalculated their reentry trajectory, every second counted now that their launch timing was off. Of the nine soldiers who had been seated in the rear, six had already donned heavy space suits and ventured outside, working to repair and resupply the returning GM. The remaining three had no time to sit around in a daze, either. Senior Crewman Ted Knight was pinned to the comm station, Petty Officer Burton Hyman was glued to the radar display watching for any threats, and Petty Officer Michel Ninorich kept vigilant eyes on the sector of space where Shiro was still engaged in combat. If confirmation came in that Shiro's machine had been destroyed, they planned to pull out at once.

Meanwhile, the shuttle commander, Ensign Sedan, listened to Sanders's after-action report. It was Sedan's call whether they would attempt a rescue or make a clean withdrawal.

"So there are still two more enemy suits out there, Chief?" Sedan asked, double-checking the report.

"Yes, sir," Sanders answered grimly. "Aside from that modified Zaku I was fighting, there should be two more Zakus. They chased my injured commander's machine, but they could come back."

Sanders chose his words carefully, calling it a "possibility." He knew how unlikely it was for Ensign Behrens's damaged GM to have escaped two Zakus. But he'd lost too many comrades already to make a final declaration like "They must be gone by now."

"I see. You've done your part, Chief. Go get some rest."

"No, sir. Please load me up with fresh ammo. I'm going back out there to help the Ball pilot."

Sedan glanced toward the battered GM receiving patchwork repairs. The machine was missing its left arm and right leg; it was a minor miracle it had even managed to limp home. Sending it out again was, to Sedan's eyes, a virtual suicide mission.

"Don't be ridiculous," Michel said, stepping in for Sedan. "Are you out of your mind?"

"What did you say?" Sanders snapped, whirling on him.

"It's suicide, that's what. This GM's barely holding together. You want to head back out there again? Come on. Better to get inside and rest. Take off your normal suit—"

"Shut up!" Sanders roared. "That 'suicide mission' you're talking about is what that pilot's doing right now, all on his own. Are we just going to pretend we don't see it? Let him die out there?"

Michel fell silent. He'd thought Shiro was crazy when he launched in a lone Ball to fight Zakus. Yet here was the wounded GM pilot, safely back after being rescued. Michel had no response for that, events had already defied his cynical outlook.

"Ensign," Sanders pressed on, ignoring Michel, "I'm requesting permission to launch immediately."

Before Sedan could reply, Elen's voice burst onto everyone's helmet comms.

"Confirmed twin explosions at our three o'clock position!"

Three o'clock, exactly where Shiro's Ball was facing off against the Zaku.

"Any comm signals?" Sedan asked curtly.

"None," Elen said. "Judging by the size and intensity of the blasts, it's very likely--"

"You're saying both mobile suits have been destroyed?" he demanded.

Elen fell silent, which said more than words.

"So that's it... It really was too reckless..."

Michel couldn't help glancing at Sanders. He couldn't read the man's expression behind his visor, but from the tension in his posture, he was clearly shaken.

"Miracles don't happen twice... This isn't Captain Joe. Things don't just fall neatly into place. At least now we can clear out of here and make it to Earth. Sanders won't have to go on that rescue mission, either. The Federation would probably rather lose some green lieutenant than a grizzled vet like the chief... It's a decent trade, right?"

As Michel brooded, Sanders turned, caught his gaze, and slammed his helmet against Michel's. Even without switching comm channels, the vibration was enough to transmit his voice through their helmets.

"He's not necessarily dead, you hear me?" Sanders practically roared. Then he mumbled in a much quieter tone:

"Not again... I can't let another comrade die on me..."



Shiro was making his way through the wreckage of the Magellan, drifting slowly in zero gravity. He clutched a CZ72 automatic pistol, the standard sidearm issued by the Federation.

In the vacuum, there was no sound. Any breathable air had long since leaked out of the shattered hull, leaving only emptiness. Which meant he could rely on sight, and sight alone.

"Damn Zeon... You're not getting away," he muttered.

By "Zeon," he meant the pilot of that Zaku, the one who'd so boldly used its own self-destruct to try and take him out. From the moment the enemy had tossed aside their machine gun in close combat without hesitation, Shiro knew this was a pilot who never flinched at taking drastic measures.

He was in pursuit. His suit's oxygen supply had under an hour left, tops. After that, he'd suffocate. Oddly enough, Shiro wasn't frightened by this at all. Perhaps, to ward off that dread, he'd convinced himself that as a Federation soldier, it was his duty to take down as many Zeon soldiers as possible. But deep down, he wasn't sure he truly believed it.

Suddenly, a shape loomed ahead. Gun raised, Shiro whipped around, only to find a white Federation normal suit lying there, helmet shattered. No doubt the poor soul had been killed back when this Magellan went down, maybe during Operation British, Shiro guessed, recalling the ferocious battle that had tried to stop Zeon's brutal colony drop. He offered a silent prayer for this unknown comrade.

"Damn Zeon..."

He readjusted his grip on the pistol, then kicked off a nearby wall to float deeper into the wreckage.

No matter what, he knew the Zaku pilot had to be in here somewhere. The battle might have ended in a draw, but this time he intended to finish it. In here, there'd be no difference in specs, no ballistic advantage or thruster supremacy. It would be man against man, on equal footing. And Shiro was certain he could win.

Gliding on momentum, he halted at the next turn, inhaled once, then pushed around the corner, gun up, ready. Nobody there.

"Damn it... Where did he go?"

Time and again he repeated this corner routine, flying out, gun raised. He'd lost track of how many times. He had to settle this before his air ran out.

"Could he be hiding, waiting for me to suffocate? But from what I saw, the enemy's normal suit isn't some special high-capacity type. He should be on the same clock I am."

He wondered where the Zeon pilot could have gone.

Shiro had sailed through about half the vessel's 265-meter length. Judging by the bulkheads, he was now directly beneath the bridge. He knew from past training cruises, before Zeon's formal declaration of war, that a Magellan-class ship had three separate bridge towers. If the pilot was trying to call for backup, the bridge would be their logical destination.

"Which way now... up, right, or left?"

He was about to choose an elevator shaft when, the hatch behind him suddenly whooshed open. Air must still have been sealed in that compartment, because a pressurized gust blasted a red normal suit out into the corridor.

*Zeon!*

Shiro snapped his weapon up instantly. The pilot rebounded off a nearby bulkhead and drew his own gun. They were only a few meters apart, impossible to miss. Shiro's finger curled around the trigger.

Just then, through the red visor, Shiro glimpsed a pair of human eyes. Of course, they were just eyes, this wasn't a mobile suit's single mono-eye lens. But still, they locked onto him, unblinking. Watching.

“Shoot!”

He screamed at his trigger finger.

But he couldn't pull it. His hand stayed frozen, paralyzed on the gun.

“Why? What am I afraid of? A few minutes ago, I was firing at him from a Ball, trying to kill him in open combat! I know I hate Zeon for Side 2... Don't I? If I'm Federation and he's Zeon, I have to shoot... Don't I?”

Sweat beaded under his helmet. He forced himself to apply pressure to the trigger.

“Shoot! Shoot! C'mon, shoot!”

He almost begged his own finger to move, but it refused.

“I can't do it...”

He couldn't bring himself to pull the trigger, though he couldn't explain why. And, strangely enough, the Zeon pilot seemed caught in the same bind. Though the gun was aimed squarely at Shiro, that finger never pulled the trigger, either.

It would take the barest twitch of a fingertip to end his life, yet no shot came.

A peculiar lightness rose in his chest. What an absurd situation, he thought, floating in the wreckage of a derelict battleship, pointing guns at each other for no real reason, with no chance that either side's backup would arrive in time. Even if one person fired, they'd probably both run out of oxygen soon anyway.

“Enough of this,” he murmured.

Shiro lowered his gun and stowed it in its holster. The Zeon pilot stared, astonished, but still didn't shoot.

He took advantage of the hesitation, drifting over to the same doorway the pilot had just emerged from. He pointed inside and beckoned, suggesting they enter. The pilot kept the gun raised for a few more seconds, then slowly lowered it and stood. He didn't, however, holster the weapon.



*If we won't kill each other, we have no choice but to help each other.*

That was Shiro's logic. So the instant they entered the sealed compartment still holding some breathable air, Shiro pulled off his helmet. Better to conserve the small supply in his normal suit's tanks. But the Zeon pilot showed no intention of removing their own helmet.

“C'mon, conserve your remaining air,” Shiro said impatiently. “Take it off unless you want to suffocate.”

He thought he saw the hint of a smile behind the visor, maybe just a trick of the light, but it made him uneasy. Finally, the Zeon pilot reached up, releasing the latches. This helmet looked a bit different from standard Zeon types, with a raised section above the forehead.

“An officer, maybe?” Shiro remembered hearing that Zeon's higher ranks sometimes adorned their helmets or mobile suits with special ornaments.

As if sensing Shiro's curiosity, the pilot removed the helmet slowly, almost theatrically. A cascade of silver hair spilled out, drifting weightless.

"A woman?!"

She turned to face him, features delicate and poised, somewhere around twenty years old, with an almost noble bearing. She wore minimal makeup, though a faint lipstick gave her lips a soft hue. And now, looking more closely, Shiro realized that her normal suit had a subtle, feminine curve at the chest and hips. Had she really been so close all this time, and he never noticed?

She didn't glare or smile, she regarded him blankly, her expression so devoid of emotion it reminded him of a lifeless doll.

Was she simply tense? No, Shiro decided. People in tense situations still show some expression. This woman, though, looked as if her mind were a million miles away. As if she were gazing at something already dead.

Yet—

"She's... beautiful..."

That was his first thought. Then he scolded himself:

"Dumb ass. What am I thinking at a time like this? She's the enemy, a Zeon soldier!"

"I'm Ensign Shiro Amada, Earth Federation Forces. And you?"

Shiro tried to sound stern, hoping to mask his own flustered thoughts.

"I am Aina Sahalin," she replied calmly. "I hold no rank."

"No rank?" Shiro echoed. "So you're a civilian?"

"Let's just say, I'm not a member of the military."

"Huh..." Shiro frowned. She pilots a Zaku, but isn't a soldier? That was odd. Still, she wasn't a prisoner, so he had no reason to interrogate her. He let it go.

"I'll be blunt. I've got less than half an hour of suit air left. Yours can't be much better. And I doubt this room will keep its pressure for long. In another hour or so, we're done for."

She said nothing.

"That's why we need to help each other. Right now, Zeon and Federation don't matter, we need to survive. Together."

She gave that same almost-smile, but didn't speak. Shiro thought, for a second, that it was genuine amusement at the idea of "living," but he wasn't certain.



*Living...*

Hearing the Federation soldier say those words, Aina Sahalin almost wanted to laugh. Was she really living at all?

Fifteen years ago, before that incident, perhaps she had been. But after everything that happened...



She gazed at the young man in front of her. He couldn't be much older than she was, maybe newly commissioned from officer school. If he truly wanted to stay alive, why join the army in the first place?

He was still speaking, something about searching for a way to contact help. "Since this compartment still has air, there must be other intact blocks," he said. "We need to split up, see if we can find any working comms. It doesn't matter if we contact Zeon or Federation, as long as they know we're here."

Aina heard him, but her mind dwelled on that one word: live. She asked him:

"Is that what you want? To...live?"

He looked surprised, staring at her as if she'd asked something crazy.

"Of course I do. Don't you?"

"I...," Aina began. But she couldn't form an answer. Did she want to live? She didn't particularly want to die, but she wasn't sure she was seeking life, either. What did that mean?

Shiro seemed to interpret her silence as agreement that she did indeed want to live.

"Right," he said firmly. "Then let's get going. We'll split up and see what we can find. Ten minutes from now, we'll meet back here."

"Understood," she said quietly. "Let's synchronize our watches."

He glanced at his wrist chronometer, only to find the display was shattered, probably from smashing against the Magellan's interior during the earlier impact. Aina hesitated, then reached into a small pouch on her belt. She drew out a finely crafted pendant watch.

"That's..." Shiro began.

"It's mine," she said softly. "Take care of it, please."

"It's a pretty fancy watch," he said, attempting a light joke. "Looks like something a noble might—"

Aina's blank expression didn't waver.

Shiro's grin faltered, and he fell silent.



Sanders was practically begging to relaunch the moment the GM's ammo was restocked, but Ensign Sedan refused.

Shiro might not even be alive, and the GM was in worse shape than Sanders would admit. Aside from missing its left arm and right leg, it had taken several direct hits to the backpack thrusters, so thrust output was low. The nuclear fusion reactor was acting up, risking a meltdown if pushed too hard, and multiple sensors were malfunctioning. Even the cockpit had sustained cracks, making it difficult to maintain internal air.

In other words, Sanders had gotten back by pure luck. A thorough repair job would require more time and specialized parts than they had on this little

transport. Getting the GM stable enough to function at all was going to take at least twenty minutes.

"Why is this taking so long?" Sanders muttered, anxious. He glared at the mechanics rushing around his machine.

It wasn't really their fault. They were a hodgepodge group with some mechanical skill, pressed into service during transit. This wasn't a proper mobile suit tech team. And in the Federation, which had only just begun rolling out mobile suits, experienced mechanics were still a rarity.

"How much oxygen do they have left?" Sanders asked Michel, who was scanning open space with binoculars.

"About fifteen minutes," Michel replied, silently adding, "If they even got out of the explosion at all."

It had already been fifteen minutes since they saw those explosions. Even if Shiro had ejected safely, his normal suit's air would run out within thirty minutes total. In other words...

"No way they'll make it..." he thought, as he continued his grim watch over the silent void.



"Useless," Shiro growled the instant he pulled off his helmet back in their makeshift rendezvous room. "All three of the Magellan's bridge comm systems are wrecked."

"How about your side?" he asked.

Aina, who'd returned first, slowly shook her head.

"No luck. The escape pods are gone," she said. "They must have been jettisoned when the ship was lost."

The air felt thinner. Probably every time they opened the hatch, more of the precious atmosphere leaked out into space.

"There has to be a way..." Shiro ground his teeth in frustration.

The shuttle was so close, at least by space standards. They didn't have the thruster power to simply float over there, but if they could just signal somehow, a small transmitter, anything...

"This block's air won't last," Aina said, level and calm, almost as if she were discussing someone else's problem. "And once that's gone, we only have what's in our normal suits."

"Don't give up," Shiro snapped. "We can't just accept death without a fight. There must be something else we can do. As long as we refuse to quit, it's not over! Even Joe..."

He paused, cutting himself off with an odd look on his face. Then, suddenly, he brightened.

"That's it... That's it!" Hope flared in his eyes. Aina watched him warily, wondering if he'd lost his mind.

"Aina," he said. "Have you ever watched a show called Captain Joe?"

She tilted her head, but remained silent. The title sounded vaguely familiar, perhaps it had aired in Side 3 when she was little, but she'd never seen it. And she was a bit taken aback by how easily this Federation pilot addressed her by first name.

"In episode 11, there's a storyline called 'Escape Through Friendship.' The main character, Joe, and one of his men get captured by the enemy, and they're tied up at opposite ends of a room with gags in their mouths so they can't talk. But even then, they pull off this brilliant act, tricking the guards and escaping."

Her expression suggested, "So what?"

"Right, so how did they coordinate such a dramatic charade when they couldn't talk?" Shiro asked. But Aina kept silent, making no effort to humor him.

Awkwardly, Shiro forged ahead, brightening his tone.

"They used blinking. Morse code with their eyes."

"Morse code, hmm?" Aina murmured. "Are you thinking we could blink a signal to a passing Federation escape craft? The flicker of a light is easily lost against the background of stars. And you'd have to be aiming right at them—"

"I'm talking about flares," Shiro interrupted.

Signal flares—ordinarily used in areas without sunlight, like the dark side of the moon or Earth, to illuminate enemies attempting to infiltrate under cover of darkness. Since Zeon began deploying Minovsky particles, however, darkness-concealed attacks had become standard tactics, and flares were now also used for communication between the front lines and command posts during retreats or pursuits. If this Magellan had been part of "Operation British," it should have signal flares on board.

"We can use the flares to let them know that we're here, that we're still alive."

"A flare..." Aina was slowly warming to the idea. Even if it sounded like a child's plan, it was cleverer than she'd expected from this Federation pilot who talked about old war shows.



Soon, from the supposedly dead Magellan, a small blaze of light fired off into space, a standard yellow flare, drifting among the debris and fading slowly. Then two more followed. Then, switching color, a red signal flare arced outward.

Yellow for short pulses, red for the extended ones, together, they spelled out an SOS in Morse code: three short bursts, three long, three short again. S.O.S.

Just as Shiro had hoped, they found a cache of flares. Of course the ship's main guns were beyond repair, so he and Aina had to manually shove each

flare out into space, timing them with delayed fuses to create the signal pattern.

"This is the last one!" Shiro grunted, pushing a flare almost as tall as Aina herself out through a hull breach. It floated gently away.

"Do you think they'll notice us?" she asked.

"They will," Shiro said, fighting to sound confident. Right on cue, that final flare burst into brilliant light.

"How beautiful..." Aina breathed, scarcely aware she'd said the words.

Beautiful. She couldn't recall the last time she used that word. Perhaps not since she was a child, almost a decade ago. She was startled to realize how foreign it felt on her tongue now.

"Yeah," Shiro chuckled. "Kind of like fireworks, right?"

She turned to see him smiling like a schoolboy. Though he was likely older than her, that grin made him look charmingly young. Oddly, she found it comforting.

The flares continued their luminous performance. They spelled out S.O.S., then M-A-G-E-L-L-A-N: S.O.S. MAGELLAN. That was all the message they could manage with the flares they had left. Just two short-burst red signals remained now, if no one responded to these, their last hope was gone.



"Hang in there, Shiro Amada..." Sanders murmured as he coaxed his patched-up GM through space. Even after the hasty repairs, it was barely flightworthy. One brush with the enemy, or even a stray shot, would spell doom.

The rest of the shuttle's crew had tried to stop him. They insisted it was far too dangerous, that there was no chance the Ball pilot had survived, anyway. They'd seen the explosions with their own eyes. Even if Shiro had ejected, by now his air would be gone.

Sanders knew all that. Logically, the chance that the young Ball pilot, Shiro Amada, had made it out was close to zero. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling Shiro was alive. He wanted him to be. He was tired of being the "Reaper," the soldier whose comrades kept dying around him.

"Stay alive," he repeated under his breath. It was like a mantra, the only thing he could do as he drifted through a silent starfield. Shiro, please be alive...

Suddenly, from the edge of his peripheral vision, a flicker caught his eye.

"What is that?" he muttered, turning the GM's head camera to focus on it. Another flicker, more like a flare than random debris. Three quick yellow flashes, then three slower reds, then three quick yellows again...

That pattern was too deliberate to be random. No mere accident of drifting wreckage.

"Is this... a miracle?" Sanders murmured, swinging the GM around to follow that beacon of light.



"They're here!" Shiro cried out, pointing into the darkness.

A Federation GM, white armor clearly visible, was descending toward them. It had come almost too quickly after the flares were launched, so it must already have been searching the area. The flares simply gave it the final clue.

"Let's go, Aina!" Shiro seized her hand. "We can make it, just the two of us!"

But she gently slipped free from his grasp.

"No. I'll stay here," she said softly.

"You're worried about being treated as a prisoner? Don't be. Under the Antarctic Treaty—"

"My own people will send help for me, I'm sure," she said, though her voice was distant. "Go now. If a Zaku shows up, that GM is no match in its current condition."

She glanced at the GM approaching, a battered shell of a mobile suit that she herself had partially crippled. If the remaining Zakus returned, it wouldn't stand a chance.

"But I can't just..." Shiro began. "I can't leave you here alone!"

Before he could finish, Aina gave him a sudden push, sending him drifting into open space.

"Aina!" he shouted, reaching out uselessly in the vacuum. If only she'd been wearing a Federation helmet, they could at least talk over the same comm. Now his voice was swallowed by silence.

He flailed his arms and legs, but momentum carried him inexorably toward the GM. "Aina, come with me! I won't leave you to die!"

He cried out again, but no sound would reach her.

Then, as if she somehow heard him, Aina smiled.

It was the first real smile he'd seen from her.

She kept that gentle smile as she closed her eyes, a long blink, then a shorter one, then longer again. Shiro's heart skipped a beat.

Morse code!

His eyes prickled with sudden tears. He understood perfectly.

Thank you, that was what Aina's eyes were telling him.

## Chapter.03

### A New Posting

*My dearest BB,*

*They've finally decided where I'll be stationed. I've been assigned to the Far Eastern Front Forces Mechanized Composite Battalion, colloquially known as the Kojima Battalion, under the 08th MS Team. "MS" stands for mobile suit. That's right, I'll be piloting a mobile suit into battle. Amazing, isn't it?*

*The tricky part is that the commander of the 08th MS Team happens to be Ensign Shiro Amada. You remember him from my previous letter, don't you? He's the reckless officer who went charging toward a Zaku in a Ball. The story goes that the original team leader was sent to the rear after the last battle, so now this guy's taking over.*

*Oh, right, besides Ensign Amada and me, there's also a Chief Petty Officer Sanders joining the same team. He's the pilot who was in that GM we saw. His entire unit was wiped out, so they decided to assign him straight to the 08th. Unlike Ensign Amada, he seems like a real veteran. I'm not sure how much faith I can put in Ensign Amada, but with Sanders around, I'll feel a bit more at ease.*

*At the moment, the three of us are stationed at a shuttle base on Earth. Unlike in the colonies, there's no climate control here, so the humidity feels stifling. I think I finally understand what "sweltering heat" really means. And that's not all, sometimes these massive squalls roll in out of nowhere, pouring rain so hard you think the sky's breaking apart, and there are insects buzzing around incessantly. It's hardly comfortable. They say people who live on Earth are the elite, but I just can't see the appeal of living in a place like this.*

*Personally, I'd choose the colonies any day, everything's air-conditioned, rain schedules are completely predictable, and besides... that's where you are, BB.*

*In about an hour, our helicopter's set to depart. Then we'll be heading straight for the front lines. Don't worry about me, BB. I promise I'll make it back in one piece.*

*Even at the front, I'll keep writing to you. They say a courier heads out regularly, so I should be able to send my letters often.*

*And—*

At that point, Michel put down his pen.

He was sitting in the PX, the post exchange, at the Federation shuttle base. It was, in essence, just a small shop. True to its name, they sold alcohol, and also everyday items like stationery, shampoo, and cigarettes.

There were a few other soldiers inside, but Michel was the only one writing a letter. Nearly everyone else was busy drinking, listening to the radio, or playing cards.

This shuttle base was set far from the front lines, so most of the soldiers here were either recovering from injuries or on a brief reprieve from active duty. Those who had leave to burn were determined to have their fun, and they drank enthusiastically. Every now and then, women who sold themselves for a living would drop by. Officially, this was against regulations, but in practice, it was all but tolerated. The higher-ups figured that if a little indulgence helped soothe battle-weary soldiers, it was a cheap price to pay for morale.

“Finished your letter?”

The voice belonged to Chief Sanders.

“Ah, y-yes, Chief,” Michel replied, jumping to his feet and saluting. He was fairly certain Sanders hadn’t read over his shoulder, but given he’d written about the man in his letter, embarrassment bubbled up in him regardless.

“Looks like the chopper’s ready. Can you head out now?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

It was an hour earlier than scheduled. Then again, this was a warzone, being on time was more the exception than the rule, and Michel was mentally prepared for that.

“Uh, could you wait just a minute?”

“Something else?”

“I’d like to drop off my letter... if that’s okay?”

Michel’s tone was hesitant, almost timid. Sanders gave a small, reassuring laugh.

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Thank you, Chief!”

Michel saluted once more.

“Thank goodness. He doesn’t seem nearly as intimidating as he looks.”



A dense jungle.

That single phrase captured the essence of the Far Eastern Front. After the tragedy of Operation British, Zeon launched three large-scale Earth invasions in quick succession, seizing half the planet in the blink of an eye.

By choosing to attack Earth rather than Luna II, humanity’s last stronghold in space, the Zeon forces blindsided the Federation. Their surprise assaults threw the Federation’s command structure into disarray, and the string of early defeats deflated Federation morale. Zeon’s momentum was bolstered

by their mobile suits, and the battered Federation, still trailing behind in mobile suit development, couldn't mount a meaningful defense.

All over the globe, the Federation was crushed and forced to retreat. It was no different for the Far Eastern Front. Zeon forces that landed in China marched straight into India toward the Far Eastern HQ at Madras Base. The Federation, equipped only with outdated vehicles, could barely hold them back.

What finally stopped Zeon's advance was the vast rainforest covering Southeast Asia. Using the thick vegetation as natural cover, the Federation managed to halt Zeon's progress. Since then, battle lines have been drawn along the jungle, with both sides locked in a grueling stalemate.

"A sea of green..."

Shiro muttered in awe, peering down at the jungle canopy from their transport helicopter.

For someone like him, raised in a space colony, the sight of so much green in one place was a revelation. The oppressive heat, incessant bugs, and sudden pounding rains had worn him out from the moment he set foot on Earth, but right now he couldn't help feeling a genuine spark of wonder.

"Ensign, this your first time here?"

A soldier who'd been fiddling with a knife asked him. Judging by his stripes, he was a Petty Officer. Though he addressed Shiro as "Ensign," there was little sign of actual respect in his voice.

"Yes, it is."

Shiro, younger than many officers, let his annoyance seep into his tone. He wasn't a stickler for protocol, but this man's casual scorn definitely rubbed him the wrong way. An experienced officer might have shrugged it off or disciplined him properly, but Shiro had yet to master either approach.

"Then let me enlighten you, Ensign. This ain't some gentle 'sea.' It's more like a swamp, a filthy quagmire."

"A quagmire?"

"Yeah, a big, muddy bog. You'll see for yourself soon enough, Ensign Newbie."

"What did you—!"

Enraged, Shiro tried to stand, but Sanders cut him off, his voice rumbling low.

"Sit down. And shut it."

His tone was gravelly and deep, deeper than usual as though he'd forced it into an even lower register. Arms folded and eyes shut, he didn't bother looking the Petty Officer's way.

"I hate men who flap their lips. If you don't wanna sink in that 'quagmire' of yours, pipe down."

Big and imposing as he was, Sanders had a certain grim presence that silenced anyone who crossed him.

"Watch it, it's the Reaper..."

Someone whispered nearby.

The petty officer opened his mouth as if to retort, but found nothing to say and slunk back to his seat. A heavier-set soldier next to Shiro murmured under his breath.

“Don’t hold it against him, Ensign. Lou’s just on edge.”

“On edge?”

“Yeah... that he’s gotta go back into the thick of it.”

After that cryptic comment, the big soldier clammed up. Shiro turned again to stare at the sprawling jungle. A vast ocean of green, the petty officer had called it a quagmire.

“A quagmire...”

That word stuck with him, echoing in his mind for a long time.



“Chief Petty Officer Karen Joshua, reporting, sir.”

Waiting for Shiro and his companions when they stepped off the helicopter was a female petty officer with fiery-red hair. Despite her gender, she looked more formidable than most men. There was a certain fierceness to her features. What made it clear she was a woman was her chest, plainly visible because she’d left her uniform unfastened at the top, no doubt thanks to the relentless heat.

“Nice to meet you, Chief. I’m Ensign Shiro Amada,” Shiro said, offering his hand for a handshake. Karen didn’t take it.

“Right... maybe that was a weird move on my part,” Shiro thought, retracting his hand.

“Before meeting the rest of the team, I’d like to introduce myself to Commander Kojima. Is he available?”

“I’ve been instructed to escort you. This way, please.”

Karen marched off, heading for a bare-bones jeep with its steel shell unpainted. Shiro followed, with Sanders right behind. Michel hesitated for a second and then scampered after them.

The jeep was built to seat two. Instead of a back seat, there was an open space like a truck bed, with a crudely bolted-on mount, likely for a machine gun.

Karen slid into the driver’s seat, twisted the key (which someone had left in the ignition), and fired up the engine. Shiro paused, uncertain whether to claim the passenger seat, until Sanders hoisted himself into the back. It was only proper that the higher-ranking officer ride in front, but he hesitated, his inexperience showing as he made a useless attempt at “courtesy.”

“We’re moving out,” Karen said curtly, and the jeep pulled away.

“Chief Joshua,” Shiro tried, raising his voice over the engine. “Have you been here long?”

“Three months,” she said, gaze fixed forward. “Anything else?”

“No, I was just—”

Her sharp tone cut off any casual back-and-forth.

"I meant nothing by it. Looking forward to working with you, Chief Joshua."

"Likewise, sir," Karen replied without looking at him.

While more polite than that petty officer in the chopper, Karen clearly wasn't interested in bonding with the new officer in charge.

"She probably thinks I'm just another green ensign who only knows the manual. It's fine. Once she sees me in combat, she'll recognize my abilities."

Just then, Michel let out an excited cry from the back.

"Look! Mobile suits!"

Relieved for any distraction from the tense mood, Shiro turned in the same direction. Three mobile suits were lumbering across the base.

They were early production prototype RGM-79(G) Ground Type GMs. As the name implied, they were developed specifically for ground warfare, one of the Federation's experimental runs before mass-producing the standard RGM-79 model. Each machine was eighteen meters tall, towering embodiments of raw firepower. Something about these humanoid silhouettes, made colossal, radiated formidable strength. For Michel, still anxious about being at the front, the sight was a small thrill.

"So that's what we'll be piloting! Wow, that's incredible!"

He made no effort to hide his excitement. Shiro felt much the same, but as the newly arrived commanding officer, he held himself back, he couldn't have Joshua thinking her superior was some starstruck rookie.

Their jeep raced past the GMs, almost like they were challenging them to a friendly race, before entering the "command base," a rough clearing, hacked out of the dense forest and surrounded only by a flimsy fence.



Commander Kojima, commanding officer of the Mechanized Composite Battalion to which Shiro had been assigned, was a man who seemed anything but a soldier. He looked to be in his early fifties. Perched on the bridge of his nose was a pair of wire-rim glasses, likely reading glasses, while faint strands of white peppered the mustache bristling across his upper lip. His arms, exposed by the short-sleeved tropical uniform, were surprisingly sinewy, yet his overall vibe suggested he might be more at home crunching numbers in a corporate accounting department than leading a frontline military unit.

"Ensign Shiro Amada, reporting for duty, sir!"

At Shiro's sharp salute, Kojima, who had been studying a tactical map, shifted his not-so-keen gaze upward.

"Chief Petty Officer Terry Sanders Jr., sir, also reporting."

Following Shiro's lead, Sanders snapped a salute. Next up was Michel, hurriedly imitating the older man's stance.

"P-Petty Officer M-Michel Ninorich, sir! Present and accounted for!"

His nervousness betrayed him, causing his voice to crack on the final word. Kojima, however, paid it no mind. He introduced himself swiftly, his tone businesslike.

"You've done well to get here. I'm Commander Kojima, your commanding officer."

With a small push of his index finger, Kojima nudged the glasses that had begun sliding down his nose.

"As we speak, our battalion is locked in a back-and-forth stalemate against Zeon forces across the jungle. Your mission is to hold this front line, and, if the opportunity arises, push the enemy back beyond the jungle."

Shiro listened, nodding seriously.

*"Maintain the front line? That's too soft. I'm going to drive those Zeon bastards out of this jungle and off Earth altogether, that's why I'm here."*

"You've likely heard that this Far Eastern theater is one of the fiercest combat zones. For those of you who've come from space, it's going to be a tough environment in more ways than one. Still, for the Federation's sake, I'm counting on you to give it your all."

"Yes, sir!"

Shiro's reply was loud enough to make Kojima momentarily forget whatever he'd been about to say next. Karen, standing off to one side, watched Shiro with a faintly amused look. Sanders, as ever, remained impassive behind him. Michel, looking a bit exasperated, quickly remembered himself, this was his commanding officer, and rearranged his features into something more appropriately respectful.

"There are two things I want you to keep in mind," Kojima continued. "First, the civilians living in the jungle, don't interfere with them."

"Civilians... sir?"

Shiro echoed Kojima's words, perplexed that any non-combatants could be residing in such a dangerous place.

"That's right. As long as we don't provoke them, there won't be any problems."

Naturally, Shiro had no intention of harassing civilians. Suspecting this was Kojima's way of warning them against acts of looting or violence, Shiro answered in a more subdued voice.

"Understood, sir."

"The other thing: remember that in these jungles, combat is not a matter of lines but of points."

"Points... Commander?"

Shiro found himself repeating Kojima's phrase again, feeling as though he sounded clueless.

"Yes, points. Don't assume there's anything resembling a continuous front. This base you're standing in is our only safe zone. The moment you step outside, be it on your flank or behind you, you're in enemy territory."

"I understand."

Shiro gave a small nod. He wanted to ask for more details, but with his subordinates present, he didn't want to appear ignorant. Besides, there would be opportunities to talk with Kojima later.

"That's that. For the nitty-gritty, ask the Chief. You got that, Karen?"

"Yes, sir," Karen replied, curt as ever. Without missing a beat, Kojima took a sip of tea from the cup at his side and turned his attention back to the map spread out on the desk. With that, the formal introduction to the battalion commander was over.

"Excuse us, sir."

Feeling slightly underwhelmed, he'd expected something more, Shiro saluted a second time and led his men out.



"There's only two of you?"

Seeing how few personnel the 08th MS Team actually had, Shiro couldn't help but voice his surprise to Chief Joshua.

"That's correct, sir. At the moment, it's just me and Eledore here."

Karen repeated the statement. Beside her, Petty Officer Eledore Massis wore a grin that bordered on smug. His long hair was tied back with a purple bandanna, and he left his shirt unbuttoned just enough for his dog tags to swing like decorative jewelry against his chest. He looked less like a soldier and more like some young guy hanging around a bustling nightlife district.

"S-so... what happened to the others?" Michel ventured.

Eledore shot him a teasing look.

"Kid, this is a war zone. You think everyone else went off on holiday together or something?"

"I-I didn't mean—"

"Then you get the picture. That's how fierce the fighting is here."

Although Eledore didn't spell it out, the empty spots in their roster likely meant that the missing members had been killed or injured badly enough to be sent to the rear.

"All right, Petty Officer Massis. So, including us three, that puts our total at five, right?" Shiro said.

"Yes, sir, that's correct."

Eledore saluted, still smirking in that irreverent way.

"Chief Joshua, I'd like to see the 08th Team's equipment."

"Yes, sir."

Shiro decided to check the mobile suits. Between Karen's brusque manner and Eledore's laid-back air, he felt the machines themselves might be easier to trust.

They found the 08th MS Team's units in a makeshift storage hangar. Contrary to Shiro's expectation of bustling mechanics, the space was deserted. The only things visible in the dim interior were the towering silhouettes of three giant forms.

“Ever since our last CO got sent to the rear, there hasn’t exactly been much action,” Eledore remarked dryly, as though reading Shiro’s mind.

That made sense. With only two people, they couldn’t conduct proper operations. That meant the mobile suits had gone unused for quite some time.

“I’m turning on the lights,” Karen called out.

A moment later, the interior flared bright, revealing the three suits in detail. They stood in muted shades of gray and blue-gray, shaped as straightforward humanoid machines. There was no heavy cannon perched on a shoulder or tank treads in place of legs, just a standard set of limbs, with little more than a visible vulcan gun in the chest as fixed armament.

Their most striking feature lay in the face: the sensor array where the “eyes” would be. Rather than a single camera or the visor-like lens of a GM, these suits had two distinct eyes, almost eerily human in shape.

“Wait... aren’t those... Gundams?!”

Michel’s shout echoed through the hangar. Federation mobile suits generally fell into one of two categories: the humanoid GM types and the Ball units specialized for artillery support. However, there existed a small handful of outliers that didn’t fit neatly into either group, among them, the legendary Gundam.

It was rumored that a Gundam’s performance far surpassed that of any GM. The pilot, Sergeant Amuro Ray, had reportedly destroyed more than ten Zakus already and even matched the infamous “Red Comet” blow for blow. While propaganda might have embellished his feats, there was no doubt that a Gundam was something special. One of the Gundam’s hallmarks was the dual-eye design, far more “human” than the visor-like face of a GM.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Eledore said, confirming Michel’s guess. “They’re not GMs. The official name is RX-79(G) Ground Combat Pre-Production Gundam.”

“No way! We really get to pilot Gundams?”

“Don’t be dumb, kid, you’re over there.”

Eledore jerked his chin toward the machine’s feet, where a reconnaissance hover truck, nicknamed the “Bloodhound”, was parked.

“Listen up: an MS Team forms a three-unit squad. That means only three pilots are needed. Now, if we pick three from the 08th, how’s that go? One...”

He pointed at Shiro.

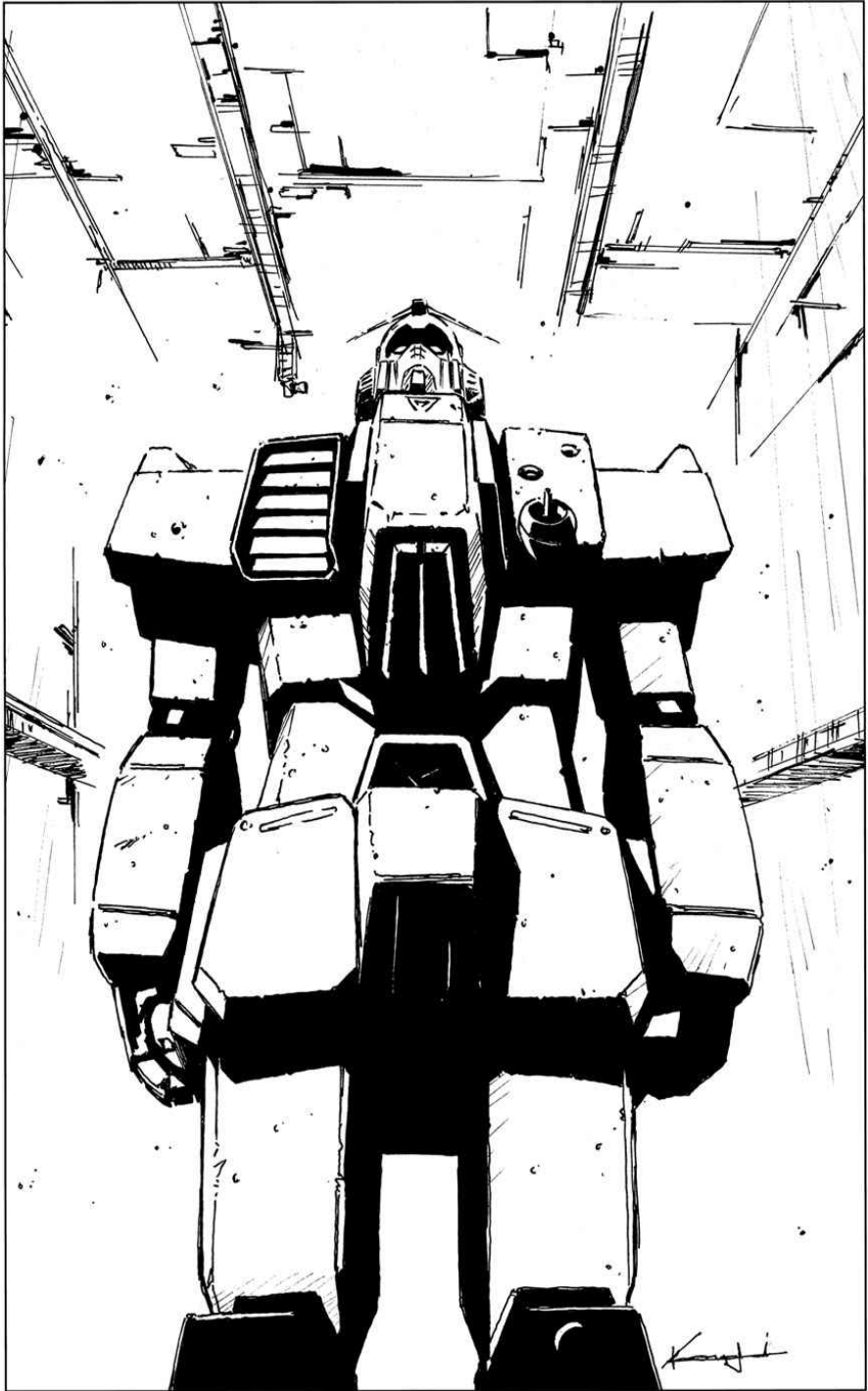
“Two.”

Then he indicated Karen, whose bored expression made it clear she wasn’t entertained by Eledore’s little performance.

“And three...”

With a theatrical twirl of his finger, he pointed at Sanders. Yes, by rank alone, Shiro, Karen, and Sanders would naturally be the ones chosen.

*“I already wrote to BB about piloting a mobile suit...”*



Michel inwardly cursed himself. Of course, it made no sense to stick a raw rookie like him in a Gundam right away.

"I didn't realize there was a ground-specific Gundam model," Shiro remarked, picking up where Michel left off. "Must be classified. It's an honor to be entrusted with such a machine."

"Being a test pilot is sort of like a badge of merit for top soldiers," Sanders added.

At that, Eledore let out a harsh laugh.

"An honor? A badge of merit? Gimme a break. Sure, they're Gundams... but they're the rejects of the bunch."

"Rejects?"

"Yeah, duds. Odds and ends slapped together from leftover parts."

"Knock it off, Eledore."

Karen's voice cut sharply through Eledore's flippant tone.

"But it's true..."

"Chief, what does he mean?" Shiro asked, ignoring Eledore and turning to Karen.

"These Gundams were created by repurposing parts from the original unit, the RX-78," she explained.

"Repurposing the original's... *parts*?"

"Yes. Even so, there's nothing wrong with their performance. We've been maintaining them regularly."

Her clipped response made it clear she did not welcome further questioning. The subtext seemed to be: Do you not trust our work?

"All right," Shiro said at last. As commanding officer, he owed it to his subordinates to trust them. "Chief Joshua, I'd like to see a map of the area next. And I'll need the combat records for the past month, plus an equipment list and our current supply status."

"Yes, sir."

Shiro's first priority was to get the lay of the land. Only then could he decide how best to carry out their mission.



Zeon's initial war strategy revolved around achieving a swift victory by leveraging mobile suits as its centerpiece. If they couldn't end the war early, they intended to pivot immediately toward a diplomatic resolution.

However, the Zeon high command was never naïve enough to assume that plan would effortlessly come to fruition. Although they had unwavering faith in the capability of their mobile suits, this would be Zeon's first real war. Moreover, the Federation held several times Zeon's national power. That was why Zeon had actively devised backup plans to prepare for the possibility of a prolonged conflict.

Their pre-war development of ground-based weaponry served precisely that purpose. Should battles shift to Earth, Zeon would inevitably require

equipment capable of operating on land. Long before the Earth invasion, Side 3 had been researching and developing a host of craft and vehicles, Gaws, Magella Attacks, Dopps, Lugguns, Goggs, and so forth.

Once Zeon launched its Earth Drop Operation, it immediately constructed research facilities to test these weapons in real conditions. Simulations on Side 3 could only approximate terrestrial environments; the data gleaned there still wasn't truly "authentic." In reality, many of those new weapons were thrown into combat more or less untested anyway.

Among Zeon's research sites, the most famous is undoubtedly California Base in North America, where the likes of the Jukon, Mad Angler submarines, and most amphibious mobile suits have been developed. Yet here on the Tibetan Plateau, Zeon had also built a clandestine facility rivaling California Base in scale and secrecy.

It was a colossal stronghold carved out of a mountain. Inside, they had everything from laboratories to a shuttle launch station, allowing all stages of R&D, right up to full-on combat training, to take place under one roof. The entrances were camouflaged to keep Federation forces unaware of the base's location. Only when shuttles or aircraft took off and landed did the mountain's northern face part briefly, revealing its hidden hangar.

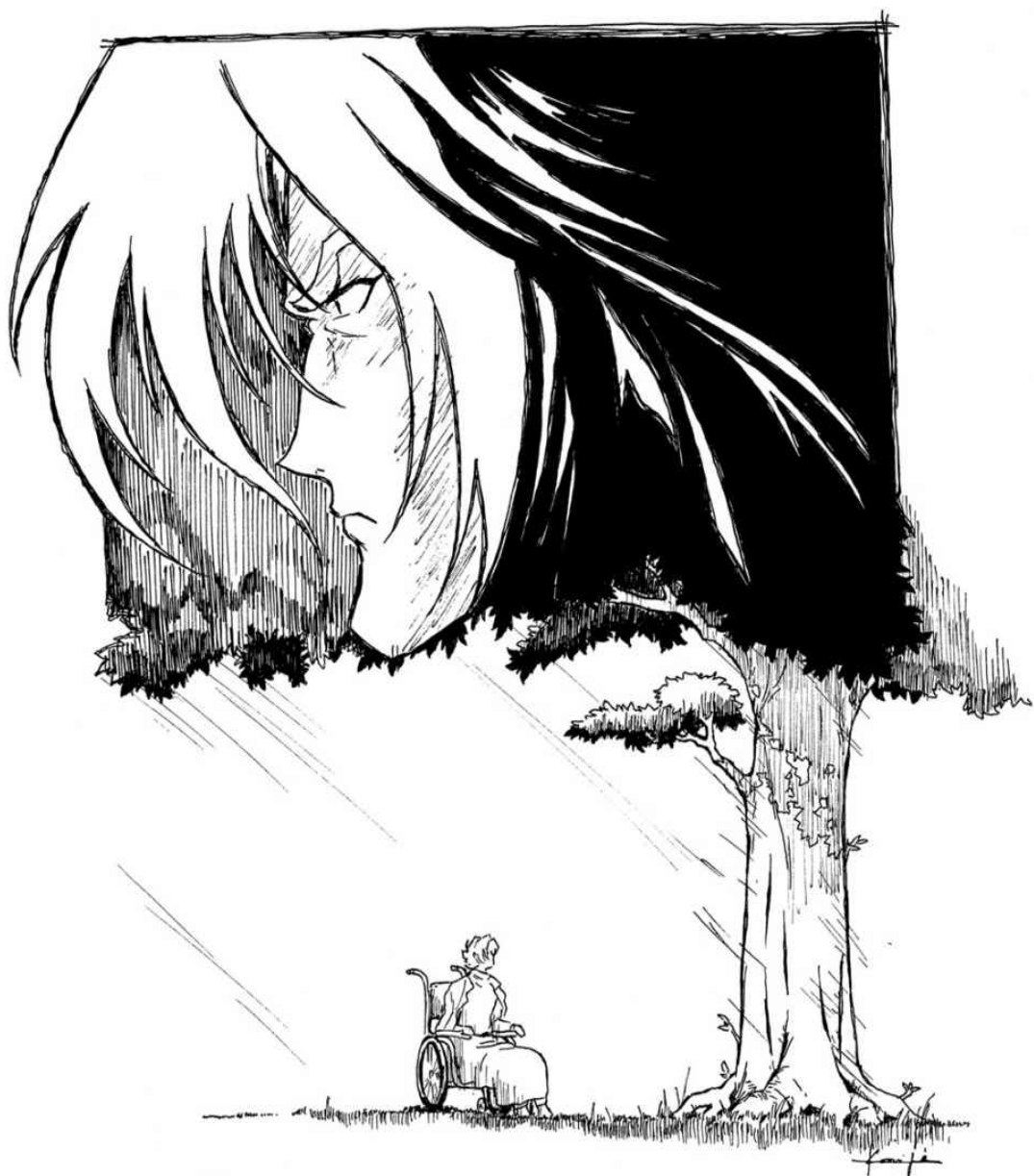
This northern entrance slid open just now, allowing a Zeon transport plane and three escort fighters to glide inside. The dock beyond was astonishingly expansive. The unfinished legs of a not-yet-deployed Rick Dom dangled from a crane, while an MS-07H8 Gouf Flight Type modification team rushed about, preparing for a test flight. The entire area looked like a grand exhibition of prototype weaponry as the transport, a Dora, eased down onto the deck.

Waiting to greet the transport were eight men, most wearing the white uniforms typical of Zeon research staff. At the forefront of the group stood a single individual in an officer's tunic emblazoned with Zeon's crest. The style resembled that of a field-grade officer, but in truth, he was a "technical" officer, a rank unique to Zeon's research hierarchy.

He appeared to be in his late twenties, handsome but with a slight gauntness. The shoulder boards indicated he was a Rear Admiral, a remarkably high rank for someone so young. His name was Ginias Sahalin, personal technical rear admiral to Sovereign Degwin.

This "technical rear admiral" title was something particular to Zeon. Because the Principality lacked the industrial might of the Federation, it aggressively incentivized research and innovation, even within the military. Outstanding scientists could be promoted in ways unthinkable elsewhere, and Ginias Sahalin was one such case. Still, being elevated to a rank on par with the sovereign's own siblings, Kycillia Zabi, a rear admiral, and Garma Zabi, a captain, showed just how extraordinary his status truly was.

Standing before Ginias, the Dora's hatch, also serving as its boarding ramp, opened with a utilitarian clang. From it emerged a single figure wearing low-heeled shoes. A woman.



She wore a long coat of a soft, muted color instead of a uniform. Combined with her silver hair, it gave her an almost aristocratic aura.

This was Aina Sahalin.

Not long ago, she had met Shiro in space and been left behind on a derelict Magellan. Yet here she was, having survived and returned.

"I'm back," Aina said simply, walking straight toward Ginias. Her face was devoid of expression, as blank as a porcelain doll. The gentle smile she'd worn when parting ways with Shiro was gone without a trace.

"Welcome home, Aina," greeted Ginias, her older brother, his lips curving into a faint smile.

"I'm sorry, Brother. I lost the test-model Zaku," she said.

"I've heard."

"However, I brought back the disk containing the experimental data. It shouldn't affect the Apsaras development timeline."

"How were the test results?"

"Favorable. Your Apsaras can withstand deployment in space. Against the Federation's current mobile suits, I see no problems."

"I see."

Ginias nodded in satisfaction. Behind him, the other men, likely researchers, looked visibly relieved. The mission's success must have been uncertain enough for them to brace for the worst.

Aina herself, though, showed neither contentment nor pride. Her face remained impassive, drifting across the group of men as though she were little more than a statue.

"Aina, in thirty minutes, we're running another acceleration trial on the Apsaras," Ginias informed her.

"Yes, Brother."

"By 16:40, be in your normal suit and—"

"Pardon me, Master Ginias," a voice interrupted. It belonged to Bill Harlow, a younger engineer who'd recently joined the research team.

"Miss Aina has only just returned. Perhaps it would be better to hold off on the acceleration test until she's had sufficient rest..."

Acceleration testing places tremendous strain on the human body. Given Aina was female and might be fatigued from her long flight home, Bill figured it common sense to suggest a delay.

Yet,

"It's fine. That won't be a problem," Aina said curtly, as if it were someone else's body she was talking about.

"But—"

"My hands are my brother's hands."

She spoke up again, quite suddenly. Bill Harlow blinked in confusion, not grasping what she meant.

"My feet are my brother's feet. My heart is my brother's heart. My—"

Aina continued in that detached manner, utterly humorless. Alarmed, Bill tore his gaze from her and glanced at the others. The research staff wore haunted looks, as though they were seeing something disturbing, and they

turned sympathetic eyes on Bill, giving him slight nods that all but said, "Yes, we know. This isn't new."

"Enough, Aina," Ginias said with a wry smile. "The soldiers are watching."

No sooner had he spoken than Aina fell silent, as if someone had flipped a switch to shut off a blaring alarm.



Around the same time, some fifteen hundred kilometers from that hidden base, Shiro sat inside the cockpit of his Gundam at Kojima Base.

He'd placed a small portable TV on the console playing an old video of Captain Joe, but paid the screen no attention. He'd already seen it countless times; by now, it was little more than background noise.

What truly had his focus was a certain ornate pocket watch, one that used to belong to Aina Sahalin. She had left it with him, and he'd never found a chance to return it.

"Aina Sahalin..."

He didn't actually know whether she was alive, nor did he feel certain she was dead. A hazy certainty told him she had to be alive. It was little more than a wishful hunch, but something inside him refused to doubt it.

"She said she wasn't a soldier... so maybe she's back on Side 3."

Threading the watch chain around his forefinger, Shiro glanced at the time: 3:38 PM. The watch was set seven hours off local time, this was "space time." Since space activities followed Greenwich Standard, the hour at Kojima Base, located far east of Greenwich, ended up ten hours apart from standard Earth-based clocks. Those days in orbit, now, felt like a dream.

He recalled his first mobile suit battle, how terrifying yet exhilarating it had been. Inside the derelict Magellan, dread had nearly overwhelmed him, but Aina was there, by his side. Upon returning from that mission, the welcome at the shuttle bay had been overwhelming, as though he'd performed a miracle. That mixture of danger, excitement, and pride, he'd actually liked it.

In stark contrast, life in the 08th Team was an absolute headache.

Sure, he'd heard the stories: unrelenting heat, sudden downpours, insects everywhere. Those things he could accept as part of the job. But these new subordinates of his? That was an issue.

Petty Officer Eledore Massis grinned constantly while Shiro was briefing him, showing zero sense of being in a warzone, and seemed to care nothing for proper deference to a superior officer. Or, more accurately, he simply didn't want to care.

Chief Petty Officer Karen Joshua's speech was polite enough, but beneath the surface, Shiro sensed an obvious contempt, as though she saw him as a "by-the-book rookie" who'd never experienced real combat.

Petty Officer Michel Ninorich struck him as a timid soul. From their shuttle ride onward, if the kid had any free time at all, he spent it writing letters to

some girlfriend. He was eighteen, so maybe it was normal, but he still came across as childishly dependent.

The only one who seemed reliable was Chief Petty Officer Sanders, though he wished they could get to know each other better, that was a minor concern compared to the others.

“Ugh...”

Shiro sighed, eyes drifting to Aina’s watch that swayed gently from his finger.

*“But I have no choice but to make this work. I came to Earth to drive out the Zeon, and that means I have to lead my team properly. Yes, I’ll show them exactly what I can do. Watch closely, Chief Joshua, I’m no greenhorn who only knows the manual. And I’ll teach Petty Officer Massis what the military is really about. As for Michel, we’ll get him ready for real combat and make a real soldier out of him soon enough.”*

There was much to be done. Before he could take the fight to Zeon, he first had to tackle the trouble brewing among his own squad. It wasn’t what he’d planned, but...

*“I’ll do it anyway.”*

Staring at the pocket watch, a keepsake once owned by that Zeon woman, Shiro voiced his resolve out loud.

“I’ve got no choice. I will make this happen.”



The following morning, as if in direct response to Shiro’s vow, the 08th Team received marching orders.

The Kojima Battalion was gearing up for its first real offensive in quite some time. The addition of Shiro’s newly arrived personnel meant they could field six fully operational MS teams, enough to move from defense to attack.

Formally known as the Far Eastern Front Forces Mechanized Composite Battalion, the Kojima Battalion was organized into four companies. The first was the Headquarters and Support Company, providing communications, medical, and logistics oversight, akin to a general affairs department in a civilian firm.

Next came the Anti-MS Infantry Company, comprised of foot soldiers armed with anti-mobile suit weaponry. One might scoff at the idea of infantry facing mobile suit units, but in the tangled jungles of the Far East, agile ground troops were a critical force.

Finally, the core strength of Kojima Battalion lay in its two mobile suit companies, the 1st MS Company and 2nd MS Company. Each company consisted of four teams, making for a total of eight mobile suit teams. However, the 04th and 06th Teams were in the midst of reorganization, leaving only six teams combat-ready. That was already an improvement: until a week ago, the 03rd and 08th teams were also being restructured, reducing

their operational teams to a mere four. With six available, an offensive finally seemed viable.

Fresh from the pre-mission briefing, Shiro emerged from the operations room feeling upbeat.

He firmly believed there was only one way to unify the members of the unruly 08th Team: they needed to see real combat together. Shiro was certain his subordinates wouldn't trust him simply because he wore a second lieutenant's bars. If he wanted their respect as their commanding officer, he'd have to prove his skills.

He'd done it before, back in space.

When Shiro first sortied in a Ball, no one had any faith in him.

"No way he'll survive."

"He'll drag us down with him."

"He's out of his mind."

That's what the other soldiers on the shuttle were saying. Everyone viewed him as a foolhardy rookie, but when he returned alive, their view of him changed completely. Impressed by his quick thinking, piloting ability, and sheer luck, the soldiers crowded around him; not one still considered him just a green ensign.

Certainly, Shiro was young, and with his boyish face, he looked younger still. He understood it was hard to expect anyone to immediately respect him as both a commanding officer and an authority figure. So, once again, he would show them his mettle in real combat.

And Shiro had confidence. At the Academy, his grades were near the top, especially in mobile suit training. His strategic simulations weren't always top-tier, but his instructors had praised him for creativity and fresh ideas. He'd also faced real combat once already, completing a rescue mission that everyone else had deemed suicide. That kind of achievement was hardly blind overconfidence.

That was why he was eager to deploy.

He figured that once they had fought side by side, the 08th Team might finally start to come together.

Yet—

"Where's Eledore?"

When Shiro arrived in front of the barracks for muster, only four people stood at attention. Eledore Massis was nowhere to be seen.

"He hasn't been back since yesterday..."

Michel, who shared a room with Eledore, answered hesitantly. Soldiers' schedules, including lights-out, were strictly set by squad. It wasn't just about health regulation but also organizing night watch and patrol shifts. Of course, exceptions were made for specific orders, but...

"I'm not aware of giving any such order. Does anyone know where Petty Officer Massis might be?"

Sanders gave an apologetic shrug; Karen wore the same implacable expression as ever. Neither showed any inclination to speak.

*"We're off to a wonderful start..."*

Shiro ground his teeth inwardly, but he refused to be discouraged. He'd known from the outset this squad would not be easy.

"All right. I'll track him down myself."

No way was Shiro letting them walk all over him. He would personally find Eledore and drag him back.

But just then,

"Yo, Commander! You're early!"

Right on cue, Eledore strolled up, waving companionably at Shiro.

Shiro forced himself to remain composed, though his temper was boiling. He fixed Eledore with a level gaze.

"Where were you, Eledore?"

"Ah, at Lieutenant Nickard's place, sir!"

Noticing Shiro's displeasure, Eledore gave a salute, which only struck Shiro as a touch too theatrical, more insulting than respectful.

"Lieutenant... Nickard?"

"Lieutenant Jidan Nickard, sir, the Supply Corps. He, uh, roped me in to lend a hand."

"I don't recall giving you any such instructions. You're not in Supply, are you?"

"No, sir, but, well...he's a lieutenant, and I'm a petty officer. He outranks me."

With that, Eledore made a casual shrug. In the strict hierarchy of the military, rank was everything. By that logic, Shiro couldn't exactly chastise him further.

"All right. I'll go speak to Lieutenant Nickard myself. Where can I find him?"

"I figure he's at the materials depot, maybe..."

"Got it."

Shiro strode off briskly before Eledore could say anything else.

"Good grief. Even the supply captain is this lax? What kind of outfit have I landed in?"



"Where can I find Lieutenant Nickard?"

Shiro's voice held more than a hint of impatience as he addressed a middle-aged soldier who seemed to be checking their food stores.

"I'm Ensign Shiro Amada. I need to speak with Lieutenant Nickard."

At first, the soldier glanced up warily. Then, upon hearing Shiro's name, his eyes lit with a mischievous spark.

"Oh! So you're the hotshot ensign who took on a Zaku in a Ball."

Clearly, rumors traveled fast, and Shiro had a hunch he knew who'd been spreading them.

*"Certainly not Sanders, so...Michel, I bet. That chatterbox..."*

Though the man's words sounded vaguely admiring, Shiro could also hear the unspoken label, "That reckless ensign."

“Looking forward to your next stunt, Ensign. Maybe this time you’ll wrestle a Zaku bare-handed, huh? Sure would simplify our supply chains.”

It was a feeble joke. Shiro didn’t crack a smile. He merely repeated his question, this time more forcefully.

“Where can I find Lieutenant Nickard?”

The older soldier shrugged, as though to say “have it your way,” and pointed to a pile of sandbags heaped nearby.



Lieutenant Jidan Nickard was over seventy years old, an elderly man if ever there was one. His hairline had retreated almost to the crown of his head, his skin looked papery and dry, and his back curved noticeably. Yet his expression somehow seemed both shrewd and childlike, not at all befitting a frail old man.

When Shiro approached, Jidan eyed him slowly from his boots up to his face, as if appraising livestock at a market.

“You’re Lieutenant Nickard?”

“That’s me. And who might you be?”

“I’m Ensign Shiro Amada, newly appointed commander of the 08th MS Team.”

“Oh-ho. So you’re the one.”

The moment Jidan realized who stood before him, his gaze shifted from evaluative to intensely curious, making Shiro feel like a zoo animal under observation.

“You know Petty Officer Eledore Massis, I take it?”

“Sure do. He’s got a foul mouth and even fouler taste in women.”

Jidan let out a gravelly laugh at his own joke. Shiro refused to indulge him, cutting straight to the point.

“Even if you are a lieutenant, I can’t allow you to use my subordinates without going through me first.”

“Hah, sorry, sorry. We’re short-handed, y’see.”

Now Jidan slipped into a frail, grandfatherly tone.

“You folks in the 08th Team are just ‘going through the motions,’ if you catch my drift. So I made use of him without thinking.”

At that, his face stretched into a sly grin. His every expression seemed to change on a whim.

“Going through the motions’? Meaning what, exactly?”

“Well, the 08th Team’s gained a reputation as a ‘graveyard for COs,’ you might say. You’re famous for burning through commanding officers.”

“A graveyard for COs. Just perfect. What a team I’ve ended up with?”

Shiro felt fresh dismay gnaw at him. He already knew his subordinates were a handful, but evidently, it was even worse than he thought.

“Hey, old man!”

The voice came from a soldier pulling up in a jeep behind Shiro. Apparently "old man" referred to Jidan.

"That bet I owe you, can I pay in rations?"

"Long as you let me put a 2x markup on it," Jidan replied in that same hoarse drawl.

"Two times? C'mon, old man, that's highway robbery!"

"Fool. Supply and demand sets the price. I don't make the rules."

"Yeah, right. I hear rumor is if we ply you with booze, that markup vanishes!"

"Baseless scuttlebutt!"

Shiro watched, incredulous, as the two of them haggled. Jidan claimed to be short on manpower, but apparently had plenty of time to run a gambling racket.

*"What a piece of work."*

Shiro caught the faint whiff of liquor drifting around Jidan, a sure sign the old man had been drinking, even on the eve of a large-scale operation.

"Fine, whatever. Cheapskate," the soldier muttered before driving off, cargo in tow.

"Oy, Ensign!" Jidan called out cheerily, acting as though nothing odd had just transpired. "Care to join the fun?"

"Fun? You mean gambling?"

"That's the ticket. Sharp lad. You can bet money, cigarettes, booze, food... anything, really. And let me tell ya, this one's guaranteed to be in your favor."

"My favor?"

"Yep! The question for this latest bet is: How long will our new 08th Team CO last around here?"

He gave Shiro a deliberate wink. From somewhere behind them, a man tending to weapon maintenance, came a poorly stifled chuckle. Jidan himself wore a broad, amused smirk, clearly proud of his "joke."

"You can wager between three days on the short end, all the way up to the end of the war on the long end," he explained.

"Man, that final bracket is a total wild card," came another voice from beneath a nearby vehicle. "So few people pick it, you'd practically rake in the pot if you won."

Heat surged up Shiro's spine, and he clenched his fists.

"I'll put everything on me lasting until the war is over."

Shiro pulled out every bill he had in his pocket and slammed the wad of cash down in front of Jidan, glaring with defiance at the captain, his superior officer in rank.

"In any case, if you need anyone from the 08th Team again, run it by me first."

With that, Shiro spun on his heel and strode off. He could hear voices rising behind him, all swirling around Jidan, but he purposely ignored them.

*"Seriously... what kind of place is this?"*

## Chapter.04

### Impatience

"Before we head out, the commander has a few words for us."

Karen's voice carried to the members of the 08th Team, who had just finished prepping for departure. Bit by bit, they gathered in front of their commanding officer, Shiro.

A pre-deployment address, words of encouragement and caution before heading into battle. Strictly speaking, everything had already been explained during the previous briefing, so there wasn't much need for another speech.

Shiro himself hadn't planned on making one.

But just then...

"Commander, whenever you're ready."

Karen's prompt felt more like a challenge than a polite invitation.

Her gaze practically said, *"Go on, let's see what you've got. I'm listening."* It was clear she was testing him.

*"All right, if that's how it is..."*

Never one to shrink from a dare, Shiro squared his shoulders, stepped forward, and spoke in a calm voice.

"This marks the first sortie for our newly reformed 08th Team," he began, surprised at how smoothly the words came out. "I don't know you all very well yet, and I'm sure you don't fully understand me either. But we do share a common goal: to defeat Zeon, and to make it back alive."

At the phrase make it back alive, Michel gave a small, instinctive nod.

Karen remained outwardly impassive, though there was keen curiosity in her eyes, as though she were observing some strange animal in a cage.

Sanders, as usual, showed nothing. No telling what was going through his mind.

Eledore, by contrast, looked positively entertained, like he was listening to a stand-up comic and might jump in with some banter at any moment.

"Our objective is, of course, to complete this mission successfully. But above all, it's to come back alive. I promise I'll do everything in my power to ensure none of you are lost out there. In return, fight like hell to stay alive yourselves. That is all."

The moment Shiro paused, Karen called out sharply.

"Mount up!"

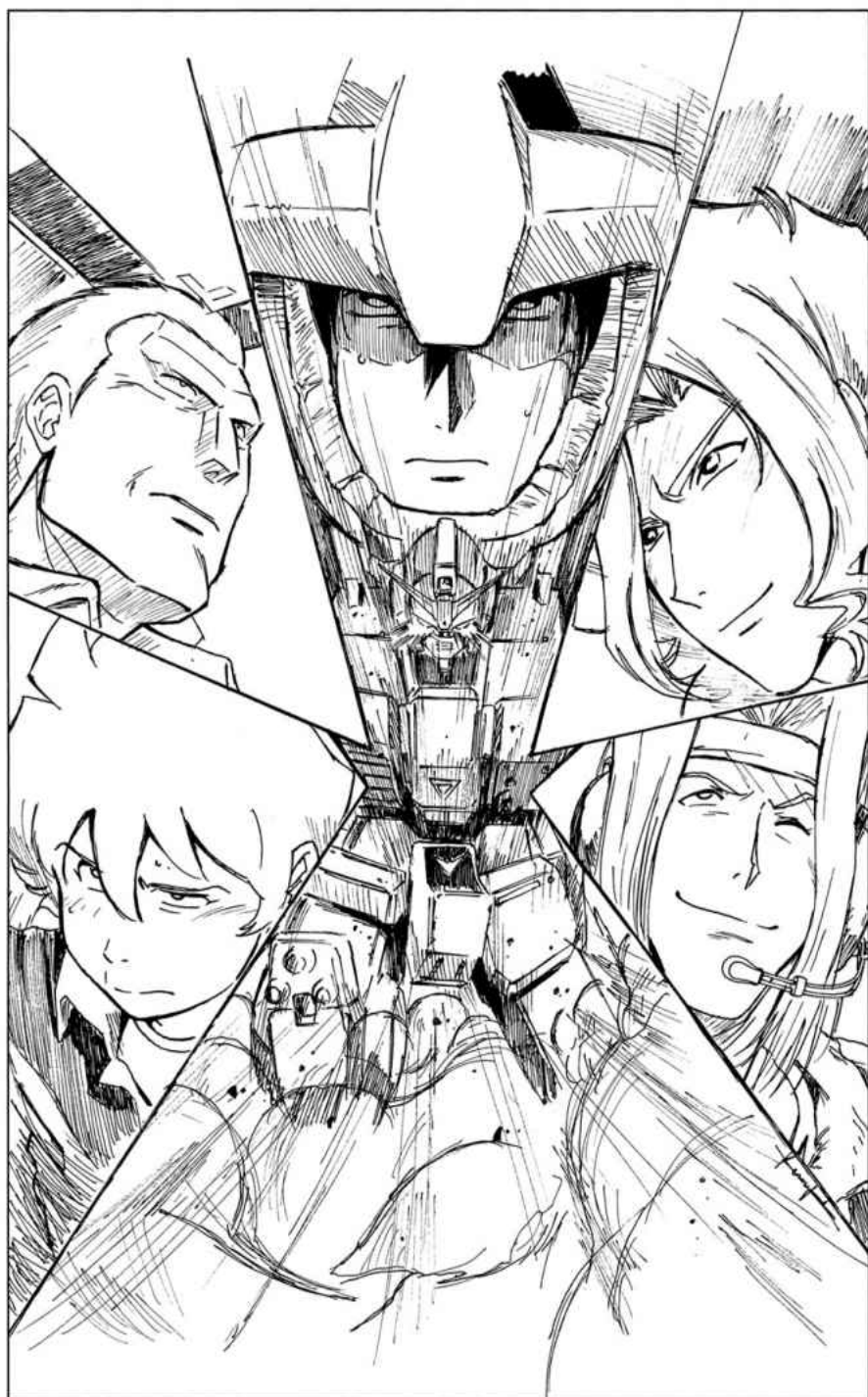
Like they'd been struck by lightning, Karen, Sanders, and Eledore shot off toward their stations. Michel, a beat behind, scrambled after them.

"'Come back alive,' huh? Easier said than done," Karen muttered under her breath as she ran. Naturally, Shiro couldn't hear her words.

*"It's really happening."*

Shiro glanced back, his gaze drifting up toward his own Gundam.

Then, he broke into a run.





Point 304, a forward Zeon base to the northwest of Kojima Base. That was the target for today's operation. Of course, a simple assault wouldn't constitute much of an operation. Instead, the Kojima Battalion planned to launch a series of staggered assaults all along the Zeon front lines, disguising the real point of attack. In other words, a diversionary operation.

The 08th Team, under Shiro's command, was one of the units assigned to carry out that diversion. Diversionary tactics demanded the highest level of tactical judgment. If the enemy discovered the ruse, the entire operation could be jeopardized, potentially even leaving the main force in danger. Striking too early or too late could doom the effort, and if the main attack failed, the diversionary units would find themselves isolated deep in enemy territory.

It wasn't surprising that some had voiced objections to placing such a heavy responsibility on Shiro, who had just arrived at the battalion. But the mission demanded the wide operational range of an RX-79(G) Ground Gundam. And while the 04th Team was being reorganized, only the 08th had Gundams on hand.

"Hmph. If I had a Gundam, I could do the job too."

Those words, spat out by Ensign Rob of the 07th Team during the meeting, still echoed in Shiro's head.

"Fine. I'll see this through. Once I succeed, everyone, every other team leader, and even Chief Joshua, will see that I'm no wet-behind-the-ears rookie."

He found himself recalling an episode from Captain Joe. In one chapter, a bright but cocky new recruit from a university joined Joe's squad and kept trying to pick holes in Joe's orders. But once he saw Joe in action on the battlefield, he finally acknowledged Joe's leadership.

"That's right. I'm a soldier. No matter what I say, my performance in the field is what matters. If I can deliver solid results, not even Chief Joshua can deny my abilities."

Brimming with determination, Shiro made his Gundam take its first heavy, earthshaking steps forward. The forest loomed nearer with every stride.

Cross the fence, and with one more step, you were in no-man's-land. Beyond that lay countless unknown dangers. No one knew where Zeon forces might be lying in wait.

"Commander."

Karen's voice crackled through the comm.

"What is it, Chief Joshua?"

"I'd like to take point, if that's all right."

The point man, when moving through a jungle, teams typically traveled in single file for safety. Traps could be anywhere, so you followed in the footprints of the person ahead. The point man's role was the most dangerous, yet also the most critical to the squad's overall survival.

Shiro suddenly realized he'd forgotten to designate the point man, an absolute basic.

"R-right... Yes, that makes sense."

In most cases, the squad's most experienced member was chosen for that position. It was natural that Karen, a seasoned soldier, fit the bill.

"All right, Chief Joshua, you're up. I'll follow behind you. Then Eledore, then Sanders."

"Understood."

"Gotcha!"

Sanders and Eledore responded in their own distinct ways.

"Minus one point..."

Shiro silently chided himself.

"Get it together, Shiro Amada. Chief Joshua's watching your every move. Think back to what you learned at the academy, assigning a point man is the most fundamental of basics."

Looking up, he could see Karen's mobile suit slowly penetrating the forest canopy.

Somewhere on the other side of that treeline, the enemy was waiting.

He had two opponents to beat: the Zeon forces, and his own inexperience.

"Let's move out!"

Shiro pressed down hard on the pedals. His Gundam rumbled forward, each step sending vibrations through the ground, carrying him ever closer to the enemy.



10:28 AM.

The 08th Team had called a brief halt in the jungle depths. It had been an hour and a half since they left base. The operation was scheduled to begin at 2:15 PM. Having covered more than half the distance already, they were making excellent time.

Karen proved herself a highly capable point man, and even Shiro had to admit it. She'd spotted and neutralized every land mine and booby trap set by the Zeon forces. Thanks to her vigilance, the team reached this position without a scratch.

"All right, that should do it. Let's push on," Karen said over the comm.

Taking point in a jungle sapped mental focus, so they'd paused to let her catch her breath and sharpen her concentration.

"Are you sure you're good to go, Chief Joshua?" Shiro asked.

"This is nothing," came her cool reply.

Even if she didn't say it aloud, Shiro could practically hear the subtext. "Don't lump me in with a greenhorn like you." And indeed, Karen was thinking exactly that.

A flush of heat shot through his body. He blurted out the plan he'd been hesitating to voice.

"At this point, we'll split into two squads."

"What was that?!" Karen sounded taken aback.

"Squad A will head toward the enemy base from the route by the waterfall, circling around to hit them from the north. Then, the other squad will attack from the south."

Eledore cut in, sounding exasperated.

"Uh, Commander? You remember we're just a diversion here, right?"

"That's exactly why we can't make it look like a diversion. If it's obvious, the enemy will see right through our plan. We have to go in with the same intensity we would if we intended to take the base ourselves."

"Hah. You're all about logic, aren't you?" Eledore said with a faint snort.

"If it goes smoothly, we'll deal a serious blow to their forward position. And even if we don't, if they panic and call for major reinforcements, that's more pressure on them and an easier time for our main force."

Splitting the team in two had been on Shiro's mind ever since he first heard the mission details. But the risks were also high, so he hadn't mustered the nerve to bring it up, until now.

"Squad A will be Chief Joshua, Sanders, Eledore, and Michel. Squad B will be whoever's left."

"Whoever's left? That's basically just you, Commander," Michel observed incredulously.

"Who knows if it'll go like it did up in space last time. And besides--"

"There's a concern with the waterfall route," Karen broke in, keeping her voice steady.

"Concern?"

"Yes. The civilians living deep in the jungle. The area near the waterfall is part of their territory."

Shiro suddenly remembered Commander Kojima's warning on the day he arrived, "Don't get entangled with the civilians in the jungle."

"We're not planning on turning their village into a battlefield. We just need to pass through," Shiro said firmly.

"Yes, but--"

"If there's any trouble, we'll explain our reasons. We're fighting Zeon, after all. They should be glad to have us."

He sounded absolutely sure of himself.

"If you insist," Karen replied. Shiro caught the hint of something left unsaid behind her words, but he let it drop.

"You'll lead Squad A, Chief Joshua. We stick with the original timetable, attack begins at 2:15 PM. If Squad B doesn't make it in time, you decide whether to engage or retreat on your own."

"Understood."

"Understood."

"Try not to die, Commander."

"Roger."

Karen, Sanders, Eledore, Michel, each responded in their own way. Shiro could easily picture Karen's wry, ironic smile.

"Just watch, Chief Joshua. I'll prove I'm no wet-behind-the-ears recruit."

With a silent burst of resolve, Shiro gave the command.

"Squad B, move out!"



Shiro peered at the monitor, which was split into four small windows.

Each window showed a camera feed: the right leg, the rear view, the left side, and the right side. At the moment, he was focusing intently on the image from the right leg camera.

The jungle trees stretched upward, vying desperately for sunlight, leaving the forest floor dark, humid, and oppressive. Green and brown filled the screen, but nothing sinister caught his eye.

No landmines.

No Zeon patrols.

No tripwires connected to hidden charges.

Nothing.

"Seems clear here, too," he murmured cautiously, verifying once more that there were no traps before taking another step forward.

Countless devices left by Zeon lurked in these jungles. Ever since the front lines had ground to a stalemate, both sides had resorted to planting traps to wear down the enemy through slow attrition. Unable to shift the war in one swift move, they tried instead to shape the terrain to their advantage, little by little.

"Surprisingly few around here," he muttered, switching to a feed from the left leg camera.

He'd parted ways with Karen and the others some time ago but still hadn't encountered a single trap. At first, he'd worried he simply wasn't spotting them. Now, it seemed more likely Zeon hadn't bothered rigging this area.

"That means they're not expecting anyone to come through here. That's good for me, surprising them from an unexpected direction should be a real advantage."

The idea made Shiro's pulse quicken. If he played his hand right, it might be more than just a diversion; maybe the 08th Team could capture the enemy base on its own. That would be a major victory. Chief Joshua and the other team leaders would finally see him as more than a rookie. And if the main operation succeeded, their main forces might push the front lines way back.

"Maybe we'll be lighting the spark for a counteroffensive all across the Far Eastern sector; drive Zeon right off the Earth."

Excitement surged through him. He felt so energized he almost wanted to break into song. Even the cautious steps he'd been taking, wary of traps, now turned into something more like a march.

He moved his right foot forward.  
No problem. No signs of a trap here.  
Left foot.  
Right foot.  
Left foot.  
A steady, rhythmic march deeper into the jungle.  
Excellent. Keep this pace.  
Just watch, you Zeon bastards. I'm going to drive every last one of you off this planet.  
The Gundam pressed on through the dense greenery.



"I've never seen one quite like that," said a young woman named Kiki Rosita, peering through binoculars.

She couldn't be older than twenty, sixteen or seventeen at most. She wore a short, airy garment that left her limbs bare and her midriff, including her navel, exposed. Yet there was nothing sensual or feminine about her appearance. If anything, her build was boyishly lithe and athletic. Reddish-brown hair was carelessly bound up with a plain bandana, and she wore no makeup, jewelry, or adornments that might suggest typical girlish vanity.

"That's a 'Gundam,' or so the Federation calls it," muttered "Hotheaded" Ted, a lanky young man standing next to her. He looked at least a few years older than she was. He wore a baseball cap backward on his head.

"A Gundam?" Kiki repeated.

"Yeah. The Federation's latest model. It's basically just a copy of the original, though."

Kiki shot him a side glance. "That was from your friend the 'rockstar'?"

"Sort of," Ted replied. "He said you can spot it by the twin eye slits and that little horn on its head."

"Hm..."

Kiki adjusted the binoculars to focus on the machine's face. Sure enough, it had two eyes and a horn-like antenna.

"So that's a Gundam, huh? Seems like a bit of a mouthful," she observed.

"You think so?"

"Yeah, usually mobile suits have short names, Zaku or GM, that sort of thing."

"True, now that you mention it..."

"But it sure looks strong," someone else chimed in, Mati, a little girl standing between Kiki and Ted. "It looks way tougher than the one-eyed ones."

"One-eyed" meant Zeon's Zaku suits. The Gundam's humanoid visage did make it look more imposing than a mono-eyed Zaku.

"Nice work spotting it, Mati," Kiki said, giving the girl an approving nod. "You did good."

Mati beamed from ear to ear.

Ted reached out and poked Mati on the head with a teasing grin. "So even Mati can be useful once in a while, huh?"

"Cut it out, Ted." Kiki flashed him a sharp look. "What were you doing when you were eight?"

"Well... there wasn't a war on when I was eight," he muttered sullenly.

"Then keep your mouth shut. If you grew up in peacetime, you've got no right to talk like that."

Ted swallowed any further retort, settling for a glower that said, "You don't have to take it that seriously." But he knew better than to provoke Kiki more, she'd only lash out again.

"Ah, the white suit is on the move," Mati piped up, breaking the tension. The mobile suit that had paused was starting to walk again.

Instantly, Kiki shifted back into a commander's focus.

"All right. We'll get it at Boar Rock up ahead. Everyone ready?"

"Got it!"

"Roger that."

"I hear ya."

"Just say the word."

A handful of men had gathered behind Kiki, each armed in his own way. They were clearly no professional soldiers, though. They weren't Federation troops, and they weren't Zeon, either. They were local civilians who'd organized themselves into a militia, guerrillas. These were precisely the "civilians in the jungle" that Kojima had warned Shiro about.

"We'll use the smoke. You all set?"

"Right here, boss," said a big man called Craig, holding up an exposed smoke canister.

"I'll circle around the front. Tony, Kurt, you go behind and lock down its legs."

"Roger!"

"On it!"

"Once the legs are pinned, we go for the arms. Don't any of you dare try taking it down solo. If you're in trouble, sit tight and let someone else handle it."

Kiki rattled off her instructions, every bit the seasoned leader. Finally, she turned to Mati.

"Mati, you run back to the village and tell my father we've got a new Federation suit out here."

"Okay!" Mati's eyes glowed with excitement.

"Miss, are you sure that's—" Craig began.

"I've made my decision," Kiki cut him off.

After all, Mati was the first to spot that white mobile suit with a 'face.' Kiki wanted her to have the honor of delivering the news herself.

"Mati, this is an important mission. Think you can handle it?"

She deliberately used the serious word mission. Mati nodded solemnly. Satisfied, Kiki gave her a gentle smile and a pat on the back.

"Then go. Make sure you tell Dad everything."

"Got it. I won't let you down!"

Mati set her jaw, then sprinted away into the jungle.



Dashing through the undergrowth, Mati felt a surge of pride. She was the one who'd spotted that fierce-looking mobile suit. Not some adult, not some older boy, her. Usually, people saw her as just extra baggage, but not this time.

She couldn't wait to get back to the village and see everyone's stunned faces when she told them. Maybe her mother would be proud of her. Surely her friends would be amazed, too.

A grin spread across Mati's face. In their village, everyone fought, in one way or another. Her father had died battling Zeon's mobile suits. That was why she wanted to help as well, maybe not on the front lines, but she still wanted to do her part.

And now, Mati had proven she could.

"I can fight, just like big sister Kiki. I can protect my mom, too. I can help the village."

"I can, I can."

She chanted it in her mind, her feet pounding the muddy ground as she ran.

But then, her right foot snagged on something.

A thin, dark wire, pulled taut and camouflaged in the greenery.

She knew what it was the instant she felt it. But it was too late.

A split second later, the explosive at the other end of that wire went off with a thunderous roar.



"Enemy fire?!"

Shiro's Gundam reflexively crouched at the explosion that erupted ahead and to the right. He raised his shield in that direction and scanned his monitors. But there was no indication of enemy movement anywhere.

"Not... an enemy attack?"

He switched camera feeds one after another, searching for any sign of hostile forces. Still, nothing. No hint of an imminent strike.

"But that was definitely an explosion," he murmured.

This jungle was riddled with traps planted by both Zeon and the Federation. An animal could have stumbled onto one, but Shiro couldn't simply write it off and move on without checking.

"I need to see for myself..."

Keeping his Gundam crouched low, he slowly raised it upright again, shield still held ready. He also disengaged the safety on his 180mm cannon. Poised

to fight at a moment's notice, he moved cautiously toward the spot where the explosion had occurred.



Kiki and her people reached the blast site first. Luckily for Mati, the device that went off wasn't meant for anti-personnel use; it had limited lethality. Though she'd lost one leg, she was still alive.

"Stay with me, Mati. Come on, Mati!"

"B-big s-s-sis... Ki... Kiki..."

Mati's face was caked with mud, and her voice came out in a rasp.

"I'm sorry, Mati... this is all my... my fault..."

"The report... I have to... make the report..."

"Shhh. Don't try to talk right now."

Kiki held Mati's head gently against her.

"Ted, how bad are her injuries?"

"She's lucky she's so light. She lost her right leg, but otherwise, there's nothing too severe. Main concern now is blood loss..."

"Blood loss..."

"I got it under control for the moment, but she needs proper treatment back in the village."

"I understand. Craig, carry Mati home. Ted, go on ahead and get things ready."

"What about that mobile suit?"

Kiki glanced through the dense foliage. Looming beyond the trees, the white machine was advancing steadily in their direction.

For guerrillas on foot, facing a mobile suit head-on was suicide, so surprise attacks were their only chance. The explosion had ruined any element of surprise they might have had.

This territory was theirs; the Federation pilot likely knew that, or at least suspected it, given the sudden blast. Whether Zeon or guerrillas were responsible, it was still an enemy threat to him.

"So... we just let it pass?" someone asked.

"Hell no. We let those army shits walk all over us, we'll never live it down. They need to learn whose turf this is," another man growled.

"Damn right, miss. Even if it's on high alert, we can still try something."

Tension simmered in low voices. None of them believed the mobile suit pilot had set that trap personally, but it was still the army, still someone's fault Mati got hurt. In their eyes, this was as good as avenging her.

But Kiki spoke calmly.

"We're going to wait it out."

"Wait...?"

"That's a brand-new mobile suit, and it's not one we can beat easily."

"But--"

“If it comes close enough to see our village, then we strike with everything we’ve got. Otherwise, we hold. I’m not losing more of us today.”

Her words cooled the men’s eagerness. At last, Craig hefted Mati onto his back and began sprinting toward the village. Ted rushed off after him.

“Everyone else, spread out. Do not let it see you,” Kiki ordered once they were gone. “If that pilot spots us first, it’s over.”



Shiro brought his Gundam to the epicenter of the blast. It looked like a crude footpath, maybe a game trail for animals, where the explosion had torn outward, toppling trees in a radial pattern.

On his main monitor, he saw the center of the blast zone. There were no animal carcasses. But there was blood, dark splashes staining the fallen trunks.

Shiro zoomed in on the spot to study it more closely.

Was it a person? An animal?

He focused on where the blood was pooled, examining every detail: beneath toppled logs, the smoke still lingering in the air, the shadows beneath thick foliage, patches of earth newly gouged out by the force of the blast.

He was looking for any trace of human life, corpse, ripped clothing, footprints, weapons. Anything that might reveal who or what had triggered the explosion.

Time ticked by, his nerves keyed up. Any moment, the enemy could attack from behind.

“Where is it? Who’s there?”

So far, he saw nothing.



The white mobile suit stood motionless at the blast site, clearly trying to figure out what had caused the explosion. Kiki and her people held their breath in the shadows deeper in the jungle.

If the pilot spotted them, they’d have no choice but to fight, and in a straight-up confrontation with a new-model mobile suit, the guerrillas would be wiped out. Odds were that fewer than half would make it out alive.

“Just go. Please...”

Kiki silently prayed the suit would turn away. Mati’s injury had been more than enough.

“And if it does come too close, I’ll have to distract it somehow and give everyone else time to escape...”

She brought her machine gun closer to her face. It was an AR75, the Federation’s standard-issue light automatic, easy to handle and resilient to

dirt, but not especially powerful. At best, she might be able to blind the mobile suit by wrecking its camera.

Her father's face floated across her mind. "Hey, how about lunch together?" he'd said before she hurried off to join her comrades. Now, she regretted not staying behind, at least for a little while.

As her thoughts drifted, it happened: the mobile suit moved.

"We've been spotted?!"

She snapped back to a soldier's mindset in an instant.

"So that's it, then..."

Kiki flicked off the AR75's safety. But to her surprise, the mobile suit's torso hatch suddenly opened. From inside emerged a young Federation officer, who then climbed down along a wire attached to the cockpit, scanning his surroundings with obvious concern.

"What the?"

The pilot wasn't pointing a gun. He seemed to be searching for something.

"Miss," Tony whispered behind her. "If we hit him now--"

He was asking permission to open fire. Indeed, at this range, Kiki could easily pick off the pilot with a single shot. If they killed him here, they might even commandeer the mobile suit.

But...

"Hold your fire."

She withheld permission to attack.

Why did that pilot climb down, alone and unarmed, in the middle of hostile territory? Was he out of his mind?

Either way, the threat to them had eased momentarily; a single Federation soldier out of his mobile suit no longer posed a threat.

"Once he's back inside that thing, it'll be trouble," Tony pressed softly.

"I know," Kiki said, voice low. "But don't kill him. We take him alive."

She watched the pilot's anxious expression as he searched desperately for... something. Then she gave the order.



*Crack!*

A sharp report echoed through the jungle, and the fallen tree trunk just ahead of Shiro suddenly splintered.

Shiro instantly realized it was a gunshot.

"Don't move, soldier boy."

He turned to see a man aiming a rifle at him. Actually, there were three of them, spaced out and all pointing their weapons his way.

Shiro slowly raised his hands. If he so much as twitched toward the sidearm at his hip, they'd kill him before he could blink.

"Zeon?" he asked.

"Don't lump us in with the likes of them," came the response, but not from the three men. It was a young woman's voice coming from the woods on his right.

"And who're you, anyway? Normally you give your own name before you go asking someone else's."

The speaker sounded young. Almost childlike. Carefully, so as not to provoke the riflemen, Shiro turned his head.

"You look like Federation Forces. Did you get separated from your unit?"

The voice belonged to a teenage girl, likely younger than Shiro by a good margin, carrying a rugged AR75 rifle that seemed far too serious a weapon for someone her age.

"I'm Shiro Amada, Ensign, Earth Federation Forces," Shiro said, deciding to comply with her demand.

"An ensign, huh? Pretty big shot," the girl remarked with mocking interest. Laughter broke out around them. And it wasn't just the three men, Shiro realized there were others in the foliage, enough to form a sizable ring around him.

"I'm Kiki Rosita. I'm what you soldiers like to call a 'guerrilla.'"

"A guerrilla? You're just a kid--"

"Like you're so grown-up yourself, Mr. Ensign," Kiki said smugly, eliciting more raucous laughter from her men.

Shiro tried to cut it short. "I don't have time for idle chatter."

He turned to go back toward his mobile suit.

But--

*Pyooon!*

A bullet struck the ground in front of his boots. It was a warning, and not a gentle one. Shiro had no choice but to halt.

"I'm not Zeon," he insisted. "I'm Federation. I'm on your side."

"On our side, is he?" someone jeered from behind.

"Hey, guys, did you hear? The Feddie's on our side."

"Which Federation is that, exactly?"

"Surely not the Earth Federation?"

"Must be some other group calling themselves 'Federation,' right? Couldn't be the ones who dragged a war into our forest and left the ground riddled with landmines."

"If they're our friends, then Zeon must be our friends, too!"

"Oh right, so Zeon were the good guys all along."

They snickered. It was a cruel, mocking laughter that closed in around Shiro.

"Whether you're on our side or not isn't your decision," Kiki said. "It's ours."

At her words, the men immediately quieted, as though she alone held command. Could this girl really be their leader?

"What do we do, miss?" one of the men asked.

"We'll take him to our village. He leaves his mobile suit right where it is. Otherwise, he can end up like Ned."

The men moved briskly, forcing Shiro down onto the ground and confiscating his sidearm. All the while, the three who had been aiming at him remained motionless, rifles trained on his head, ready to shoot him if he so much as struggled. They were frighteningly well-practiced. Shiro had to acknowledge that these men weren't simple villagers, they were genuine guerrillas.



Blindfolded and trussed to a pole like hunted game, Shiro was carried through the forest. Throughout the journey, he tried to persuade his captors, but received only crude laughter, jokes, and jabs in return. None of them seemed remotely inclined to listen.

Eventually, light began filtering through Shiro's blindfold. They'd apparently emerged from the forest.

"Where have you taken me? Is this your village?" he asked.

"Man, you do talk a lot," Kiki's voice replied. "Women don't like a guy who can't shut up, you know."

Then came more vulgar jibes from the men, until Shiro simply gave up trying. They weren't going to be swayed by words, that much was clear.

Resigned, Shiro focused on listening. He caught the lively voices of children playing somewhere, and a steady thok-thok sound, probably wood being chopped. Everything suggested they were indeed in a settlement.

Suddenly, the light vanished altogether; they must have taken him indoors. He heard a door open and then slam shut. An instant later, rough hands threw him down onto a floor.

"Father, I brought him," Kiki announced.

A low, resonant voice responded, "Untie him."

At that command, someone removed the ropes binding Shiro's limbs and yanked off the blindfold.

As Shiro's vision cleared, he saw a man seated before him wearing a loose-fitting robe. The man had only one eye, the right side of his face covered with a black eyepatch. Because of that, his left eye radiated a piercing intensity, as though it held the force of both eyes combined.

He wore a wild beard across his cheeks, chin, and upper lip. His head was shaved bald, though he didn't look particularly old, maybe he kept it trimmed that way.

"Welcome, Ensign Shiro Amada," the man said, eyeing Shiro with a sort of measured scrutiny.

"And you are...?" Shiro asked.

"I'm Baresto, the one who governs this village."

So he's the guerrilla leader, Shiro guessed. And Baresto certainly fit the part, with an imposing demeanor. He was probably assessing Shiro as a

young and inexperienced officer. Shiro had a fleeting, irrational thought about growing a beard of his own, just to seem less green.

"All right then, Ensign," Baresto said abruptly. "Explain yourself. Why were you there?"

"Explain?"

"Yes. That stretch of jungle is our territory. I want to know your reason for intruding there with a mobile suit."

Baresto's single eye narrowed, as if silently warning that the wrong answer could cost Shiro his life.

"I apologize for crossing your land," Shiro began, speaking carefully. "I'm on a mission to attack the Zeon base up ahead—"

"The one on Triangular Hill, yes?" Kiki interrupted. Indeed, from a bird's-eye view, that Zeon outpost sat atop a roughly three-sided plateau.

"My squad is waiting for me up there. Without me, the plan—"

"We don't care about your plan," Baresto cut him off. "I'm asking why you came through our territory. Surely you can wage war somewhere else."

"I see your point, but... this operation could be good for you as well," Shiro pressed.

"Oh? A benefit, is it?" Baresto's single eye gleamed with faint amusement.

Shiro nodded earnestly.

"If we destroy that base, the front lines will move farther away from your village. And if the Federation defeats Zeon outright, this war ends. So—"

"I see," Baresto said. "But is there any guarantee your Federation can actually win?"

"Guarantee...?" Shiro faltered. He felt certain of victory. He believed wholeheartedly in taking Zeon down. Yet he couldn't offer a rock-solid promise.

"No doubt, showing up at the Zeons' rear with a mobile suit would have quite an impact," Baresto went on. "After all, Zeon's confident the Federation can't get through our territory."

"Exactly. So we should be able to—"

"But what if your attack fails?"

"Fails...? Well...if it does, then we'll just have to fight to the last man—"

"I'm not talking about your fate." Baresto's gaze was unflinching. "I'm talking about us."

"Us?" Shiro echoed, startled.

"Right. If a Federation mobile suit suddenly pops up behind that Zeon base, what do you think they'll assume? That we gave you free passage, that we're cooperating with the Federation."

"..."

"We've only managed to avoid an all-out assault from both Zeon and the Federation because we don't take sides. You both mostly leave us alone. You see, you and Zeon each figures we're not worth the trouble, as long as we stay out of your business."

Suddenly Shiro remembered Kojima's orders about not interfering with the local civilians. It all made sense now, this delicate balance was the reason.



"If Zeon thinks we're working with your army, they'll label us the enemy. And a bunch of amateurs like us don't stand a chance against professional soldiers."

Shiro realized for the first time how these villagers had carved out a precarious balance in the midst of a brutal war.

"You see now why we can't simply let you pass through," Baresto concluded, his words heavy and unyielding.

Shiro swallowed. He understood the guerrillas' position, but he still couldn't afford to give up.

"I'm sorry, but I have to insist you let me go through anyway," he said, voice firm. "My team is counting on me. I promised I'd be there."

"That's not our concern," Baresto said flatly.

"I can't promise a guaranteed victory... but I swear the Federation will protect you."

Baresto's one eye hardened at this. Even so, Shiro pressed on, desperate.

"We're not like Zeon. We don't slaughter civilians for no reason. And we have mobile suits now, too, this isn't like Loum at the start of the war. We--"

But Baresto's stare turned glacial, showing no sign of agreement. The mission clock was ticking, and Shiro's subordinates were out there, waiting. Still, he couldn't stop pleading.

"Please, Mr. Baresto. If you let me through, we'll drive out Zeon. We'll keep you safe. I--"

But Baresto spun his chair around, turning his back on Shiro.

"Lock him up somewhere. I'll figure out how we can use him later."

"Wait--!" Shiro jumped to his feet.

If he didn't show, the 08th Team would be forced to engage the base with only two mobile suits, attacking straight on. They didn't have nearly enough firepower for such a direct assault.

"My squad needs me! You have to let me go--!"

"Shut it!"

A pair of thick arms locked around Shiro from behind.

"Quit whining."

"We've got better things to do than listen to you run your mouth all day."

Despite his struggles, they dragged him away. He kept trying anyway, refusing to fall silent.

"Please, Baresto! You must hate Zeon, same as I do, right? We share an enemy!"

Baresto didn't look back. He just waved a hand dismissively, like brushing off a nuisance. A heartbeat later, a heavy blow sank into Shiro's gut.

"Please... my team..." was all he managed to choke out as his vision blurred and darkness swallowed him.



"It's T-minus five minutes," Michel said, half-whispering from the driver's seat of the hovertruck used for recon. It was 2:10 PM. The operation would begin in five minutes.

"Yeah, we know," Eledore snapped irritably.

Eledore sat at the sonar station wearing headphones, using the sound collectors mounted on the Bloodhound's exterior to monitor outside audio.

Since Minovsky particles had rendered existing radar systems useless, reconnaissance relied primarily on visual and auditory methods. Especially in jungle combat with poor visibility, sound-based detection became paramount. Engine hum, tread noise, voices, gunfire, any sound could reveal an enemy's location and type. Eledore might be a notorious slacker as a soldier, but his skill as a sonar operator was first-rate, his sharp ears had saved his hide more than once.

When Michel fell quiet again, a heavy silence filled the Bloodhound. Just a few hundred meters away stood a Zeon outpost. From Eledore's audio sweeps, they estimated three Zakus, five vehicles, and a single helicopter on-site. Even two Gundams might be hard-pressed to deal with that.

"Three minutes," Sanders' voice crackled over the speaker. "What's the call, Chief?"

Karen's reply was clipped and terse.

"We attack at 15. That was the order."

"But the Commander--"

"Those were the Commander's own instructions: If B Squad doesn't show, act on your own."

Indeed, Shiro had said exactly that before they split up. Even taking a detour through the jungle, he should have been able to rejoin them in time, assuming nothing went wrong. But they couldn't risk radioing each other for an update, not out here. Short distances might allow for directional comms, but...

"Time's up," Karen said curtly.

It was now 2:15 PM.

That single statement served as the signal. In the dim light of the jungle, the two Gundams stood.

"Sanders, move out!" Karen commanded.

"Roger."

Karen's and Sanders' 100mm machine guns roared almost in unison, unleashing the first salvo of the attack.

## Chapter.05

### Prisoner

When Shiro came to, he found himself lying on a pile of straw.

"Where... am I?"

The space around him was dim, as though dusk had seeped into every corner. He tried to sit up and immediately realized he was bound, both arms and both ankles. Worse, they had tied his hands behind his back, securing not just his wrists but his entire forearms, in a manner far too competent for an amateur.

With no choice, he rolled his body across the straw and surveyed his surroundings.

It appeared to be some kind of dwelling, a crude wooden structure with walls so thin he felt like a solid body slam might knock them down. Gaps showed between the slats, but beyond them, there was no light.

Night had already fallen. No matter how long the operation had dragged on, it would certainly be over by now.

It was too late.

Shiro had failed to keep his promise to his team to meet up at the designated time. Where were they now? Had they completed their mission? Or more importantly, had they all gotten out alive?

"Our objective is, of course, to complete this mission successfully," Shiro had told them before heading out. "But above all, it's to come back alive. I promise I'll do everything in my power to ensure none of you are lost out there."

That declaration still echoed in his mind, reverberating through his ears like a hollow ring.

"Who was I to say 'come back alive'?"

He pictured each teammate's face, people he hadn't exactly grown attached to, but whose well-being weighed on him now.

Chief Joshua was one woman he found insufferably arrogant. Still, all he could do was hope she kept the team together and made it back in one piece.

Sanders had proven himself time and again. Shiro had once saved his life out in space, but what good was that if poor command decisions now ended up killing him?

Eledore probably thought Shiro was the most clueless commanding officer on Earth, and he couldn't blame him. Given how things had gone, there was no room to refute it.

Michel, barely eighteen, had talked about a girlfriend and a family waiting for him. If that kid didn't make it home, how would Shiro ever face them?

"Damn it."

Twisting his body in frustration, Shiro rammed himself against the wall. Under normal circumstances, he'd be throwing punches or kicking something in anger, but tied up as he was, all he could do was fling himself at the wall.

He felt an unbearable rush of regret, of fury, of shame.

Again and again, Shiro rolled and struck himself against the wooden planks, as if possessed. It was almost like he believed ramming his body into the wall might drive away his tormenting thoughts.

"No need to do that. We'll let you out," came a sudden female voice.

"And besides," she added, "that wall's a lot sturdier than you think. Wood bends and absorbs impact, you know."

Shiro turned toward the voice. Just beyond a wooden partition stood the girl who had captured him, Kiki.

"Oh... it's you..."

"You'? We've been over this. I'm Kiki Rosita, not 'you,'" she said with a triumphant grin. Shiro, however, didn't have it in him to argue.

"You said you'd let me out. What's that supposed to mean?"

"Means your ride's here."

"My ride?"

"That's right. Hey, come on in," she called out to someone Shiro couldn't see.

"Yo, Commander," came a familiar voice.

The person who strode in so casually, as if dropping by on a friendly visit rather than stepping into a guerrilla stronghold, was Eledore.

"Eledore?! You're alive?"

"What's with the long face? I'm not dumb enough to let Zeon bag me."

"What about the others? Are they okay? Did we pull off the mission? The diversion--?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll answer all your questions in a minute. First, let's get you outta here."

Eledore opened the simple latch on the wooden partition and crouched next to Shiro. From his chest pocket, he pulled out an army-issue knife and, with a flick of one hand, popped out the blade.

"C'mon, turn around so I can cut these ropes."

"Eledore, how did you even get here?"

"Call it 'bartering,' if you like. Check it out."

With that, Eledore gave Shiro a quick roll to access the ropes binding him.

"They were more than happy to let you go once we promised 'em medicine and rations. A Gundam or a captured officer doesn't fill anyone's belly, you know, so they barely hesitated."

"Medicine and food... Don't tell me you used--"

"What else could we offer? Relax. If a little stock goes missing, it'll just get blamed on either Zeon or the guerrillas."

As he worked at the ropes, Eledore slid Shiro a meaningful look.

Finally, the ropes came free. Shiro stretched his arms, rolled his shoulders, and tried to ease the stiffness out of his muscles. Pain shot through his joints, probably thanks to his repeated collisions with the wall.

"You're one lucky guy, Commander," Eledore murmured under his breath, leaning in close to Shiro's ear. "These people hate soldiers. Wouldn't have been a shock if they just put you down for good."

Was that true? Shiro glanced over at Kiki, standing on the other side of the partition. He'd never once felt like she intended to kill him...but perhaps that had been naive.

"C'mon, you getting out of here or what?" Kiki teased, wearing a mischievous grin. "Unless, of course, you've grown fond of this place."



The long-awaited offensive by the Kojima Battalion had achieved moderate success. The main force's assault hadn't managed to seize Zeon's stronghold, but they had dealt a respectable amount of damage before withdrawing. The diversionary units all made it back alive. O3rd Team had the misfortune of hitting Zeon-laid mines, damaging a single GM, but overall, losses remained light.

As for the O8th Team, which had recently welcomed the newly assigned Ensign Shiro Amada, their performance didn't stand out much in terms of results, but they safely completed their assigned role. Those who had doubted the wisdom of letting an inexperienced officer handle a diversion couldn't argue with the end report.

On paper, at least.

In truth, the Zeon base assault had been led entirely by Chief Joshua and the rest of the O8th Team, everyone except Shiro. They'd attacked with just two Gundams and a Bloodhound unit, withdrawing without a single casualty. It was a solid feat of arms, indicating that the O8th Team was more capable than Shiro himself had realized.

Meanwhile, Shiro had been taken prisoner in a guerrilla village. Ultimately, the only reason they released him was because of the promise to hand over medicine and rations. Naturally, nothing about that arrangement made it into Shiro's official report.

He hadn't lied out of vanity. If High Command got word that he'd come into direct contact with local guerrillas, or that their supplies were being traded away, it would become impossible to continue providing the medicine and rations those villagers needed.

"Well, we already made a deal with them," Eledore had pointed out, sensing Shiro's reluctance to falsify a report.

"If you insist on telling them the whole truth, we're all in trouble," he'd added. "We already filed our own embellished reports. We'd be just as guilty as you."

"How guilty?" Michel had chimed in from the side, anxious.

"If they found out we made deals with enemy guerrillas, it could mean a court-martial."

"A court-martial?!"

"If the guerrillas count as enemy combatants, that means we 'collaborated.' That can warrant a firing squad in the worst case."

"You've gotta be kidding," Michel had said, looking stricken. "Commander, please, just do it. If we hand over the medicine, they get what they need. We keep our heads. Nobody loses."

And with Michel practically begging him on the verge of tears, Shiro had finally picked up the pen and written the false report.



"Ensign Amada?"

Shiro snapped to attention at the sound of Keenan Wynn, the battalion's staff officer, calling his name.

"Huh? Y-Yes, sir," he blurted, hastily raising his head.

He suddenly realized that everyone in the meeting tent, Kojima's staff, the company commanders, the squad leaders, was staring at him.

"What's wrong, Ensign Amada?" Wynn asked. "Are you feeling all right?"

Flustered, Shiro quickly glanced around. They were in the middle of a briefing on the recent operation.

"S-Sorry, sir."

"Let's have your assessment of enemy strength on the left flank, then. Did you see any mobile suits aside from Zaku types?"

Wynn repeated his question, prompting Shiro to stand up and consult the bogus report he himself had written.

"At Point 304, which we attacked, we confirmed five Zakus. One was a cannon-type unit with a shoulder-mounted gun serving as artillery support."

"There's intel that Zeon might be running a major experiment behind their lines. You didn't spot anything that looked like a prototype or test unit?"

"No, sir. We detected no specialized assets."

Wynn turned to Kojima, muttering a few words back and forth with the commander, then gave Shiro a curt nod.

"Ensign Amada, you may be seated."

"Yes, sir."

Shiro took his seat. In reality, he hadn't seen a single Zaku, let alone a single Zeon soldier. All he'd seen was a band of guerrillas led by a young woman. Every scrap of Zaku intel in that report came straight from Eledore and the others who'd actually fought.

Eledore's reasoning made sense. The guerrillas undoubtedly needed that medicine. And keeping the supply line a secret would spare his subordinates from punishment. But...

"Is it really okay...?"

Shiro's conscience raged. If he went back to the beginning, all this had stemmed from his own error in the field. Even if the medicine saved lives and the fake report kept his subordinates clear of charges, the lies still concealed his personal blunder.

Beneath the table, Shiro clutched the falsified report tightly in his hand.



"That said, I still can't believe you figured it out so fast," Michel remarked as he lay beneath the Bloodhound, sluggishly working a spanner back and forth.

"How did you know the Commander got snatched by guerrillas?"

"Elementary, my good man," Eledore replied, smugly confident. "If he planned a detour, he'd have to skirt guerrilla territory. He never showed up no matter how long we waited, so it didn't take a genius to guess he'd been nabbed by them."

"But what if it was a Zeon trap?" Michel asked. "What made you so sure the Commander wouldn't blunder into something like that?"

"Well, I..." Eledore hesitated, searching for words.

"So you actually think he's a decent pilot?" Michel prompted.

"Uh... yeah, more or less. He's soft, sure, but he's not half-bad behind the controls. From what I've seen, he doesn't strike me as someone who'd just waltz into a Zeon trap."

"Interesting," Michel said, clearly impressed. "Now that you mention it, he fought a Zaku in space using just a Ball, so maybe he really is better than he looks. Hey, Chief, could you hand me that tester over there?"

From underneath the truck, Michel thrust out a hand. Sanders, who was sitting nearby, silently placed the tester into his outstretched palm.

"Thanks. But still, the one thing we can say for sure is that he's got some insane luck."

"Luck?"

"Yeah. I mean, he survived in space, then he survived this. The guerrillas could've killed him on sight, right? It's not like that would've been surprising."

"Now that you mention it," Eledore conceded.

"They might've intended to use him for bargaining, though?"

"Nope."

Karen, who had been leaning against the wall with arms folded, suddenly interjected.

"This isn't the first time soldiers wandered into the guerrillas' territory during an operation," she said.

"So... what happened to them?" Michel asked from under the Bloodhound.

"They found the bodies dumped right at the boundary between our zone and guerrilla land. Didn't even have time to talk terms."

Michel was silent.

“Well,” Karen added, flashing Eledore a glance, “there’s always an exception or two.”

“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean?” Eledore asked.

“Nothing. Just don’t go too far. I’m not about to lend a hand with your ‘side business.’”

“I-I know,” Eledore grumbled, pouting.

“What are you two talking about?” Michel called out from beneath the truck. He clearly had no clue.

“You’re better off not knowing,” Eledore said.

“Hey, come on! That’s not fair. We’re all in the 08th Team together, aren’t we?”

“Who said anything about ‘together’? We just happen to be stuck in the same war. Don’t make it out like we’re some band of brothers.”

“Stuck in the same war?” Michel echoed.

“Exactly.” Eledore gave a mischievous chuckle. “If you wanna play the idealistic team game, you can do that with our soft-hearted Commander.”



“So you’re saying you struck a deal with the guerrillas?”

Staff Officer Wynn’s voice trembled with anger.

“Yes, sir. That’s correct,” Shiro answered without hesitation.

The room erupted into a storm of shouting and disbelief, all of it aimed at condemning and ridiculing Shiro’s actions.

“You’ve gotta be kidding!”

“Making deals with guerrillas, of all people--”

“Absolutely no need to humor that kind of request, Commander.”

“Well, well, what a bold new recruit we have here.”

“Actually, this might be a good chance. We can use him to lure those guerrillas out into the open.”

“Ensign Amada, do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“Didn’t we say this fresh-faced officer wasn’t cut out for a diversionary operation...”

Caught in the raging tide of accusations, Shiro stood quietly, saying nothing. There was one other man who had yet to speak: Commander Kojima. From the moment Shiro began explaining, his split from the team, his capture, and the ultimate deal he’d struck, Kojima had listened in silence.

Finally, Staff Officer Wynn, sounding desperate for a decision, turned to the commander. “Sir, what action should we take?”

But Kojima continued to stare wordlessly at Shiro. And Shiro stared back, just as silent.

Splitting the unit was one thing; commanders sometimes chose to act independently based on the situation. Being captured by guerrillas was damning in terms of competence, but not exactly a punishable offense in itself. However, independently negotiating with guerrillas, then filing a false

report so that military supplies could be siphoned off, those were serious crimes.

It would be simple enough to punish him: collaboration with the enemy, falsifying official documents, attempted embezzlement of resources. Any of those alone could see him court-martialed.

But Kojima showed no sign of speaking.

"Commander," Shiro said at last, breaking the tense silence, "I ask that you decide my punishment. But please, spare my teammates. I accept full responsibility for what I've done."

He bowed so deeply at the waist that his back formed a perfect right angle. The tent fell momentarily quiet, then flared with shouts once again.

"Listen to him trying to weasel out of this!"

"His team carried out the deal, didn't they? They're every bit as guilty."

"He's in no position to demand anything!"

A barrage of angry voices rained down, but Shiro remained bent forward in an unyielding bow.

Eventually, Kojima spoke at last, slowly and deliberately.

"Raise your head, Ensign Amada."

At his words, everyone else quieted.

"Staff Officer," Kojima said, "if we apply the letter of the law to Ensign Amada's actions, what does that entail?"

"Yes, sir. Collaboration with hostile civilians, falsifying reports, attempting to misappropriate supplies. Taken all together, the death penalty seems warranted."

Wynn's crisp tone made it clear he'd have no qualms about seeing Shiro receive the harshest punishment. The Earth Federation had no death penalty in principle, such barbaric punishment had supposedly been abolished a century ago. However, this didn't apply to military forces. Wartime punishments included an excessive number of capital sentences.

"I see." Kojima shifted his gaze. "Lieutenant Nickard, how much surplus do we have in our supplies?"

"By my calculations," Jidan said, stroking his beard thoughtfully, "we can spare two sets of medical kits and about thirty days' worth of rations."

Exactly what Shiro had promised the guerrillas.

"Then we'll release two sets of medical supplies and thirty days' worth of food as a goodwill measure for the local population."

"But, Commander--" Wynn objected.

"If that's enough to recover a pilot and a Gundam, it's a bargain," Kojima replied calmly, signaling Wynn to stand down.

"Ensign Amada."

"Yes, sir!"

"Under normal circumstances, you would be court-martialed. But these are extraordinary times. We can't afford to lose a single soldier. So instead of formal proceedings, I'm assigning you a dangerous new duty: escorting the shipment of supplies to the guerrillas. I trust you have no objection?"

Someone kicked a table with a loud thump. Ensign Rob from the 07th Team clicked his tongue in disgust. Jidan narrowed his eyes like he was savoring the moment. Wynn looked fit to faint, eyes bulging in outrage. Almost everyone in the tent bristled with disapproval over Kojima's decision.

Amid that tempest of resentment, Shiro bowed his head once more.



Ensign Easy.

Guerrilla Spy.

Courier.

Walking Drugstore.

Ever since Shiro's confession at the debriefing, people had been hurling all sorts of derisive nicknames at him. Even soldiers of lower rank would smirk openly whenever they spotted him, whispering "Ensign Easy," just loudly enough for him to hear.

Shiro pretended not to notice, devoting himself silently to his duties; there was little else he could do.

Meanwhile, the rest of the 08th Team...

"Is that today? The deal with the guerrillas?"

Eledore, sprawled on his back beneath the Gundam's foot, was listening to the radio.

"Hey, Michel," he called, "that's today, right?"

"Sure is."

Michel's voice boomed down from somewhere high above, where he was tinkering with the Gundam's systems.

"You realize this is all your fault, Eledore. Show a little remorse, would you?"

"How is it my fault?"

"Because you're the one who egged the Ensign on, made him falsify that report! There's no way a guy like him could handle something so underhanded. It's obvious if you just think about it for a second..."

"Well, you agreed too, didn't you?"

"I didn't 'agree.' You scared me into it with all that talk about a firing squad if we told the truth!"

"You idiot, that wasn't just talk. It really could've meant the firing squad. And then that fence-sitter old man decided to let him off scot-free."

"Wait, you're telling me it was actually that serious?"

Michel, intrigued, switched off Eledore's radio. It was the first he'd heard of it.

"You are such a child sometimes. You think the old man in charge is actually so softhearted? It's about covering himself, if someone in his battalion messed up that badly, it'd look like he couldn't manage his own troops, and that would hurt his career prospects."

"Ah... I see."

“Yup. Grown-ups are way more cunning and complicated than you kids realize.”

“You kids realize’...?” Michel repeated, eyebrows raised.

“Sure. You and our resident ‘Drugstore,’” Eledore said, smirking.

The “Drugstore” nickname came courtesy of the 07th Team, referring to Shiro, who supposedly had an endless supply of medicine and rations for the guerrillas.

At that jab, Sanders, who had been working next to them, opened his mouth to speak, but Karen beat him to it.

“Pipe down, Eledore.”

Karen was lounging in a hammock strung up between a couple of maintenance shafts. They’d all assumed she was dozing, but apparently she’d been listening in.

“You’re sounding just like those jerks in the 07th Team,” she added.

“B-but, Karen...”

“Shut it.”

That sharp warning was enough to make Eledore clam up. He knew better than to provoke Karen when she was in a foul mood.

For a moment, Karen rocked back and forth in her hammock, looking uncomfortable. She alone understood why Shiro had broken away from the team that day, why he’d taken such reckless, solitary action. He’d wanted to prove himself to the subordinates who gave him grief, Karen among them.

It wasn’t exactly rare for officers and noncoms to clash. Someone like Shiro, fresh out of the academy, would step into a small-team command post with next to no field experience. Then eventually, he’d climb the ranks and leave, while the noncoms, sergeants, corporals, stayed put, with the same squad all the way to the end.

Karen couldn’t stand officers for that very reason. Their previous commanding officer had been some stuck-up intellectual who kept insisting he was better suited to staff work. So she’d dragged him into the worst combat zone she could find, and sure enough, the so-called strategist ended up begging for rear-line duty. Something about a “stress-induced ulcer.” It was laughable.

Compared to him, Shiro Amada at least seemed to have some backbone. Not that she wanted to be friendly, but he might become a soldier she could tolerate, eventually. So Karen had come at him harder than usual. Maybe she’d overdone it.

“Who’d have guessed he could be that much of an idiot...” she murmured to herself. Though it came out as an insult, there was a hint of reluctant fondness behind it.



A week had passed since Shiro had returned to the 08th Team after being taken prisoner by guerrillas, then released.

In that time, Eledore had been a bit more serious than usual. Without his deal, Shiro would've never been saved, but Eledore couldn't shake his guilt, he'd done it partly for his own convenience, to make his own side-job easier, not purely out of concern for Shiro.

Sanders had gotten into a huge fight with some men from the 07th Team. The reason? He'd overheard them badmouthing Shiro. Sanders never mentioned that detail to anyone.

Karen was her normal self, except one day she'd shattered her favorite mug by smashing it against the wall for no obvious reason.

Michel penned three letters to BB during that same week. They mentioned his first deployment, Sanders's brawl, the usual 08th Team shenanigans, but pointedly nothing about Shiro.

And then the week was up, time for the promised handoff to the guerrillas.

Shiro worked alone, prepping the Gundam as ordered by Commander Kojima. Unlike a standard GM, the Gundam had a massive container on its back, designed for long-term solo ops. Shiro intended to fill it with the two sets of medical supplies and thirty days' worth of rations he'd promised the guerrillas.

"Thirty... fifteen... twenty-one... All good."

He double-checked the digital readouts near the sensors and confirmed that the Gundam was ready for deployment. Then he reached into his breast pocket to check the time, only to stop with a start.

"Oh, right. The guerrillas took it..."

That's where Aina's watch should have been. But now he had nothing. The guerrillas had confiscated all of Shiro's belongings, and much of the Gundam's gear, too, when he was captured.

Yet the physical watch wasn't the only thing Shiro had lost.

He'd also lost his confidence.

His pride.

Others' trust.

Everything.

Now he had nothing left.

"Guess I never became Joe after all..."

He'd thought he could. He'd thought he'd fight side by side with trusted comrades to defeat Zeon. He truly believed it was possible for him. Sure, "Captain Joe" was a fictional TV hero, but that was precisely why Shiro saw him as an ideal, a personification of how someone, somewhere, hoped soldiers could be. A model he'd aimed to follow, with no shame.

Now, though, he had no energy even to set a goal. He felt he wasn't even up to par with the bare minimum expected of a soldier, let alone a hero like Joe.

"Hey! Choirboy!"

From below, at the Gundam's feet, Lieutenant Jidan called out.

He'd taken to calling Shiro "choirboy." It's what he calls the naive confession Shiro made at the debriefing. Shiro actually found it easier to handle than the other malicious nicknames.

"The container's ready. It's sitting over there, go ahead and take it."

Shiro peered down. Jidan's cheeks were flushed red, probably from drinking again.

Shiro still remembered that, at the debriefing, it was Jidan who'd encouraged Commander Kojima to accept the deal with the guerrillas. Shiro knew the old coot could be irresponsible, but he no longer felt quite the same resentment toward him.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Nickard."

"How many times I gotta tell ya, call me Old Man! Geez, Choirboy..." Jidan bellowed, then gave Shiro a thumbs-up.



The designated handoff point was "south of the village."

The guerrillas had been vague on purpose; if they gave an exact location, it could be used against them. At the debriefing where Shiro came clean, there were already people saying they should exploit the supply drop to wipe out the guerrillas in one stroke.

Even so, Shiro was uneasy.

"Is this really the right spot?"

He'd traveled quite a distance in what he guessed was the southern region of the village, but saw no sign of the guerrillas. Perhaps they were wary of him arriving in a mobile suit.

"Well, if they don't show up, I'll just take these supplies directly to the village. They're not gonna want a whole container full of stuff if--"

But as soon as that thought crossed his mind, someone's face popped up across the Gundam's forward monitor.

"Right on time, Mr. Commander!"

It was Kiki. She had pressed her face against the Gundam's cameras, the "eyes", so in Shiro's cockpit display, she appeared upside down.

"That cargo on your back must be what you promised?"

She dangled from the top of the Gundam's head like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Hey, that's dangerous! Get off there!"

"I'm fine. Anyway, hurry up and unload the goods!"

"Sure, but... how are you going to carry it all?"

"Don't worry."

Kiki waved once, and a moment later, villagers emerged from hiding, practically the whole village, by the look of it. With that many people, they'd have no trouble shifting the supplies.

Following Kiki's orders, Shiro climbed down from the Gundam and watched the villagers swarm around the cargo container like industrious ants, offloading the boxes and crates.

He was surprised to see that Kiki seemed to be directing them all. Most likely, she was in command in place of her father, Baresto, who had difficulty walking. Even more surprising was how naturally the villagers obeyed her, she commanded real respect, not just deference to "the chief's daughter."

"Meanwhile, look at me..."

That thought pulled Shiro into another whirlpool of self-reproach. Going off half-cocked, burdening his subordinates, acting like the worst possible officer.

"Shiro."

Lost in thought, he blinked at the sound of Kiki's voice.

"All done here. We've taken everything you brought."

Sure enough, the once-stacked container was now totally empty, a testament to the village's efficient teamwork. Kiki's easy grin made her look older than Shiro somehow, more assured.

"Tell your buddies I said thanks. And..."

She trailed off, clearly hesitant, rare for her. Then, as if gathering her courage, she asked what she really wanted to know.

"There's something I wanna ask you."

Her gruff tone belied a certain girlish nervousness that Shiro couldn't help but pick up on.

"What is it?"

"That time we captured you, when that explosion went off, you climbed out of your mobile suit, right? Why'd you do that?"

It wasn't the question Shiro expected. He'd thought she might demand details about Kojima Base's layout or their operation plans.

"You mean back at that big blast site?"

"Yeah. You got out of your suit. Why?"

There was a quiet moment before Shiro began speaking, hesitantly.

"I... saw a foot."

"A foot?"

"Yeah. It was small, hidden under a fallen tree. It was covered in dirt and blood, but I could tell right away it belonged to a child. I thought, 'They were just hit by the explosion, so maybe there's still time... maybe I can save them.' So..."

"So you hopped out to help?" Kiki jumped in.

"Right."

Shiro gave a single nod. In other words, even in the middle of combat, he left the safety of his cockpit to try and rescue a child who might have been wounded by the blast.

Kiki was momentarily speechless. Even if you felt concern for someone, wouldn't you suspect a trap? Or enemy soldiers lying in wait? He acted like some TV hero, not a soldier in a war zone.

After a long pause, she finally blurted, "You really are a moron, aren't you?"

Shiro had no comeback. He only hung his head. He couldn't argue; it had been foolish. If he really wanted to search for wounded people, the safer approach would've been to stay in the mobile suit. Someone like Chief Joshua wouldn't have hesitated to remain inside. And if it were just a training exercise, Shiro probably would've done the same.

But in that real moment, faced with a torn-off human foot, he simply reacted, he climbed out.

"Guess I really am a moron," he murmured, half to himself.

"Anyway, here."

Without warning, Kiki thrust something into his hands: the watch he thought he'd lost for good, the one from Aina.

"That's important to you, right? Take it back."

"You sure? It's gotta be--"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

She pushed it firmly into his grasp.

"Truth is, I don't even need a watch. It's not like I live minute to minute. Normally, we don't return 'spoils of war,' but... you're a special exception."

Her tone was brusque, but there was the faintest flush to her cheeks.

"Well, I'm off. Make sure you get back before sunset or you'll be traveling in the dark."

With that, Kiki pivoted lightly and disappeared into the trees.

"Back... right..."

Shiro turned the word over in his mind. His mission was done. According to the manual, once the operation ends, you return to base, file your reports, then get ready for the next deployment.

"Yes... I should go back..."

After Kiki vanished into the forest gloom, Shiro reached out for the Gundam's boarding crane. Just then, "Shiro!"

He turned to see Kiki waving from the edge of the woods.

"That kid, Mati, the one who stepped on the mine, she survived!"

"Survived? Really? She made it? Thank goodness..."

Relief flooded through him. As he processed this news, a small, genuine smile spread across his face, his first smile, in fact, since the day he'd been captured by the guerrillas a week ago.

## Chapter.06

### The Reaper

The midday sky made Aina's skin crawl.

Beyond that fragile canopy should have been open space, yet all she could see was an unbroken sheet of blue.

Back in the colony, the universe had always been a realm of glittering pinpricks set in endless black.

It was the same the day she begged her brother, only five years old then, to escort her to the control room jutting from the colony wall so she could "really see" space.

Night skies at least still wore that familiar color of the cosmos she knew.

Perhaps that was why Aina so often tilted her head to the heavens after dusk. At first she merely gazed; lately, the silence above kept dragging her back to what had happened out there.

During the Apsaras's orbital durability test she had ascended into true space, and run straight into Federation mobile suits. Three GMs went down easily enough, but then came the Ball, and its pilot.

Shiro Amada.

That was his name: a young ensign, a shade older than she was.

Inside the wreckage of that battleship he'd leveled his sidearm at her, and she'd leveled hers right back. Yet...

"I couldn't pull the trigger..."

The magazine had been full.

The mechanism flawless.

And still her finger refused to move. "No, it wasn't that I wouldn't," she admitted to herself, "I couldn't."

Why? Why couldn't I fire?

Every time Shiro surfaced in her memory, the question followed close behind.

She had destroyed Federation machines before, even seconds earlier when she carved up those GMs. Why had the trigger frozen then?

She didn't know.

Why had he, Shiro Amada, held his fire? He'd fought Zeon often enough; he'd opened up on her Zaku.

Did he understand the reason she hadn't shot?

If she asked him, would he tell her why her own shot never came?

A soft knock shattered the spiral of thoughts.

"Come in."

Aina stood on the balcony of the only external building in the Lhasa covert base, a villa-shaped residence meant as camouflage. In principle, only officers were allowed here, which meant,

"So this is where you were, Lady Aina."



Just as she guessed, it was Captain Norris Packard.

While many Zeon officers favored tailored or modified uniforms, Norris wore his as if drawn straight from a manual. The stern lines of his face and his almost samurai-like bearing completed the portrait of a textbook soldier. Yet as he stepped onto the balcony a faint smile softened the mask.

"You're fond of this spot, my lady."

He still addressed her as Lady Aina, the way he had when he first served the Sahalin family as bodyguard.

"What is it, Norris? Weren't you at the front?"

"I came to pick up supplies, and to begin preparations for a new operation."

"A new operation?"

"Yes, Lady Aina. Master Ginias intends to collect live-combat data on the Apsaras by using it in the field."

"I see."

She accepted the news without the slightest flicker. That she herself would pilot the Apsaras was obvious, yet her expression never shifted.

"My lady, this next sortie will push far beyond testing parameters. It will be extremely dangerous. Couldn't another pilot--"

"Is that my brother's instruction?"

"No, it is my own opinion."

"Then I cannot oblige. As long as my brother requires it, I pilot the Apsaras."

Norris fell silent, the reply was exactly what he had expected.

Silence felt awkward, but Aina never forced conversation simply to fill it; in truth she didn't find silence awkward at all. Normally, once Norris stopped speaking their exchanges ended there.

Today was different, Aina broke the hush herself.

"Tell me, Norris."

"Yes, my lady?" He lifted his head, genuinely surprised.

"You're a soldier."

"That I am."

"Have you ever killed Federation soldiers?"

"Ma'am?"

Though taken aback, he answered.

"Yes. I have. I harbor no regrets. I am a warrior, they were warriors, life or death turns solely on luck and skill."

"You killed them in mobile suits?"

"In mobile suits...or fighters, yes."

"I see... So you've never killed a Federation soldier face-to-face."

Her murmur held a trace of disappointment.

Norris hesitated, unsure whether to respond, and in the end kept his peace.

Did she want him to have killed someone with his own hands? And if he had, what then?

He couldn't fathom the purpose of her questions.

Since that incident, Aina had become a mystery even to him, almost doll-like, emptied of emotion. When had she turned into this porcelain figure?

Ignoring the now speechless Norris as though he were air, Aina slipped back into her thoughts of the Federation pilot, Shiro Amada, wondering once more why he hadn't fired.



"Master Ginias, I believe Captain Norris paid you a visit just now?"

Technical Commander Walter Yanowitz raised the matter on his way out. Seeing Norris at headquarters when the captain should have been at the front had nagged at him.

He doubted he'd get an answer, any meeting between Ginias's hand-picked captain and the baron himself could well be classified. If told it was a military secret, he would have to forget it.

To Yanowitz's surprise, Ginias answered readily.

"He was here about deploying the Apsaras in live combat."

"Live combat? The Apsaras, sir?"

"Yes. On a small engagement in the Far East. Nothing that should pose a problem."

"I... I see..."

The anti-fortress mobile armor Apsaras was still unfinished, but ground operations were within spec, barring one critical point.

"However, sir, we haven't completed pilot-safety verification. If we commit the unit as it stands, we cannot guarantee the pilot's life."

That was precisely Yanowitz's concern.

Since development began, Ginias had unilaterally fixed the pilot seat on Aina. Normally a civilian, especially one tied to high-level secrets, would never be allowed to test a prototype mobile armor. Yet Zeon granted flag officers broad privileges within their own commands: painting machines crimson, reshaping helmets, indulging any whim so long as it didn't hinder an operation. Assigning his sister as test pilot fell neatly into that gray zone.

Yanowitz's worry was not for Aina personally. As a scientist, he simply respected human life. (Otherwise who would care for a woman as lifeless as that doll...)

He wasn't alone; most of the research staff felt the same chill around her. Exceptions were limited to her brother and perhaps Captain Norris.

"If the mission proceeds under current conditions, please at least brief the pilot fully and give her the right to refuse."

Yanowitz was a scrupulous man. Bending the rules offended his scientific integrity.

"Very well, Commander Yanowitz, do as you like," Ginias said, spinning his chair to turn his back, interest already fading from his voice.

"But she won't refuse."

"Sir?"

“Because I have already decided she won’t.”

A conspirator’s smile crept across Ginias’s lips, one Yanowitz could not see.



That day, the O8th Team completed its second sortie without a scratch.

To be fair, Shiro’s squad had been posted on the O6th Team’s flank as a screen, hardly the spot for glory, but safely distant from the heaviest fire. Even so, Shiro handled the humdrum escort job with textbook precision, covered the withdrawal without incident, and filed his combat report before anyone had to ask. Watching him, Staff Officer Wynn and the rest of the Kojima Battalion brass finally released the breath they’d been holding.

Since his first deployment Shiro had changed.

The raw, unfiltered aggression he used to wear like a badge had settled; he followed orders without fuss and seemed to know where his people were and what they needed. The staff found the new, compliant Shiro far easier to work with, and were happy to say so.

The officers who had nursed a quiet envy of the rookie ensign who had downed a Zaku in a Ball found their irritation fading, and the open sniping stopped. From those who had been neutral toward him, Shiro even won sympathy: veterans began teaching him the finer points of fieldcraft, how to make rations half-palatable, little tricks only time imparts.

Shiro never noticed, but the incident that had nearly broken him was slowly turning Kojima Base into friendlier ground.

As for the O8th Team members themselves...

“Eledore, a hand would be nice!”

Michel’s voice carried a note of exasperation as he worked beneath the Bloodhound, oil stains darkening his uniform. “I’ve been the only one working on this thing all morning, your turn.”

“Idiot,” Eledore drawled, popping an earphone loose.

“Kid, this is the army. Senior man’s orders are law, so shut up and keep wrenching.”

“Senior?” Michel scoffed. “We draw the same pay, hold the same rank, and--”

Their bickering drifted over to Karen, who leaned against the wall with her eyes shut, listening. Eledore barking, Michel snapping back, same old maintenance duet. Technically, as their superior, she should probably rein Eledore in, but...

Good hands, she thought, watching Michel work.

Before enlisting he’d been in an engineering program, and it showed. Electronics were his specialty, yet even on the mechanical side he had a knack, instinct, almost.

Eledore, by contrast, had a musician’s ear but hopeless maintenance skills; no staying power, Karen decided. So she let Michel shoulder the work,

better a machine tuned to perfection, and better still if Michel grew confident enough to tell Eledore “no” on the strength of competence alone.

“Hey, where’s the ensign anyway?”

Eledore, bored at last, looked for safer conversational ground.

“Finished his debrief ages ago, didn’t he? And yet...”

“Over with Lieutenant Blaydon,” Michel answered readily. “Probably another lesson.”

“Huh... well, Blaydon’s nothing if not devoted.”

Ever since Shiro’s capture, 1st Team’s Eric Blaydon had taken him under his wing, explaining the battlefield at every turn.

“Guess it worked out for the boss, getting captured and all. More friends in high places.”

“Yeah. He even seems brighter these days. Right after he got back... man, it was hard to watch.”

“That’s because you’re still a kid.”

“Come again?”

“He didn’t perk up because he gained friends.”

“Then what did it?” Michel wriggled out from under the truck, mouth pursed.

Shiro in the days after his rescue had been a hollow puppet, going through motions with none of the spirit that used to overflow from him. Lately, though, light had returned, tentative smiles, a little initiative. The shift was subtle enough only teammates noticed, but it was real.

“He changed after we ran meds to that guerrilla camp,” Eledore declared, dead certain.

“You think so?”

“Bet on it. You know that pocket watch he dotes on?”

“The old-fashioned one? Never struck me as his style.”

“Yeah. The guerrillas took it the first time they grabbed him, yet presto, he’s got it back. Must’ve traded for it when we delivered the drugs.”

“Shiro’s not exactly Mr. Smooth, you know,” Karen cut in at last.

“Unlike someone here,” Michel teased. “Eledore, you strike a bargain with guerrillas lately?”

“D-dumbass! Course not. I, uh, that was when I helped bust him out.”

Eledore shot Karen a wounded glare, scrambling for cover.

Michel sensed something off but let it slide, returning to the point.

“Still, I don’t see how meeting guerrillas lifts your mood. Maybe they thanked him for the medicine?”

“Nah. It’s a woman.”

“Now that sounds like you talking, not the ensign. Shiro and a woman?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Guys like him, no experience, fall hardest when they finally do.”

“Personal experience, Sergeant?” Karen prodded, timing her jab to perfection. Michel snorted, pfft, trying to smother a laugh.

“Pure theory, pure theory. Right, Sergeant?”

He turned to Sanders, parked against the Bloodhound’s wheel.

Sanders stared at the dirt, lost in thought.

"Hey, Sergeant. Back me up here."

Pressed again, Sanders finally lifted his head.

"Ah... yeah. Sure."

He nodded, but it was clear he hadn't heard a word. Karen frowned.

"Sanders, you feeling okay?"

"No, nothing's wrong."

"You sure? You've been off since we got back."

"Come to think of it," Michel added quickly, "When I asked for the tester earlier you handed me a spanner."

"He's always quiet," Eledore said, "but yeah, too quiet."

With three pairs of eyes on him, Sanders shifted, visibly uneasy. "Maybe... you're right."

He stood abruptly, far too abruptly for the normally deliberate sergeant.

"Where you headed?"

"Just... getting some water."

He strode off, the pace of a man in retreat.

Something's definitely wrong. Karen's vague suspicion hardened into conviction.

Ever since they'd come off the operation something about Sanders rang false, a change she couldn't name, which only deepened the unease.

"Great," she sighed inwardly. "We finally get the commander sorted, and now Sanders is the one unraveling."



"Hey, did you hear? The Grim Reaper's back."

"Yeah. Feel sorry for the 08th, huh? A POW lieutenant and now a Reaper, you'd think they were cursed."

"Hasn't it always been that way? I've never seen a platoon burn through COs that fast."

"Right? They're command-busting champs."

"And this time the bust turns into a full-platoon wipe."

The men roared with drunken laughter.

They were gathered in the Kojima Base PX, most of them from the 07th Team. A few had already tipped back enough cheap whiskey to loosen their tongues, exactly the sort of rowdiness that earned Kojima Battalion its back-alley nickname: the Independent Renegades.

"Joke if you want," one soldier muttered, "but this one's no laughing matter. What if they pair us up on the next op? Third time out with the Reaper and everyone dies, right?"

"Everyone except the Reaper."

"I heard it's only the team he's in that buys it."

"No, man, whole unit goes down, lock, stock, and ammo box."

"Hell, who wants to sortie with someone that dangerous?"

"Relax, 08's boss is that Drugstore kid. Command's not dumb enough to let him sortie alone."

"Fine by me, we already deployed with 'em last time."

"Which means HQ might think we're 'compatible,' genius."

"Russian roulette, Kojima-style."

"Only ones with a blank in the chamber are HQ and the supply wagons."

Someone jerked his chin toward the entrance.

"Speak of the devil, poor sap who just drew the live round."

Every head swiveled.

Michel stood frozen in the doorway, prickling under the sudden glare.

"Hey there, POW Corporal!"

One of the soldiers called out, tagging him with the same brand they gave his commander.

Michel ignored the bait and headed for the counter. He just wanted to drop a letter to B.B. and get out of here.

"He snubbed you, man."

"Let him. Guy's probably writing his last will and testament."

"Dear Mother, forgive your unworthy son..."

Mock-solemn voices set off another round of guffaws.

"Side 6, please," Michel told the clerk, laying the letter on the counter with his back to the chorus behind him.

"Hey, kid. Face this way."

"Yeah, you'll wanna hear our little chat."

The racket kept building while the clerk processed the mail.

"Turn around when I'm talking!"

The sharp crack of an angry voice.

Simultaneously, the sound of shattering glass rang out. One of the men had smashed his bottle against the floor.

Startled, Michel spun. The thrower, a red-faced soldier named Joyce, glared daggers at him.

"H-hey, cut it out."

"Easy, Joyce."

His buddies, who'd fanned the flames a minute ago, suddenly scrambled to douse them. They hadn't expected anyone to take the joke seriously.

"You call this 'easy'?" Joyce barked. "Thanks to them we're all heading for hell!"

Now they understood: Joyce wasn't clowning, he was scared stiff of dying beside the Reaper.

"Take your curse somewhere else, don't drag us down with you!"

Michel had no idea what the man was on about, only that arguing would pour more fuel on the fire.

Should I run? He eyed the PX door, half open. But bolting from a drunk felt... cowardly.

"Come on, Joyce, it's just a rumor."

"Yeah, calm down. Jinxes don't mean squat."

"From what I heard, only the platoon blows up, so you're safe."

"Shut the hell up!"

Joyce shoved past them, weaving toward Michel, muttering about Reapers, jinxes, and bullets that couldn't kill him.

Reaper? Jinx? What is he talking about?

Michel tracked the room with his eyes, no rescue forthcoming. Joyce's companions continued their verbal attempts to calm him down, but none appeared willing to physically intervene.

Joyce closed in, steps wobbling. Instinctively, Michel backed up, straight into the counter. No more retreat.

Before long, Joyce had closed to within striking distance. The voices trying to calm him had fallen silent. Everyone in the PX held their breath, watching the two men.

"You piss me off," Joyce growled, raising a fist.

Michel popped into a guard stance.

"Knock it off."

A low, heavy voice rolled across the room.

Joyce froze. Michel, fists still up, searched for the owner of that voice.

"Pathetic, Joyce."

A man rose from a table behind the gossipers, a burly white guy built like a linebacker. Square jaw, bold features, arms and chest fur spilling from an unbuttoned fatigue shirt. Pure, uncut masculinity.

Michel recognized him: Ensign Rob, CO of the 07th. The very platoon that pinned the nickname Drugstore on Shiro, and the one forever needling him.

"Didn't know I had a coward in my outfit," Rob said, sauntering toward his subordinate.

"E-ensign, I--"

Joyce's earlier bravado evaporated. Joyce was clearly flustered.

"Jumping at Reaper rumors?" Rob snorted. "Pathetic."

He stopped inches from Joyce.

"B-but sir, what if--"

"Shut it."

Rob's bark snapped through the air.

"Stop embarrassing me. Go run it off, sober up."

"R-roger that, sir."

Joyce stumbled out of the PX in a drunken weave. Rob watched him leave, then turned to return to his original seat.

"Um, Ensign Rob?" Michel ventured. "Thanks for that."

Rob gave a bored nod. "Don't thank me yet."

"Sir?"

"You really don't know, do you? Figures, the last to hear is always the one wearing the target."

"Target? You mean that Reaper, jinx nonsense...?"

Rob raised his voice toward the rear.

"Frankie, enlighten him."

"R-right." A heavyset soldier waddled up, the gossip ringleader.

"You've got a sergeant named Sanders, yeah?"

"Y-yeah..."

"He's called Sanders the Reaper. Word is, the platoon he rides with gets wiped out on their third sortie."

"You can't be serious."

Michel tried to laugh it off, but the sound wouldn't come naturally. He had heard that Sanders's old team was scooped up by shuttle, only Sanders left alive, and that was why he joined the O8th.

"Not a joke," Rob said flatly, driving the nail home. "Happened at least three times. Every single one, on the third mission."



Shiro exhaled, and snapped his head and heels upward in one fluid motion. His body formed a rigid V, pivoting at the waist. A heartbeat later he dropped flat again, spine parallel to the packed earth beneath him.

"Thirty-one."

Another breath, another sharp snap, up into the V, down onto his back. The exercise was the so-called jackknife, far nastier than a regular sit-up and perfect for honing both core and balance, which was why Shiro loved it.

"Forty-eight... forty-nine... fifty."

Finished, he blew out a long breath and let himself sprawl. Planetside workouts were sweaty business, nothing like space, where the sun's heat never beat directly on you. The sting of blazing light, the damp weight of grass and soil... somehow it all felt right to him. While Michel complained endlessly about this "broken climate control" of Earth's weather, Shiro found himself strangely drawn to the blazing sunlight and the earthy scents around him.

"We were born on Earth," he mused, squinting happily into the glare, "and down here you can actually tell."

A shadow blotted out the sun.

"Commander."

It was Michel, blocking the light.

"What's up? Already mailed that letter?"

Shiro stayed on his back, casual as could be.

"Yes, sir. But..."

Something in the corporal's voice made Shiro sit halfway up.

"What happened?"

"Well... it's just..."

"It's all right. It's just me here."

Michel glanced around. The field was wide open, just the two of them, yet he seemed reluctant to speak, no walls meant no eavesdroppers, though, so he started in a timid whisper.

"It's about the sergeant."

"Sanders?"

“Sir, have you ever heard of Sanders the Reaper? They say every platoon he’s in gets wiped out on its third sortie...”

“Ridiculous.”

Shiro brushed it off with an exaggerated snort.

“It’s not a joke. Ensign Rob from the 07th--”

Michel remembered that Rob had it in for Shiro and faltered, but the commander’s nod urged him on.

“He checked the records, sir. Each time, the sergeant’s platoon really was annihilated on mission number three.”

“So the Reaper personally killed them? Or did he survive situations no one could survive? Sounds like a tough, capable soldier to me, be glad he’s on our side.”

“I... guess, but--”

Soldiers, especially frontline troops, were surprisingly superstitious. Some carried lucky coins everywhere, others insisted on stepping out with their right foot first. The military was rife with earnest whispers about how carrying a lover’s pubic hair would ensure safe return.

On battlefields where death lurked constantly, soldiers could rely only on themselves and such superstitions. They were desperate enough to cling to anything—that’s how frightened they truly were.

Shiro understood this. That’s why he couldn’t simply dismiss Michel’s anxiety as mere rumor.

“Did you ask Sanders himself?”

Shiro lowered his voice.

“That’s just it... when I’m in front of the Sergeant, I somehow can’t bring myself to ask.”

“I see.”

“Ever since our last sortie he’s been... off. Mixed up a tester and a spanner, stares into space. Next time out will be sortie three. I’m sure the Sergeant knows too. About his own jinx.”

“We can’t exactly skip the mission.”

“That’s why we should go on the safest possible missions. Or maybe leave the Sergeant behind.”

Even Michel realized that was a half-measure. No mission was truly safe, and ducking the third would only postpone the omen.

But as squad leader, Shiro couldn’t believe in superstitions and take unauthorized action. If he disobeyed orders again, this time Shiro would face formal punishment.

“I understand.”

Shiro’s voice went low. The rumor would reach Karen and Eledore soon enough; he’d have to face it. And he wouldn’t send Michel out with that fear chewing at him.

“I’ll talk to the sergeant tonight,” he said and made his reluctant decision.



Later that night, Shiro and Karen were hunched over training schedules in his quarters. Once they finished, he planned to summon Sanders and get the truth straight from the source.

He hadn't decided what to do when he called him, but he wanted to hear the story from Sanders' own lips. Whether the Sanders the Reaper rumors were merely gossip, or if there was some real reason behind them.

"Chief Joshua, do you have any superstitions?"

A thought struck him.

"Superstitions?"

"Yeah. Do you keep any lucky charm or pre-battle ritual?"

"No. Nothing of the sort."

If a faded photo of her husband counted, she wasn't about to admit it; she'd never told anyone in the 08th she was married.

"How about you, Commander? Some kind of charm?"

"Well..."

Aina's pocket-watch floated into his mind. He'd worn it ever since she'd lent it to him, not exactly a charm, but...

"Am I... smitten?"

Soldiers' keepsakes were almost always from sweethearts. But Aina was Zeon, and the odds of ever meeting again were infinitesimal.

"She really was beautiful," he thought, and a soft smile slipped out.

"Commander?" Karen eyed him suspiciously.

"Ah, sorry. Daydreaming. Back to work."

He hastily shuffled the papers on his desk.

A knock.

"Commander, may I have a word?" Sanders' voice came from beyond the door. "There's something I'd like to discuss with you privately."

So the sergeant beat him to it.

"If this is a bad time, I can come back later."

"No, come in. I had questions for you too."

After glancing at Karen, Shiro invited Sanders in from the hallway.

Sanders opened the door and saluted crisply. But noticing Karen's presence, he showed a slightly troubled expression.

"I'll step out, sir."

"No."

Sanders stopped her.

"She'll know soon enough. I'd rather she heard it now."

"Understood. We'll both listen."

Karen looked at Shiro's face before sitting back down. Sanders was offered a chair but didn't take it. He remained standing by the door as he began to speak.

"My story is probably what you want to ask, Commander, so allow me to begin."

Silence.

"They call me Sanders the Reaper."

"A Reaper, huh?" Karen teased, thinking it a Zeon nickname.

"Not the enemy's name, Chief. My own side's."

"...?"

"Every platoon I've served with has been wiped out on its third sortie. That's how I got the nickname. That last time, the op where you rescued me, was number three."

Karen fell silent. Shiro, too.

"At first I thought I was blessed," Sanders went on tonelessly. "Surviving when everyone else died, I thanked God. The second time didn't worry me much either. My squad wasn't the only one destroyed, the entire Federation Forces had taken devastating losses."

In the early stages of the war, the Federation had suffered defeat after stunning defeat at the hands of Zeon's new weapon: the mobile suit. Zeon had seized space superiority and had been permitted to execute their Earth drop operations. It was only recently that the Federation had found themselves on somewhat equal footing with Zeon.

"But the third... that's when I felt real fear. I realized the pattern and the nickname stuck."

Sanders lowered his eyes, as if speaking had become painful.

"My next assignment was an MS Team under the 7th Fleet's mixed battalion. The company commander, having heard the rumors, gave us a third sortie deep in Federation-held space, a safe recon, meant to break the jinx."

Shiro realized this was the mission where he'd encountered Sanders in that sector of space.

"But my squad was annihilated again. We encountered enemies who shouldn't have been there, and I couldn't clear the Reaper stigma. Please, Commander. Leave me out of the next sortie. If I go out with the 08th Team, you'll all be wiped out. I can't bear to--"

The plea cut off in a grunt.

Karen's fist slammed into his jaw with a loud thud, and he crumpled into the corner.

"Don't spout such bullshit," she growled. "Are you saying whether we live or die depends on you?"

"That's not, I never--"

"People's lives and deaths aren't decided by such trivial garbage. You're telling me you'll cower in the rear while the rest of us risk dying?"

"Chief, that's enough." Shiro moved to restrain her.

She shook him off, words like hammer blows.

"Jinxes, fate, I hate quitters who give up without even trying more than anything. If you don't want your squad wiped out, then fight with your life on the line. Or what, did your squads get annihilated because you shot them in the back? Because you abandoned your post and ran while everyone else died?"

"No! I always gave everything--"



“Then stand tall and do it again. If we still lose, if any of us die, none of us will curse you. Win or die, it’s on us, every one.”

Sanders stared up, stunned. Shiro stared at Karen, equally shocked.

Karen opened her mouth for more, then stopped. Heat surged behind her eyes. She would not let them see tears.

“Excuse me.”

She bolted from the room.

The corridor blurred as she marched, almost ran, through the dim hallways. No footsteps followed, but she kept going anyway.

“Damn it! Why the tears now?”

The sting reminded her of another night she’d cried till dawn, the night the letter arrived confirming her husband was KIA.

And the heat in her eyes only grew hotter.



“How’s the Apsaras performing?”

Ginias sank deeper into the sofa, voice smooth as satin.

“Nominal. She’s ready for combat at any time.”

Aina answered by reflex; her face remained a porcelain mask.

“Excellent.”

Satisfied, Ginias lifted a crystal wine-glass from the low table. Two glasses sat there, but Aina’s had clearly gone untouched.

“I’ve already sent Norris’s team ahead to film Apsaras’s grand debut. All that’s left is for you to—”

“Sortie in the Apsaras.”

Aina stated the inevitable as fact.

Ginias downed his wine in one gulp before replying.

The officers’ cabin held only the two of them, but even with siblings alone the atmosphere never thawed. No word of comfort from brother to sister; no spark of emotion from sister to brother.

Brr-rr-ring.

The desk display chimed, shattering the stagnation.

“Ginias, you in?”

A tall man in Zeon green filled the screen, late twenties at most, broad-shouldered, shoulder boards gleaming with a Rear Admiral’s twin stars. Zeon ran young, but that young meant one of two things: blood ties to the Zabi family or an officer of terrifying talent. After all, even Garma Zabi, the beloved youngest brother of Sovereign Degwin Sodo Zabi, held only the rank of Captain.

However, this man hardly looked like Zabi family. His hair hung unkempt, his uniform front boldly unbuttoned to reveal skin beneath. Gold accessories dangled from his neck, giving him the appearance of a rogue; the boyish glint in his eyes made the contrast sharper still.

“Harsh, friend. We’re practically neighbors on the front line and you won’t even drop by.”

The man spoke familiarly.

But Ginias frowned with obvious annoyance.

“Did you at least read my operation file, Rear Admiral Yuri Kellerne?”

He emphasized the full name, a pointed reminder they were not on first-name terms.

“Same boring bastard as always,” Yuri chuckled, then his gaze shifted.

“Oh, isn’t that Aina there? You’ve become quite beautiful. When I saw you at the military academy, you were much more of a child.”

Yuri had apparently spotted Aina in the corner of the screen.

“How about it, Aina? Become my girl. Beats rotting in that cave, under my command you could wage war in open sunshine.”

He laughed at his own words. Though both Ginias and Aina merely stared at him coldly.

“Fine, fine. Let’s talk business. Why dump that plan on me out of nowhere?”

“The objectives were laid out clearly,” Ginias replied, calm.

“That’s not what I mean. Why should I risk my men for your toy?”

“Apsaras,” Ginias corrected softly. “And the plan benefits you as well. Follow my deployment, and we’ll swat the Federation in a single blow.”

“Assuming your toy actually works.”

“You doubt me?”

“Would you bet lives on it?”

Their stares clashed like drawn blades.

According to Ginias’s proposal, Apsaras would fly deep and hammer the Kojima Base, while Yuri’s line, thinned out to encircle, closed in to finish the crippled garrison. If Apsaras performed to spec, it would be a massacre. If not, Yuri’s scattered units would be exposed and crushed.

“I’m not telling my troops to die for some gizmo they’ve never seen.”

“Apsaras carries the personal seal of Sovereign Degwin. You refuse to cooperate?”

“That’s right. I can’t cooperate. Besides, that plan’s real purpose isn’t Federation annihilation, so don’t pretend your ‘plan’ isn’t just wide-area rescue cover in case your gizmo sputters out.”

A twitch distorted Ginias’s elegant brow.

“Bull’s-eye, huh? All you care about’s that machine; war, sister, all meaningless to you.”

“Enough, Yuri.”

Ginias hurled his wine-glass at the monitor. Purple liquid splattered as crystal burst in mid-air.

“Whoa there, Mr. Scary Face.” Yuri flinched theatrically. “Look, you don’t have to mean mug me. I will sortie, just not under your script. My plan works with or without the gizmo.”

“What of Apsaras?”

"I'll tell you where my forces are deploying. Can't guarantee pickup anywhere, but if you crash near my units, I'll retrieve you."

He smirked, speaking with supreme confidence. Whatever Degwin's patronage, operational command lay with Yuri; Ginias could not move those troops an inch without him.

"Very well," Ginias spoke through gritted teeth. "Send me the deployment positions."

"The Far East's been stuck in that cursed jungle long enough. I am rooting for your gadget. After all, back at the military academy—"

"Aina."

"Yes, Brother."

She cut the feed; Yuri's image vanished and the room returned to its stagnant atmosphere.

Aina stood unchanged, mannequin-still. Ginias quivered, excitement skittering through his nerves.

"Damn that Yuri..."

He clutched his chest, breathing ragged; a trickle of blood slid from his lip.

"We're close. So close to completing Apsaras. When it's done—"

"Your medicine, Brother."

Aina retrieved the vial; he tossed two pills onto his tongue and washed them down with her untouched wine.

"The Apsaras will be complete..."

He repeated it like an incantation, blood still staining his smile.



*My dearest BB,*

*Our 08th Team has returned safely from its second mission and we're on standby for number three. The commander's mellowed out, but now a new problem's popped up, the one guy I thought normal, Sergeant Sanders. Turns out he's nicknamed "Sanders the Reaper." Rumor says any platoon he's in is wiped out on its third sortie.*

*He begged the commander to bench him, but no dice. To cap it off, he and Chief Joshua got into a fistfight. I didn't see it myself, but my colleague Eledore told me about it. That guy's got good ears, I'll give him that. The whole team's on edge.*

*Our rookie commander may be more reasonable now, but he's still unreliable, and if the two vets are at each other's throats, we're in a tight spot.*

*Which means, just like the previous two sorties, guess who has to hold things together?*

"No."

Michel crumpled the page.

"Last thing B.B. needs is worry."

He pitched the wadded ball of paper into the waste-bin in the corner of his room.

Eledore had vanished again, half-day absences were normal for him.

“Of all times to disappear...”

Michel flopped onto the lower bunk. His letters boasted that his skill kept the 08th winning, but truth was cruel. While he helped during maintenance, he was virtually useless in combat. Being a new recruit made that natural enough, but he still felt pathetic about his frequent mistakes. Things he could normally do without trouble became panic-inducing once combat started.

The 08th Team had survived this long thanks to Karen and Sanders' efforts. Karen's skill, having survived in the team despite its reputation as a “commander killer,” impressed even Michel. Similarly, Sanders, who had survived multiple total squad wipeouts, was no ordinary pilot.

But this time, those two were at odds with each other. Michel doubted their commander could bring them together.

Before their third sortie, Michel felt the “Sanders the Reaper” jinx gradually taking effect. As if someone was methodically paving the way toward the team's complete annihilation...

“No way.”

Michel shot upright and pulled a fresh sheet, maybe his last, and began writing again.



The next morning, third sortie orders hit the 08th. The mission: reconnaissance in force against Zeon frontlines. Target: Point 304, the location where the 08th Team had conducted diversionary operations two missions ago. The squad's selection for this operation was partly due to that previous experience.

Only the 08th would participate. Originally other units were scheduled to join, but learning of Sanders' jinx, they had refused to sortie, or so Eledore claimed, having somehow heard this information.

Shiro stood before his subordinates, explaining the mission details in a flat tone.

Intelligence anticipated a major Zeon offensive based on spy reports and intercepted communications. However, they couldn't determine its scale, timing, or operational content. Command's predictions might prove completely wrong.

Therefore, the 08th Team would conduct reconnaissance in force. Attack Point 304 and gauge enemy strength by the degree of counterattack.

Command feared large Zeon reinforcements had arrived. Excessive retaliation would suggest high reinforcement probability. Even without reinforcements, striking first against enemy offensive preparations would prove beneficial. Command appeared to expect as much.

When Shiro finished, silence reigned, unnaturally so for an O8 briefing. Even Eledore kept his mouth shut.

"That concludes the mission details. Questions?"

None.

Yet every pair of eyes screamed an unasked one. Shiro understood what those looks meant.

"I'm sure you all know about Sanders' situation."

Tension snapped like a drawn wire.

"Some of you are uneasy. But listen, Sanders isn't the only one with a jinx."

That froze them; they expected denial, not admission.

Shiro produced a slim silver pocket-watch.

"When I carry this, everyone with me comes home alive."

"Oh, for crying out--"

Eledore's hands flew out in disbelief; the others mirrored his stunned look. What was he trying to say—their faces expressed exactly that.

"Sanders, Michel, you remember what happened in space. In that battle everyone considered hopeless, I survived. So did Sanders and Michel, not one person aboard that shuttle died."

Eledore turned to Michel asking if this was true. Michel nodded ambiguously.

"The first sortie was the same. Not exactly a praiseworthy story, but I made it back alive."

This time Eledore said nothing.

Sure, Shiro should have been killed before Eledore arrived to rescue him. That would have been more natural. Yet he had remained a prisoner rather than being executed until Eledore's arrival.

"Come to think of it, no soldier captured by guerrillas has ever returned, right?"

Michel said, remembering Karen's words.

"Exactly. All thanks to this."

Shiro confidently held up the watch.

"Second sortie? We all came back, and even the O6th walked away. So I'll survive the next sortie too. All of us together."

"Commander, that's..."

"Sanders, this charm works. It'll blow away your pointless jinx."

Shiro thrust the watch forward aggressively in front of Sanders. The elegant pocket watch did indeed resemble a protective charm.

Karen caught herself smiling; she was pleased that Shiro hadn't been swayed by rumors and wasn't ditching Sanders after all.

Eledore eyed the watch, too refined for Shiro's pay grade. It would suit a nobleman or woman perfectly.

Michel just gaped in amazement. Was the commander seriously saying such childish things?

Sanders, meanwhile, remembered the day he'd been reassigned to the O8th. After his squad's annihilation, he had received new orders at Madras

Base. He understood he was being shuffled off, exactly like when his previous squad was wiped out.

Learning that the new 08th Team commander was that Shiro Amada had also happened at Madras. That man might be able to break his jinx. Sanders had secretly watched Shiro with such hopes.

Breaking his jinx required extraordinary luck. Someone else's extraordinary luck and he clung to that desperate thought.

"Your jinx versus my charm, Sergeant," Shiro said, grinning without guile.

And for the first time in months, Sanders decided to bet on something other than dread.

## Chapter.07

### A Formidable Enemy

The Apsaras Project.

It was an ultra-secret endeavor, sanctioned by none other than Sovereign Degwin himself. Driven by a desire to bring this war to a swift end, Sovereign Degwin had, apart from Supreme Commander Gihren, who bore ultimate responsibility for the conflict, conceived of numerous alternative proposals. He gathered around him those who supported his cause, as well as those who had fallen out of Gihren's favor, and they all bandied about a host of ideas.

The proposals ranged from intricate political maneuvering, subverting the Federation government, inciting defections among their ranks, to more extreme measures that would require abandoning treaty obligations entirely: nuclear arms, colony drops, poison gas, and so forth. They debated assassinating or discrediting the Federation's war hawks, compelling Side 6 to join the fray, and drawing up a possible armistice agreement that the Federation might actually consider. They considered developing new weaponry powerful enough to radically alter the course of the war, orchestrating large-scale sabotage missions against Jaburo, and guiding the Federation's public sentiment toward war-weariness.

The Apsaras Project was one among these many ambitious schemes. It was submitted by Captain Ginias Sahalin, a brilliant yet young technical officer. He proposed a new mobile armor specialized in fortress assaults that would obliterate Jaburo in one decisive strike, thus crushing the Federation's will to continue the war.

At first, people dismissed it as a preposterous notion, little more than a pipe dream. But Ginias had done more than merely theorize; he had actually drafted detailed blueprints for the fortress-assault mobile armor Apsaras.

Apsaras was designed as a massive mobile armor equipped with an ultra-high-output mega particle cannon at its core, intended to bore straight into Jaburo's subterranean base by literally ripping through the earth above.

"But how do you plan to advance all the way to Jaburo's airspace?" one of the gathered officers asked. "If you can't get there, that fancy cannon won't do any good."

With perfect confidence, Ginias replied, "Simple. We'll travel through space."

The plan was audacious in its simplicity. Constructed on Earth, the Apsaras would use a booster unit to ascend into satellite orbit, then make a controlled atmospheric reentry right over Jaburo. Since multiple treaties banned the use of ICBMs and similar weaponry, Jaburo's anti-air defenses were unexpectedly weak. This would later prompt Zeon to mount a descent operation against Jaburo, but only at a much later stage. Ginias's plan

exploited this very blind spot, lending his seemingly outlandish proposal a persuasive logic that couldn't be easily dismissed. Of course, there were technical hurdles, but Sovereign Degwin approved Ginias's proposal and allocated the necessary budget and personnel.

Wasting no time, Ginias led his personally selected team of engineers down to Earth. He reasoned that developing a weapon intended for terrestrial operations would be far more practical if conducted on Earth itself, where testing and experimentation could proceed more efficiently.

Military strength was largely unnecessary for the project. However, considering the need for combat testing and other practical concerns, Ginias recruited Captain Norris Packard. Most assumed Norris would be the test pilot for the Apsaras. Yet, in truth, Ginias chose his own sister, Aina Sahalin, a decision that raised many eyebrows, given her lack of combat experience. But Ginias, having received Sovereign Degwin's assurance that "everything rests in your hands," paid no heed to the dissenting voices.

"I won't hand over my Apsaras to some nobody," Ginias murmured, gazing up at the machine just before its maiden launch.

This masterpiece, into which Ginias had poured his heart and soul, was about to see real combat for the first time. The torrential rain of its mega particle cannon, heretofore confined to the test range, would now descend upon an actual Federation base.

"Brother."

A voice called from behind him. Naturally, it was Aina. She was his only sister; no one else would address him so familiarly.

"Preparations are complete."

"Then it's time for your launch."

"Yes."

Aina, dressed in her normal suit, gave a firm nod. She held the specially designed Apsaras helmet at her side.

"Norris's unit has already gone on ahead," Ginias said. "By the time Apsaras reaches the enemy base's airspace, they should be positioned three kilometers from the target, standing by."

"Understood."

"Remember, this mission is a test run. If you experience any malfunction or danger, you are to return immediately. You have the deployment map for Yuri's squad?"

"Yes. I've got it in both digital and hard copies."

It was the perfect answer. In emergencies, the map would be crucial, but one could never guarantee that digital data wouldn't crash at a critical moment, hence the redundancy of paper backup.

Ginias smiled in satisfaction and sent Aina off.

"Take good care of my Apsaras, Aina."

"I will, Brother."

His words were not, "Apsaras, look after Aina." But whether he said one or the other made no difference to Aina.



“Hey, Commander.” Eledore’s voice was relaxed as he kept one ear pressed against his sonar headset. “About that charm you showed us before, what exactly is that thing?”

“Isn’t it obvious, Eledore?” Michel broke in. “It’s a watch. A pocket watch.”

“You moron, I wasn’t asking you,” Eledore snapped back, making Michel huff in annoyance. “I was asking the commander why he’s carrying around that kind of watch.”

“Oh, so I can’t own anything fancy?” Shiro said with feigned displeasure.

“Well, yeah... I mean, that watch is worth serious money. And you’re, well... how should I put this... more of an everyman, you know?”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

“Hey, that was a compliment, I like having an officer who gets us grunts.”

“Well, thanks,” Shiro replied with sarcastic politeness.

“Any time,” Eledore continued. “And you can’t deny that watch looks like something a woman would own. C’mon, is it from a girlfriend? Don’t tell me this is some sort of ‘it was my mother’s’ sob story.”

“That’s probably spot on,” Michel chimed in. “It looks pretty old.”

“No way,” Eledore drawled in disbelief. “I nailed it?”

“Well?” Michel asked, eyes gleaming. “Is that it, Commander?”

“Man, I’d hate to have a Commander who’s a mama’s boy,” Eledore teased. “Don’t get all ‘Mommy, help me!’ out on the battlefield now.”

Even though they were technically on a mission, the 08th Team was as chatty as ever. According to regulations, they really shouldn’t be talking about anything but the essentials during an operation. Yet this was just the way the 08th Team usually behaved. They’d been weighed down by tension after what happened with Sanders, but now, finally, they seemed to be regaining their characteristic energy.

Shiro, sensing that this lively banter was doing them good, chose not to shut it down. Instead, he played along with Eledore’s casual jibes.

“You can laugh all you want,” Shiro said. “But the owner of this watch is a lovely young woman.”

“You’re not just making that up?”

“She’s not, say, a chubby gal with a busted-up face?”

“Nope. A real beauty, and definitely not overweight.”

“Ah, I get it, it’s your sister or something.”

Karen, listening in on these playful jabs, felt the tiniest pang of admiration for Shiro. She could see he was deliberately letting Eledore and Michel banter, trying to lighten the mood by throwing himself into their teasing.

Gradually, Karen had come to acknowledge Shiro, at least in some respects. She could see his skill as a pilot was strong, perhaps even remarkable. In battle, he kept his cool, well enough to earn at least a passing grade. Occasionally, he could be an absolute fool, but he didn’t lack

intelligence. With experience, she thought, he might become an exceptional soldier.

“But a commanding officer is something else entirely...”

She still wasn't ready to accept him as a commander. For Karen, there was one crucial quality a leader had to possess, something she hadn't yet seen from Shiro.



“That blue one in the middle, it doesn't look quite like a Zaku,” Kiki said, peering through her binoculars.

All three mobile suits appeared in her view, moving single file through the forest at a measured pace, the frontmost unit scanning the surroundings in constant vigilance.

Indeed, the “blue one” Kiki referred to was clearly different from an ordinary Zaku, not merely in color but also in its shape, atop its head jutted a crest like a feathered horn, and on its shoulders rose spikes curved like a bull's horns. It looked altogether more formidable than any Zaku they had seen before. Ted's frantic warning suddenly made perfect sense.

“What do we do, Kiki?”

Ted's anxious tone betrayed his impatience.

“They're just about to enter our turf. Surely you're not gonna let them pass just 'cause it's some fancy new model. If we do nothing, they'll think we're a bunch of pushovers.”

“Keep it down, Ted,” Kiki snapped. Then she pointed out another oddity.

“Look at the one at the back. It's not a one-eyed mono-eye, it's got three.”

Sure enough, the last unit in the column was peculiar. Instead of a single mono-eye, three camera-like lenses protruded from its head, reminiscent of an old-fashioned camera. Six small, fin-like wings flared out on its back, making the blue mobile suit in the middle look comparatively more “Zaku-like.”

“I'll bet it's some sort of recon unit,” Kurt said. He was crouched next to Kiki, also studying them through binoculars.

“See that camera thing on the shoulder? I heard rumors about a Zaku like that.”

Kurt's knowledge came from conversations he'd secretly had with Zeon soldiers. He was the one who bartered with Zeon's supply squads, exchanging goods from the village for firearms and medicine. It was the only way to get hold of weapons, or even basic medical supplies, now that their forest had turned into a battleground. Legitimate ways of purchasing from traveling merchants or going into town had become impossible. The merchants no longer visited, and going into any populated area required avoiding traps and military patrols. Dealing directly with the army was simply the quickest solution.

“A recon model? What's that?”

Ted asked from behind.

"Kinda like what we're doing now," Kurt explained, still focused on the binoculars. "Look at its face, it's practically got a giant pair of binoculars built in."

"Well, I can't see jack," Ted complained. "You two are hogging the only binoculars we've got."

"Fine, use mine," Kiki said, thrusting her binoculars at him.

"But more importantly, Kurt, what's the deal with a recon-type Zaku? I've never seen one till now."

"Beats me. Some new operation, I guess."

*"No... that's not it."*

Kiki denied Kurt's guess silently. The blue Zaku and that recon-type, out of the three mobile suits, two were unfamiliar models. Dismissing this as mere coincidence would be dangerously optimistic. What's more, the Zeon forces knew full well that this forest was guerrilla territory. For them to deliberately traverse this route meant...

"Only someone like Shiro would do something that stupid."

She remembered the time that cocky young officer had wandered alone into their territory. But she couldn't imagine the three Zeon machines below sharing Shiro's brand of reckless "stupidity."

"They're moving off now, Kiki," Ted said tersely.

Kiki snapped back to the moment, grabbing the binoculars from Ted again. Sure enough, the three mobile suits were veering away, heading farther from the village.

"Huh. Looks like one of their usual patrols," Kurt observed.

"Damn, they scared the crap outta me," Ted muttered.

"Ha, you sound disappointed, Ted," Kurt teased.

"Shut it. I'm no warmongering brat," Ted shot back.

"Sure you aren't."

While Kurt and Ted exchanged a relieved stream of trash talk, Kiki still couldn't bring herself to relax. In fact, she felt even more on edge.

*"That was no simple patrol..."*

Instinct warned her.

*"I should probably tell Father..."*

The anxiety gnawed at her as she stood.



MS-06E3 Zaku Flipper.

That was the official name of the machine Kiki had dubbed the "three-eyed one." A further development of the MS-06E Zaku Reconnaissance Type, this model boasted enhanced surveillance capabilities over the original 06E.

The biggest difference between the 06E and the 06E3 Zaku Flipper lay in the sophisticated multi-sensor unit attached to its back. Whereas the earlier

O6E had relied almost exclusively on optical cameras, the O6E3 combined ultrasonic and laser scanning for far superior detection accuracy. Its composite sensor suite spread across six fin-like “booms,” which shifted orientation according to the recon target. The moniker “Flipper” referred to these wings, reminiscent of a ship’s horizontal rudders.

Ginias had procured the Zaku Flipper to capture external test data for the Apsaras project. The Flipper’s chest also housed a set of emergency rocket thrusters, enabling it to lift off briefly for aerial photography should the situation demand it.

“Seriously, I feel like some embedded wartime correspondent...”

So went the private grumblings of Sergeant Walter Kohler, a veteran pilot who had been assigned to the Flipper. Yes, the rocket thrusters meant an emergency escape was possible, but the Flipper’s combat strength left much to be desired. Its armor was light, it carried no real weapons, and it lacked a shield. To make matters worse, the tri-lens camera unit that replaced the mono-eye gave it a narrower field of vision.

Still, Walter’s dissatisfaction wasn’t fear of being killed in a defenseless suit.

“It’s that I can’t fight.”

What galled Walter was the prospect of returning from a mobile suit sortie without engaging in combat. Worse yet, while his comrades battled the enemy, he’d be expected to flee alone using his rocket thrusters when things turned dangerous. For someone who’d piloted mobile suits since the war’s opening phases, this assignment went against every instinct he’d honed in battle.

“Walter, time to engage the Flipper’s systems,”

Captain Norris Packard’s voice reached him via directional comm from the blue mobile suit up ahead.

“Copy that, Captain,”

Walter replied, bringing the Zaku Flipper to a halt and activating its complex sensor unit. The six fins, previously folded in, now spread open, one by one like mechanical flower petals.

“How’s the ride on that Flipper, Walter?”

“Feels a lot like a Zaku when just walking, sir. A little stiff, maybe.”

Walter kept his response diplomatic. Because the Zaku Flipper wasn’t built for close combat, its shock absorbers were fairly basic.

“How about you, Captain? Enjoying the new model?”

Walter inquired while using his camera unit to zoom in on the blue mobile suit ahead.

“Not bad. All that remains is to see how it fares in actual combat.”

Norris Packard, pilot of the new model Gouf, the MS-07B3, kept his tone modest, but in truth, his impressions were already quite favorable. As a ground-specialized unit, the Gouf boasted raw power and agility leagues above that of the Zaku’s land-combat variants. Despite the extra armor plating, its mobility remained uncompromised. By adding a shield into the design, it avoided loading up too much extra weight.

"I'm particularly eager to try out this heat rod," Norris remarked, swinging the Gouf's left arm, the side that housed the specialized close-combat weapon.

"That thing gave me hell during our mock battles," Walter answered with a rueful chuckle, recalling how thoroughly Norris had thrashed him in testing. He already knew the Captain's skill, but the outcome had been even more decisive than he expected.

"Strange, though. Why did later models abandon the heat rod? Seems like an effective weapon to me."

"Probably because only a handful of pilots can handle it properly. It's a whole different beast compared to the usual heat hawk."

"Which makes it that much trickier for the enemy," Walter put in. "You can strike them outside the normal range of guns or swords. Just my two cents after our sparring sessions."

"No doubt. Especially for anyone facing this Gouf for the first time."

"Captain," A sharp voice cut into Norris and Walter's conversation. It was Ensign Hans Difflipp, leading the column from the front in his Zaku.

"What is it, Hans?"

"Looks like you'll get your chance to test that heat rod, sir," he said, sounding almost cheerful.



The moment Ensign Hans Difflipp's Zaku noticed an enemy presence, Karen caught sight of the Zaku in nearly the same instant.

"Confirmed hostile mobile suit. Number unknown," Karen immediately sent out a tight-beam comm message to the rear. Instantly, all casual chatter ceased. Shiro's and Sanders's mobile suits immediately assumed low profiles, Eledore pressed an ear harder against his sonar headset, and Michel, one beat behind the others, switched into battle prep.

"What about them?"

Shiro's voice was no more than a whisper.

"No idea... but assume they've noticed us," Karen murmured back.

No shots were fired from the enemy's side yet, but taking it for granted that they hadn't been spotted would be a rookie mistake.

"We need to spread out immediately. Staying clustered is suicide," Karen advised, anticipating the tactical situation.

"Agreed. But what about the traps?"

"At this point, all we can do is pray."

Any direction except the path Karen had taken might still be rigged with mines or hidden explosives. But they had no choice; worrying about traps wouldn't save them if they got wiped out.

"Right. Once I fire, Chief Joshua, you take the right flank. Sanders, you circle left."

"Roger that."

“Got it.”

“Michel, you pull back and watch for reinforcements. Do not engage.”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

Michel, their driver, was already maneuvering the Bloodhound in reverse. Against mobile suits, the hover truck’s weapons were basically useless.

“Counting down... three... two...”

Karen had lost sight of the Zaku, whether it had moved or was lying in wait, she couldn’t say. Shiro decided he’d spray a volley at the general area ahead.

“...one... zero!”

BRAAAT!

The bark of Shiro’s 100mm machine gun tore through the silence. Simultaneously, Karen and Sanders veered off in opposite directions, and Michel, right on cue, drove the Bloodhound in reverse.

In the same instant, gunfire erupted from up ahead.



Norris’s Gouf unleashed its 35mm Gatling cannon at precisely the same moment bullets rained in from the opposite side.

“So they were onto us.”

After delivering a single burst, Norris ducked down into the cover of the woods. Most of the incoming rounds whizzed overhead. One bullet appeared to strike his left shoulder, though it ricocheted away with a crisp kahng, leaving only a faint echo in his ears.

“Not half bad,” he muttered.

Even as he ducked, he caught a glimpse of the enemy’s maneuvers. In addition to the suit firing straight ahead, two others had fanned out: one to the left, one to the right. They hadn’t hesitated to move deeper into the forest, ignoring the possibility of traps, suggesting a commander with guts.

“Hans, let’s take out the one on the left first. While I close in with the Gouf, keep the one on the right pinned down.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Walter, swing around to the right. No need to engage, but force them to keep an eye on you.”

“Understood.”

Almost at the same moment Norris issued these orders, Hans’s Zaku and Walter’s Flipper started flanking right. They were dependable subordinates indeed. Though Norris had no intention of underestimating the enemy, he couldn’t see himself losing in a three-versus-three.

“Might as well test out the heat rod right away.”

Timed with Hans’s suppressive fire, Norris advanced swiftly toward the enemy on his left.



The mobile suit that moved to the right side, meaning it was on Norris's left, belonged to Karen.

All three of the 08th Team's mobile suits were Gundams. Though not quite at the level of the original, their power and armor far exceeded those of most mass-production models. Against a Zaku of equal pilot skill, they would never lose.

And in Karen's estimation, the 08th Team's pilots, Shiro and Sanders, were quite skilled indeed.

Sanders, in particular, had survived the total annihilation of his team multiple times; that couldn't possibly be a matter of mere chance.

Shiro, too, had proven unexpectedly capable as a pilot. It was no lie when people said he took down a Zaku with a Ball. Likely he was top of his class or close to it at the academy.

Karen herself had survived in this intense Far Eastern front, so she had more than a little confidence in her own skill.

"Still..."

The blue mobile suit that first fired on them weighed heavily on Karen's mind.

"It looked like a Zaku, but... must be some new design?"

Rumors circulated of a new blue suit called a "Gouf" confirmed on the European front. Then again, Zeon officers often repainted their machines however they pleased, unlike the Federation. The "Red Comet," the "Black Tri-Stars," the "White Wolf," it was said every famous ace had their own unique color scheme.

"I sure hope it's not the Blue Giant."

A faint chill prickled at the thought of Lieutenant Ramba Ral, bearer of the "Blue Giant" epithet, a veteran warrior dating back to the Republic of Zeon era, by all accounts.

"Whether it's a new unit or an ace pilot... it's not going to be easy."

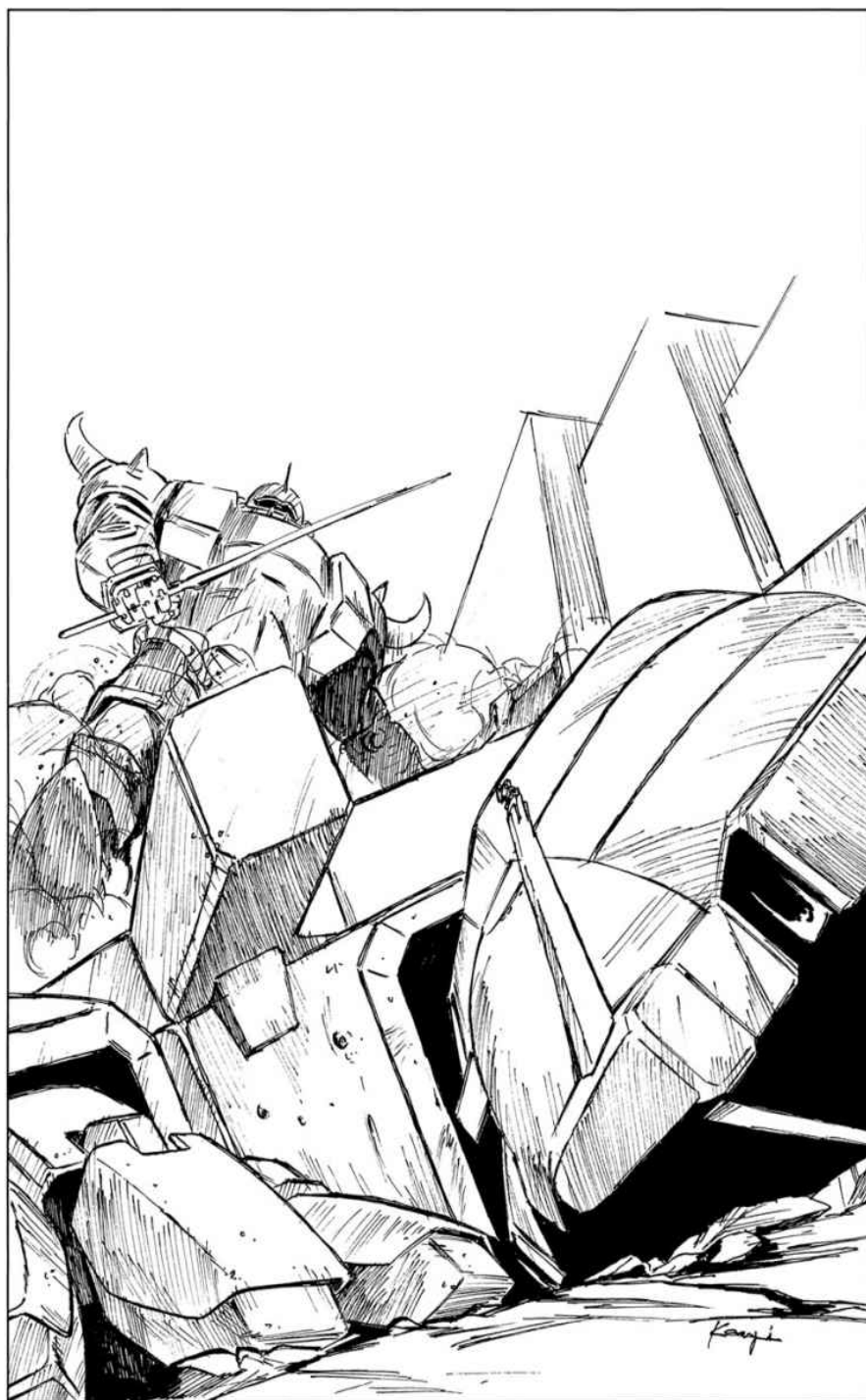
As she dashed to her right, Karen loosed a barrage from her 100mm machine gun straight ahead, not really aiming to hit but rather baiting a response. Sure enough, one of them returned fire, but only the same mobile suit that had already been trading shots from the start.

"Where'd the other two go? I'm sure we saw three..."

Even as she wondered, something burst out of the woods. Karen instinctively raised her shield. She braced for the impact of gunfire, yet felt no bullet strike. Nor did she hear that high-pitched clang that came with a ricochet.

This was all in the space of a fraction of a second, perhaps two-tenths. Even as her mind wrestled with the mystery, Karen's body moved on autopilot, keeping the shield raised while swiveling the 100mm machine gun toward the forest, ready to saturate whatever threat lurked there.

She never got the chance. A different sort of shock slammed into her. Not the blunt impact of a round, but something that felt like a sudden surge of electricity.



In the next instant, her monitors blacked out, plunging the cockpit into total darkness.



“Karen’s mobile suit, down!”

Eledore’s distressed voice crackled urgently over Shiro’s comm.

“No way!”

Shiro barked back, stunned. Less than thirty seconds had passed since the fighting began, and already Chief Joshua’s suit was lost?

“Are they hiding a sniper?”

“No, it’s not gunfire. Must’ve been close combat.”

If a bullet had taken her out, Eledore would have heard an explosion. In his expert opinion, the absence of any such sound meant Karen was struck by an attack that didn’t involve detonation, almost certainly a melee strike.

“Was it that blue suit?”

“I can’t confirm. But it’s definitely not a Zaku. None of the acoustic signatures match.”

The Bloodhound had audio data for every known Zaku variant. Two of the targets aligned perfectly with the footprints of a ground combat Zaku and a recon Zaku, but the third, the blue unit, didn’t match any known model.

“Blue mobile suit...”

Michel, overhearing Eledore and Shiro, rummaged through his memory. He was sure he’d read something in a Federation military bulletin about a “blue mobile suit.”

“Commander, I think it’s a Gouf, a new Zeon model,” Michel announced.

“A Gouf?”

“It was sighted on the European front. Word is it’s got a high-voltage whip that can short-circuit an enemy suit.”

Michel hadn’t actually laid eyes on the enemy, but between Shiro’s “blue one” comment and Karen’s suit suddenly dying without an explosion, he recalled the rumor.

“We should retreat, Commander! It’s three against two, and their third is a new model. We can’t win!”

A vision of “Sanders the Reaper” and his ill-fated track record flared in Michel’s mind. Was it really their destiny to be wiped out on this third sortie?

“Commander, I’m—” Sanders murmured, obviously fighting the same fear. Shiro cut him off before he could finish.

“Don’t say it, Sanders.”

Shiro’s words cracked like a whip.

They had no time for superstitions. They had to do whatever it took to survive, and to stand a chance of winning.

“So we run away and just leave Karen?”

Eledore's voice pointedly conveyed his reluctance. He'd served alongside Karen since before Shiro joined the 08th Team, so this came as no surprise.

"What's it gonna be, Commander?"

"Yeah, Commander."

"Commander..."

All eyes, or ears, were on Shiro. The situation was dire.

For the 08th Team, Karen's suit was arguably their most significant combat asset. Her skill, her judgment, her experience fighting in dense forest, losing her was a crushing blow. And now the enemy had a new model capable of taking out Karen in under thirty seconds.

Still, if the Gouf specialized in melee, then maybe, if they kept their distance and retreated under covering fire, they could avoid further casualties. Every textbook and every sign pointed to withdrawal. A commanding officer must sometimes be ruthless. If Karen were dead, risking the entire team to save her would be pointless.

And yet... Shiro didn't want to leave her behind.

*"What do I do?"*

The new Zeon suit was surely closing in with every second he hesitated.

"I--!"

Clenching his sweating palms around the control sticks, Shiro steeled himself.



"One down," Norris murmured, a note of satisfaction in his voice as the enemy mobile suit before him crumpled and collapsed. The heat rod had more than proven itself in real combat. In terrain crowded by obstacles, thick forest, urban sprawl, it might be more effective than most firearms.

"Captain, you did it!"

Ensign Hans's excited voice came from his position at center, where he'd been suppressing the enemy's right flank.

"That's a Gundam, sir! Same type that supposedly fought the Red Comet to a draw."

"A Gundam... what's it doing in a place like this?"

"No idea, but I'm sure of it. But those forehead horns, the twin eyes..."

Norris had heard the rumors: a high-performance Federation mobile suit called the Gundam. Though the legends were inflated with all kinds of exaggerations, there seemed to be some truth to its existence. Could it mean the Federation had managed to mass-produce the Gundam at last? The heat rod took it out so quickly that Norris couldn't gauge its armor or power.

"Don't get cocky, Hans. If that's a Gundam, even two versus three might be dangerous."

"Understood, Captain."

Norris heard Hans's reply and allowed himself a faint smile. He doesn't truly understand yet, he thought. Hans was young and still at that age where he hungered for glory. In time, he would learn that staying alive was what mattered most. But that lesson only came with experience.

"The next target is the one in the center. Hans, keep up the pressure on the right."

"Got it."

Hans's Zaku renewed its barrage against the suit on the right flank. Though intended as suppressive fire, Norris could tell Hans was trying to land a legitimate hit.

"Try not to overreach, Hans. If you live long enough, you'll make a fine soldier."

With that silent prayer, Norris began to advance once again.



Karen fought desperately with the dead cockpit systems. She still didn't know exactly what had happened, only that the blue mobile suit had definitely hit her with something. Right before the shockwave, she thought she saw a rope-like weapon shooting out in her direction...

"Damn it... What's going on out there?"

With her monitors gone dark, she couldn't see a thing outside. If her suit was down for the count, then the 08th Team was stuck fighting three enemies with only two mobile suits. And that blue suit was clearly no pushover. Odds were they were already in serious trouble, maybe they'd even lost another pilot by now.

"What the hell did they do to me?"

Karen hunched under the console, yanking out a panel with brute force. She didn't have time to follow the manual's neat little instructions. The fact that the blue mobile suit hadn't bothered finishing her off likely meant this was a disabling attack that wouldn't be fixed easily.

And yet...

*"No way I'm giving up."*

Her hand went to the pocket holding her late husband's photo. They'd met back when she was in med school, he was a young physician working in the ICU. That ward saw patients perpetually on the brink between life and death. If the scales tipped toward "life," they'd move to a general ward. If "death," they'd be sent to the morgue. Either way, people always left the ICU one way or another.

And in that place, her husband would tell patients over and over: "Don't you dare give up."

Don't give up on living.

If you keep fighting, I promise you'll recover.

I'll make sure you get well.

Karen had been furious at Sanders before because he'd basically thrown in the towel, accepting the "Sanders the Reaper" jinx as though it were set in stone. Giving up was something she wouldn't tolerate.

*"I'm not giving up. No way."*

She bit down on her Maglite so she could shine it into the dark opening behind the ripped-out panel, using both hands to pull out a mess of colorful wires. She had no real clue how to fix any of it, but stopping wasn't an option. Giving up felt like a betrayal of her husband's memory.

"I will survive," she told herself, teeth grinding on the flashlight.



Norris had decided that the first Gundam that opened fire must be the enemy's commander. Initially, the other two suits had peeled off left and right. The squad leader generally wanted to keep a view of the battlefield, so it made sense the CO would stay in the center.

*"If I take out the Gundam in the middle, the fight's as good as won."*

He moved through the forest in a crouch. The numbers were three-on-two in theory, but one of their own was a recon unit, little use in a direct fight. That effectively made it two against two, hardly a comfortable margin of safety. And they were Gundams, after all.

*"I'll end this quickly by taking out their leader. I can't afford to get bogged down. Not when Lady Aina's counting on me."*

Norris straightened the Gouf, then let rip another torrent of 35mm Gatling rounds into the center, not really aiming to hit, but hoping to force the Gundam to break cover.

*"Come on out, Gundam."*

Staying visible in the open, he dashed sideways.



*"There it is!"*

The blue mobile suit, the Gouf, emerged from concealment, firing indiscriminately while sliding sideways. If it kept moving like that, Eledore's ears couldn't possibly track it precisely.

"Trying to lure me in, huh?!"

Shiro shouted, spraying his 100mm machine gun in response. The Gouf reacted with lightning speed, raising its shield to block a fatal blow as it vanished from sight, likely by ducking down.

*"Fast... It's definitely not like a Zaku."*

Shiro veered sideways, too. Staying put was begging to be picked off. But the enemy seemed ready for that. The blue mobile suit rose up directly in Shiro's path, almost as if it had predicted his route.

"You've got to be kidding!"

He whipped his machine gun to bear on the target, but the Gouf's move was even faster, something shot from its left arm.

Michel's earlier words flashed in Shiro's head: "It's got this high-voltage whip that can short out a suit."

"So this is what took down Chief Joshua..."

He snapped up his shield-bearing left arm in defense.



*"Got him!"*

Norris felt a momentary surge of triumph. The Gundam was trying to block his Gouf's heat rod with a shield, but a physical shield was useless against an electrical weapon.

*"Just like the first one, it's going down in a shorted-out heap."*

The heat rod extended forward, nearly connecting with the Gundam when, the Gundam threw its shield. The rod tangled around the discarded slab of metal and crashed uselessly to the ground. No way for high-voltage current to arc into the Gundam now.

"Impressive!"

Norris's face split into a grin, despite his surprise. Encountering such a formidable foe sparked something like delight in him. Just then, he narrowly dodged the Gundam's machine gun salvo, diving to the ground in time to hear the roar of rounds tearing overhead.

Even as he retracted the entangled heat rod, Norris unleashed a wild Gatling barrage into the dirt in front of him.



Dust burst into the air, cloaking the battlefield in a haze. The Gouf's Gatling was ripping up the ground, raising a thick, obscuring cloud.

"Guess that's his camouflage," Shiro muttered, deciding to pull back from the dust. In such low visibility, the pilot with more experience, likely the Gouf's pilot, had the advantage.

"Eledore, how's the Chief doing?"

"Still no movement."

Eledore pressed his headphones so tight it hurt his ears, but there was no hint that Karen's suit had reactivated.

"What about the other two enemy suits?"

"The Zaku's not budging from straight ahead. The recon unit's drifting to the Sergeant's left."

It looked like they were gradually boxing Sanders in. Two-on-one would keep him pinned. To turn the tables, Shiro would have to take out the Gouf, but...

*"What do I do next?"*

He cut the connection and thought it over. He'd already sacrificed his shield to dodge the heat rod once, but he had nothing left to fend off the next strike. That left two options: destroy the weapon first or stay at a range where the enemy couldn't use it.

But if he backed away, he'd leave Sanders behind, surrounded and isolated. Then all three would converge on Sanders, eliminate him, and finish off Shiro after. On the other hand, if Shiro moved to coordinate a retreat with Sanders, they'd be withdrawing from the fight.

"Is running our only choice?"

Logically, he knew retreat offered the best shot at survival. Gripping Aina's pocket watch, which hung in the cockpit, he took a moment to steel himself.

They had to ensure everyone's survival, especially for Sanders's sake. And if that meant...

"All right."

He made his choice, slipping the watch into his chest pocket.



Michel was trembling in the driver's seat. The situation was overwhelmingly bleak. Three enemy suits, one of them a brand-new model, versus their O8th Team, now effectively down to two suits because the most dependable one, Karen's, had been disabled.

And yet the Commander showed no intention of ordering a retreat. If they kept this up, the O8th Team might be wiped out. The Sanders the Reaper curse was starting to feel all too real.

"B.B., I'm sorry..."

He pressed a hand gently over B.B.'s photo in his jacket pocket.



Sanders was on the verge of tears.

He really was "Sanders the Reaper" after all.

Like climbing one step of a staircase after another, the O8th Team was inching inexorably toward total annihilation.

Somewhere out there, the Commander was locked in combat with what was likely an ace pilot, and in a brand-new model no less, a mobile suit specialized in close quarters, perfect for jungle warfare. As for Sanders himself, he was pinned down by two units, unable to budge. The Bloodhound couldn't even hope to scratch a mobile suit's paint. There was absolutely nothing left to tip the scales in their favor.

"I knew it... I really am a harbinger of death."

His teeth sank into his lower lip.



Eledore strained to pick up any sound from Karen's machine. But there was simply too much other racket, heavy gunfire and explosions, making it impossible to detect anything subtle.

"Damn it, could they maybe quiet down a little?"

He muttered under his breath, knowing full well it was an absurd complaint. There was no such thing as a "quiet" battle, and if they weren't in combat, there'd be no need to locate Karen's machine in the first place. Still, he couldn't help cursing all the same.

"Sergeant, the recon suit's on the move again. It's now at your three o'clock."

"Got it."

Eledore relayed the recon unit's position to Sanders. While he continued searching for any sound from Karen's suit, he never lost track of the enemy's movements. He wasn't just a sonar man with good ears, he had a rare gift for mentally sorting overlapping sounds in real time.

"Commander, the middle one's pushing forward. If you stay where you are, you'll be caught in a crossfire."

He tried hailing Shiro via directional comm again, but no response came.

"Commander? If you can hear me, answer! Don't tell me you're down, Commander!"



"Yes, got it!"

Karen had finally revived one of her monitors.

But that was it. The Gundam itself still wouldn't budge, and she couldn't switch camera feeds.

"Damn it. What's the situation out there?"

The only thing visible on the flickering screen was forest, no sign of mobile suits or even a muzzle flash.

"Where's the Commander... what about Sanders? Don't tell me they're already..."

Impatient, she rapped on the console, eyes glued to the single operational monitor. It showed no movement. If only she could get the comm working again, she might warn Shiro, tell him about that weapon, caution him that moving too close was suicide, that they had to keep their distance...

"I've got to let them know... If they get near that thing, they're done for. First, pull back and--"

Still fiddling with the controls in mounting frustration, Karen suddenly saw a Gundam appear onscreen. It had been lurking in the trees, and now it rose to its feet. No shield, no defense, completely exposed.

"You idiot!"

Karen burst out in an involuntary shout.



“So it’s shown itself at last.”

Norris saw the Gundam at precisely the same time Karen did.

Their prey was being slowly encircled by three Zeon suits, Norris had banked on the fact that the Gundam would inevitably be forced to move. Sure enough, there it was.

Standing carelessly in the forest, the Gundam had no shield. This time there should be no way to defend against the heat rod.

Norris charged straight ahead to confront it from the front. No fancy flanking maneuvers. He went in like a sharpened drill.

“Let’s see how you handle this.”

The Gouf’s left arm snapped upward. From the wrist, the heat rod launched straight at the Gundam’s chest, precisely where the cockpit ought to be. It arrowed in with deadly accuracy and...

Contact!

The tip clamped onto the Gundam’s armor as if magnetized.

“Too easy, far too easy,” Norris thought. “Even a little anticlimactic.”

He squeezed the trigger, sending a surge of high-voltage current through the conductive cable, normally enough to short out any mobile suit.

But instead, Norris was the one left reeling.

The Gouf’s left arm, the same arm that had fired the heat rod, suddenly exploded.

“Impossible!”

The electrical surge that should have overloaded the Gundam had nowhere to go. It backfed into the Gouf’s left arm instead, triggering a powerful detonation. The blast sent the Gouf crashing onto its back. In the moment he toppled, Norris caught sight of a lone figure deep in the forest, someone aiming an anti-tank rocket.



“Got ‘em!”

Shiro held the rocket launcher steady, exultant. His Stinger had obliterated the Gouf’s left arm, sending it sprawling from the resulting shockwave. At the very least, that weapon was no longer a threat.

“How’s the Gundam?”

He turned, glancing behind him. There stood his Gundam, empty-handed and motionless.

Nope, Shiro wasn’t even inside the suit.

A straight fight had looked hopeless, so he’d decided to use the Gundam as a decoy while fighting on foot. Quietly slipping out and hauling an anti-tank Stinger on his back, he reasoned the only sure way to seal that “whip” was to blast the Gouf’s left arm at the precise moment it was deployed. So he’d timed his shot from below, one of the suit’s blind spots, just as the pilot triggered the heat rod.

The Gundam's sudden stand had been activated by a pre-set timer, using the onboard autopilot functions.

*"Now it's two against two."*

Shiro tapped the pocket holding Aina's watch.

*"Sanders... I'll put an end to your jinx, no matter what."*

He flung aside the spent launcher and took off at a run. The thrill of toppling the Gouf was already out of his mind. Every ounce of his focus shifted to dealing with the remaining two.



"Captain! Are you alright? Captain!"

"I'm fine, Hans, just lost the left arm."

Coughing through the smoke clouding the cockpit, Norris reported in. True, only the left arm had been destroyed, but because the attack struck the moment he unleashed a high-voltage current, it caused some of that electrical surge to backflow. The engine output refused to climb, and multiple systems were offline, leg cameras, exhaust valves, shock absorbers...

"We can't continue fighting in this state. Hans, Walter, we're pulling out."

"But I can still fight, sir. The enemy--"

"Fall back, Hans. Our job isn't to annihilate the Federation. Our mission is to gather data for the Apsaras and provide cover."

Norris spoke like a patient instructor.

"If this battle keeps dragging on, we won't be able to fulfill that mission. We'll withdraw and move under the Apsaras's flight path instead. If luck's on our side, we might just make it."

Hans was still young, so he likely struggled to accept retreat without a real defeat. They had a three-against-two advantage, technically, and Hans himself had scored no tangible victory yet.

"Understood, sir," Sergeant Walter piped up before Hans could protest further.

"Give us the route, Captain."

Walter understood perfectly how Hans felt. By speaking up first, Walter removed Hans's chance to object. Hans would find it harder to complain once a senior non-com was already agreeing to withdraw.

Norris, thankful for the sergeant's tact, quickly issued his next order.

"Hans, you'll cover the rear. We'll rendezvous at point 407. Make a straight retreat, and don't dawdle. They're unlikely to pursue."



"So, Sanders, how about the power of my little good-luck charm?"

The moment Sanders climbed down from his Gundam, Shiro was there to greet him with a grin.

"I'll admit defeat, Captain,"

Sanders replied, layering multiple meanings into those few words. During that battle, part of him had still wanted to give up, convinced he was indeed the “Sanders the Reaper” destined to drag the 08th Team toward total annihilation.

But Shiro had refused to throw in the towel. He’d gone so far as to abandon his own mobile suit, a seemingly reckless move that stunned both friend and foe, and in so doing, turned the tide.

“All the same, having a nickname like ‘Sanders the Reaper’ did sound kinda cool, didn’t it?”

Eledore piped up after hopping off the Bloodhound, taking a tone of cheerful irresponsibility. For once, though, Sanders felt buoyant enough to joke back.

“You’ve got a point. Maybe I should change it to ‘Angel’ next,” he said with a laugh.

“Ugh, you’re serious, Sergeant?”

“An angel? That’s way over the top,” Michel said, siding with Eledore. “If you’re dropping ‘Reaper,’ why not go all out and call yourself ‘Satan’ or something?”

It was rare for Michel to tease Sanders so openly, but the Sergeant’s face was gentler than anyone had ever seen it.

“Hey, Michel, that’s worse than ‘Reaper!’”

“Don’t you know? Satan is technically a fallen angel.”

“Oh, quit trying to sound so smart. I’m just some ignorant grunt, okay?”

The air of gloom that had once hung over the 08th Team had lifted completely. By defeating Sanders’s supposed curse through their own efforts, everyone felt practically giddy.

“Michel, mind taking a look at my Gundam?”

Karen had arrived last, walking over with measured steps.

“That new model’s weapon must have shorted it out. I’m at a total loss here.”

“Oh, yes, ma’am!”

Michel broke off his banter immediately and jogged over. He was pleased Karen had asked for his help.

Meanwhile, Karen herself wasn’t smiling. Instead, she stood there silently watching Shiro chat with Sanders.

“Leaving your mobile suit to fight on foot...”

She still couldn’t believe Shiro had actually done that. Sure, it was an interesting idea, but it was riddled with risk. So many ways it could have failed:

If they’d spotted Shiro on foot first, if the autopilot’s timing had been off, if he’d blundered into a trap, if the empty Gundam had been discovered before it stood up, if the Stinger shot had missed, if the enemy pilot hadn’t used that particular weapon...

In truth, it had been a terrible gamble. And yet, he’d done it anyway. Why?

“Was it to break Sanders’s curse? Or to rescue me?”

Karen couldn't say for sure. All she knew was that Shiro gained absolutely nothing from taking such a risk. Every commander she'd served under before had cared only about their own promotion or survival. Stuck out here in the Far East warzone through sheer bad luck, they'd complain and try to transfer out. Some feigned illness and barricaded themselves in their rooms. Others spouted endless theory but cowered at the rear when actual fighting broke out. They called the 08th Team a "Commander-Killer," but in Karen's view, those officers practically got themselves killed.

Shiro, this new commander, was different. He was inexperienced, sure, but that was a shortfall the rest of them could cover. What mattered was a willingness to share his subordinates' fate, the courage to stand firm in dire situations. With that, the troops would follow.

"Maybe... just maybe..."

"Chief Joshua? Is something wrong?"

Noticing Karen's gaze, Shiro looked puzzled. She realized she must have been staring. Quickly, she fumbled for an excuse.

"No, I... your arm..."

"My arm?"

Shiro glanced down at himself. Blood trickled from a wound in his right arm, likely sustained during his on-foot skirmish.

"Let me see it. I'll give you some first aid."

"Ah, it's nothing. I can--"

"It's your right arm, sir. You planning to treat it one-handed with your left?"

Shiro paused, realizing that would be nearly impossible.

"I was a med student once," Karen explained. "I can probably manage better than your left hand can."

"A med student?"

"It was a long time ago."

She nodded curtly, and although Shiro found that intriguing, he decided not to pry further, he could sense she'd clam up again if he pushed.

"Alright, then. I'll rely on you, Chief Joshua."

He extended his right arm. As Karen took hold of it, she spoke in a brusque tone on purpose.

"Karen is fine."



They were on the way back to Kojima Base when Michel, as if remembering something, broke the silence.

"Commander, I've gotta say... how in the world did you come up with that plan? Leaving your mobile suit to fight on foot?"

"He's right," Sanders said, sounding more formal than usual. "Not just anyone can pull that off. Had you been thinking about it for a while?"

Karen said nothing, but she, too, was curious about Shiro's reply. It had been a strategy with enormous risk, pulling it together in such a short time was no small feat.

"Oh, I saw it on TV," Shiro said matter-of-factly.

"TV?" Michel demanded, suspicious. "Don't tell me... this is more of your 'Captain Joe' nonsense?"

But Shiro didn't look the slightest bit guilty.

"What, you've never seen it, Michel? Joe's a pro at taking down Zakus with his Stinger."

"You've got to be kidding me. You're telling me we owed our lives to some silly TV plot?!"

Eledore practically howled in disbelief.

"Well," Sanders chimed in, valiantly trying to defend Shiro, "they probably research these shows carefully. Maybe some soldier out there really did fight that way."

Karen simply stared at them, too dumbfounded to say anything.

"Look, a win's a win," Shiro declared. "We beat that enemy fair and square."

"That's not the point!"

"A life-or-death game of 'Captain Joe,' huh."

"Come on, Michel, don't whine so much. I'll lend you my discs sometime."

"No thanks!"

The 08th Team was in high spirits. Despite the fact that encountering the Gouf had forced them to abort their mission, they were acting like they'd achieved a grand success.

"Maybe it's all thanks to this," Shiro thought, bantering with Michel and the others as he glanced at the watch hanging in his cockpit. Perhaps this good-luck charm, once a joke, might actually make miracles happen.

"When the war ends, I'll go to Side 3. I'll give this back to Aina myself. I'll thank her, maybe share a meal... and then..."

His pleasant daydream trailed off.

"Explosions?"

Eledore pressed his sonar headset to his ear, looking shaken.

"Eledore, did you say something?" Michel asked.

"Are you deaf? There's fighting going on, close by!" Eledore snapped, losing his cool. "Damn it... it's coming from Kojima Base!"

He cursed himself for not wearing the sonar just a few moments earlier. He'd never imagined the base could be under attack.

"Eledore, what's happening?"

"It's exactly what it sounds like, Commander. I hear gunfire, explosions, sirens... an all-out assault. It's coming from the direction of Kojima Base."

Gone was Eledore's usual glib tone. Next to him, Michel clutched the photo of B.B. in his pocket.

Maybe the Sanders the Reaper curse wasn't over yet.



By the time Shiro and the others returned, Kojima Base had been reduced to little more than rubble.

Though sporadic fighting continued, nearly all the structures lay destroyed; fires raged across the complex. The mix of sirens and agonized screams formed a jarring, discordant chorus. Wreckage from mobile suits littered the ground, along with piles of debris... and bodies everywhere, an apocalyptic nightmare.

Yet there was no sign of the attackers. Had they withdrawn? That seemed strange, given the faint crackle of gunfire still audible, and there were no remains of enemy units at all, no corpses or vehicles.

"This... can't be..."

Shiro finally managed, mouth dry as sandpaper.

"Not just a single squad, but a whole battalion..."

The "Reaper" curse flared anew in Sanders's mind. Everyone said his unit would always be wiped out on its third sortie, and in truth, that third sortie hadn't really ended yet. He felt sick with himself for ever letting his guard down.

Karen nervously flicked her camera view again and again, but all it showed was the same panorama of devastation at Kojima Base. Eledore tried to break the oppressive silence with some witty remark, only to find no words came at all, his mouth opened like a fish gasping for food. Michel was in even worse shape: mute, mind paralyzed. He seemed not even to understand where he was.

In front of the stunned 08th Team, something blazed down from above, a flash of light slamming into a half-intact warehouse. The structure disintegrated in an instant, leaving a giant crater behind. It was as though they'd witnessed magic, there one moment, gone the next.

"They're attacking from above?!"

Shiro was the first to snap out of it. He whipped his gaze skyward. Something was up there, half hidden in the glare, definitely hovering in the direction that beam had come from.

"You're saying that thing destroyed the entire base... on its own?"

Only one silhouette hung against the sky, no other enemy in sight. Which could only mean...

"One single unit did all this damage?"

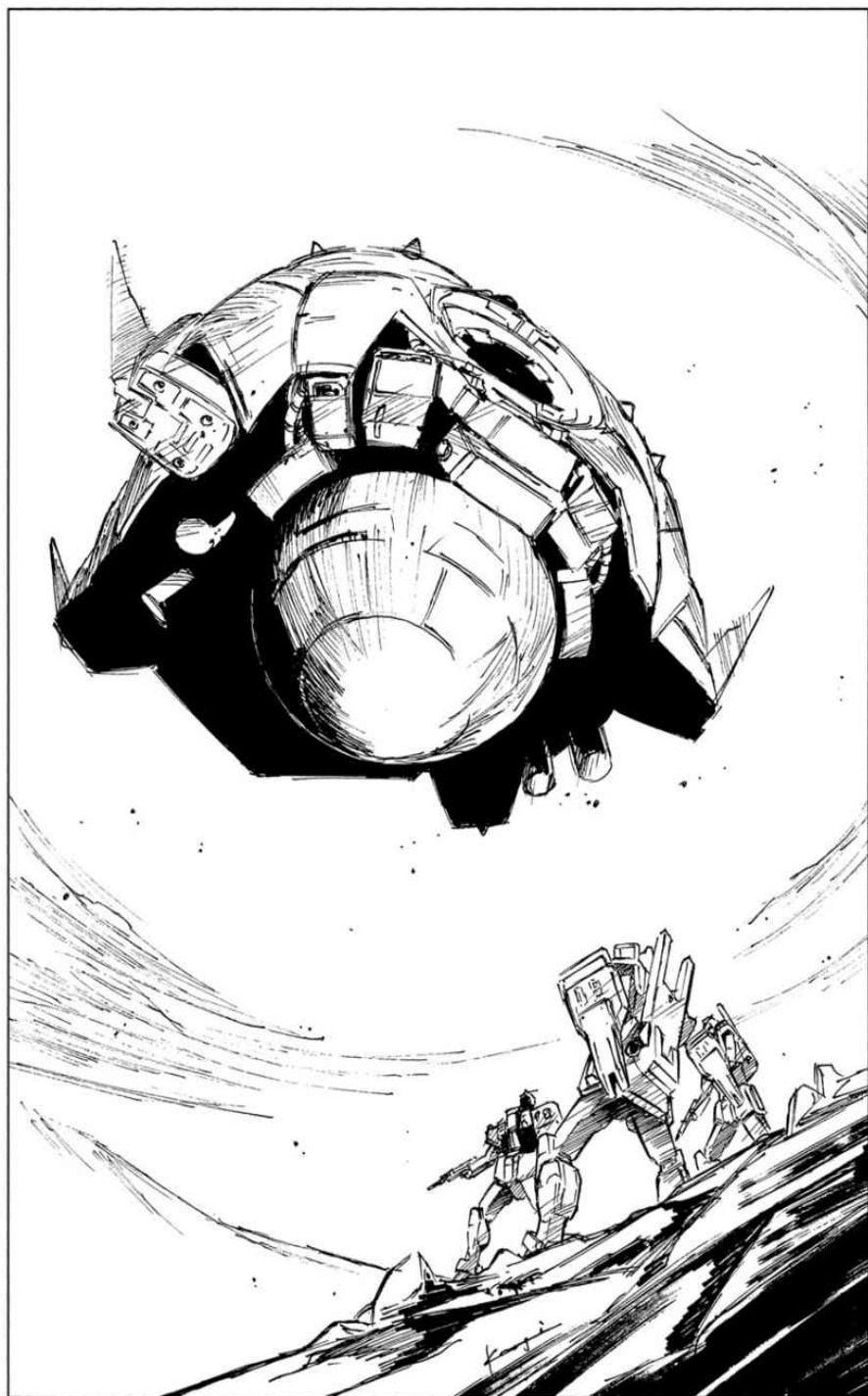
Shiro squinted into the light, Aina's watch in his cockpit swaying gently.



Three mobile suits.

Unknown model designation.

Likely ground-combat models.



Aina scanned the readouts on her console and switched views on her monitor. She zoomed in on the northern part of the base, where three new mobile suits were staring up at the Apsaras. Judging by their lack of return fire, they had no weapons capable of striking at such altitude.

“A new model, perhaps,” she murmured in the cockpit, registering the Gundam, which wasn’t in her data banks, only as an “unidentified enemy unit.”

She never imagined who might be inside.