



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

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM

VOLUME.02

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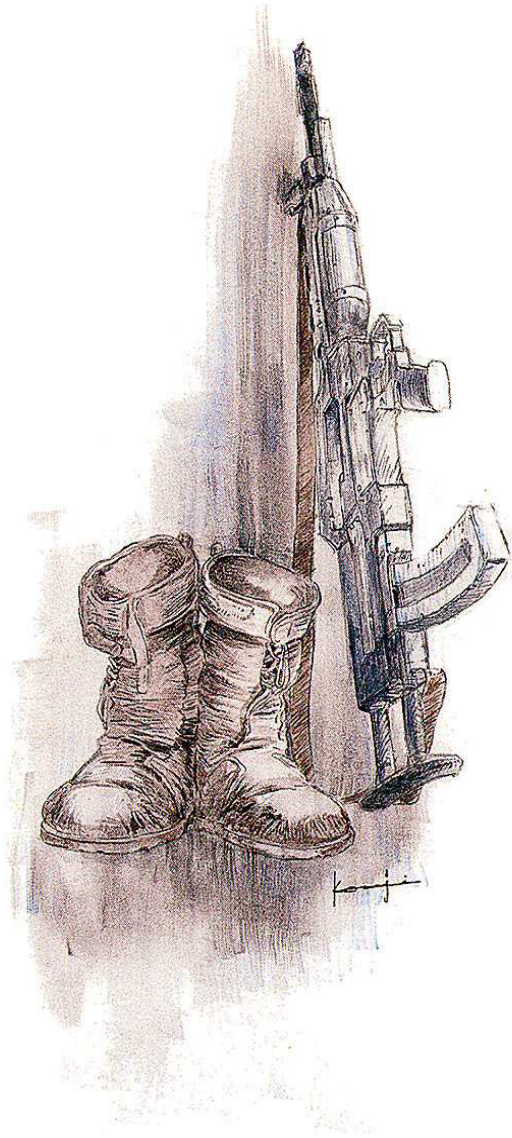
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Red light flooded my vision.  
Sirens wailed relentlessly.  
The air itself was slipping away.  
I was only five years old, trapped in that nightmare.  
I was being carried by a man. My brother was with me, too.  
The man gripped each of us tightly under his arms as he sprinted through the chaos.

Carrying a five-year-old like me was one thing, but my twelve-year-old brother couldn't have been so light. Yet somehow, the man never faltered; he just kept running, both of us clutched firmly to his sides.

All I felt was fear; utter, overwhelming fear.

My voice had died in my throat.

My eyelids were frozen open.

My thoughts had ceased.

I was so utterly petrified that everything within me had ground to a halt.

My brother's face hovered right in front of mine.

But it wasn't the face I knew.

His clear, gentle blue eyes had twisted into a murky, reddish-brown.

His skin darkened, turning mossy green, with blotches of black appearing like stains of ink.

Blood poured from his nostrils in an endless cascade, but it wasn't red. To my horror, it was blue, vividly blue, like my favorite shampoo.

Before my eyes, my brother was turning into something inhuman.

And I couldn't do a thing.

I was powerless...

# Chapter.01

## Reunion

"I've done it again..." Sanders groaned bitterly.

The so-called "Reaper" jinx must have weighed heavily on his mind, the superstition that any squad Sanders joined would be wiped out on its third mission. Shiro's 08th Team had just returned safely from their third deployment, and for a brief moment, it seemed the jinx had finally been shattered.

But it wasn't over yet.

"Dammit... it's still happening."

When the 08th Team returned triumphant from repelling enemy forces, what greeted them was the smoldering ruin of Kojima Base. A mission wasn't truly finished until they returned home safely, and clearly, this was far from safe.

"Snap out of it, Sanders!" Shiro barked sharply. "Forget the damn jinx, we've got a job to do! Take that thing down, whatever it is!"

Sanders jerked his head upward in sudden panic. Something floated menacingly in the sky above, what Shiro had simply called "that thing." It hung there, barely visible as a dark silhouette against the blinding glare of the sun. Whatever it was, it must have been Zeon's new weapon, and, shockingly, this single craft had evidently obliterated the entire Kojima Base by itself.

"Eledore! Anything from the audio signatures?"

"All I can tell you is that it's got Minovsky Craft," Eledore answered, pressing his headphones tighter against his ears.

Minovsky Craft technology utilized repulsive forces between Minovsky particles to achieve sustained flight, cutting-edge tech, certainly, but already deployed by the Federation in vessels like the Pegasus class. It wasn't unthinkable that Zeon might have something similar.

"But other than that, I've got nothing! This thing sounds totally new, doesn't match anything else we've encountered."

With Minovsky particles rendering radar useless, auditory analysis had become a vital method for identifying enemy craft.

"Alright, spread out and attack!" Shiro swiftly ordered. "Grouping up just makes us sitting ducks!"

The destruction of the base and the appearance of Zeon's advanced weaponry had rattled Shiro. But he couldn't let shock take over, he was commander of the 08th Team, after all.



The three mobile suits scattered simultaneously, sprinting in different directions while firing upwards at Aina's Apsaras.

"Pointless," Aina murmured coldly.

She quickly identified their weapons as mere machine guns. There was no need even for evasive maneuvers. A faint rattling echoed, shots peppering harmlessly off the underside of her craft. Machine gun rounds posed no real threat to the Apsaras.

Machine guns prioritized firing speed, spraying bullets wildly to maximize the chances of hitting targets. Individually, each bullet lacked serious penetrating power. Moreover, unlike the vacuum of space, Earth's gravity dragged these bullets downward. Shooting straight up required extra force, and beneath the Apsaras floated a powerful repulsive field generated by the Minovsky Craft. Machine gun rounds simply didn't have enough punch to pierce its reinforced underside.

Aina selected one mobile suit among the three darting figures. It moved swiftly, faster than she'd anticipated. She could obliterate the entire surrounding area to ensure a hit, but the Apsaras's energy reserves had already dipped into cautionary levels.

"Remember, this mission is purely a test," her brother's voice echoed clearly in her mind. Eliminating enemies wasn't Aina's task, soon, Rear Admiral Yuri Kellerne's forces would sweep through and handle any remaining resistance.

She chose a trajectory that risked missing, deliberately.



A blinding pillar of light fell from above.

At least, that's how it seemed to Sanders.

The Apsaras's mega particle cannon struck just short of his mobile suit. Though it missed, the sheer force of impact sent his Gundam tumbling violently backwards.

"What kind of firepower is this?!" Sanders choked out, hopelessness filling him. Even the Gundam's thick armor wouldn't survive a direct hit from that monster. And it hadn't even bothered dodging their attacks, it hadn't needed to.

"Sanders, you okay!?"

"Yes, Commander!" Sanders shouted, regaining his feet swiftly. Running was their only real option now.

"Commander, machine guns won't cut it!" Michel's voice crackled through the comms. "The Minovsky Craft creates a repulsive field below it! Our rounds can barely reach it!"

"So, what else can we use?" Shiro demanded.

"Well... something stronger, like a beam rifle, or maybe even attacking from above with fighter craft would work, outside of the repulsive field."

“Fighters?!” Eledore snapped irritably. “Where the hell do you think we're gonna find fighters? Stop wishing for things we don't have, we've gotta use what we've got!”

“You asked, so I answered!”

“Knock it off, both of you!” Shiro's voice cut sharply through the argument. “Find us some weapons, something powerful enough to take it down! I'll buy as much time as I can!”

“Yes, sir!” Karen answered immediately, already moving.

Whether it was how he'd snapped Sanders out of his stupor or quelled the squabble between Eledore and Michel, Karen noted with a faint smile that Shiro was finally growing into his role as leader, especially under this kind of pressure.



Aina confirmed that her initial shot had indeed missed. Carefully, she began lining up her next target.

Which one?

They all seemed identical, and none carried a weapon capable of truly threatening her Apsaras.

The dry clinking of bullets striking below interrupted her thoughts again. One mobile suit persistently kept firing its ineffective machine gun. Irritated, she decided it would be the next one to silence.



From his cockpit, Shiro saw the enemy's weapon aiming squarely at him. Good. This was exactly what he'd wanted.

He intentionally dashed across open ground without cover, drawing the enemy's fire. Every second mattered, Karen and the others needed time to dig through the rubble, to find a weapon capable of taking down this menace.

His gaze flicked briefly down to the watch placed carefully in the cockpit, Aina's watch.

“I'm coming back alive...” he whispered fiercely, “I swear it.”



“Another dud!”

Sanders tossed away a spent 180mm cannon retrieved from a fallen GM. It had already run dry.

“Do we really have to dig through that pile?” Sanders muttered, eyes shifting to the demolished remains of the weapons storage depot. Surely there'd be usable weapons beneath, provided they weren't destroyed during

the collapse. But even if intact, clearing all that rubble would take time they simply didn't have.

Sanders glanced anxiously at the monitor tracking Shiro's suit. The enemy was still firing relentlessly, meaning Shiro was still holding on, but for how long? Eventually, luck would run out.

"Sanders." Karen's voice broke through his doubts. "Looks like you had the same idea."

He turned to see Karen's suit already heaving aside chunks of debris from the wreckage of the armory.

"Don't you dare give up, Sanders," she warned. "Or do I need to beat some sense into you again?"

"N-no, ma'am!" he stammered.

*"That's right, Shiro hasn't given up, so neither can I!"*

Galvanized by fresh determination, Sanders joined Karen, frantically tearing through rubble.



The ground erupted just behind Shiro's Gundam.

The enemy's mega particle cannon had missed, but its shots were growing steadily more accurate. Likely, it possessed some form of adaptive targeting software. And it was now lowering its altitude, too, making its next shot even easier.

*"Karen, Sanders... what's taking so long?!"*

Shiro felt a pang of urgency, but he wasn't about to transmit that anxiety to his teammates. "I can't let my own anxiety infect the others."

Just as Karen had noticed, Shiro was rapidly maturing into his role as leader. His field of view was expanding; he was seeing situations from multiple perspectives at once. Before, Shiro would have focused solely on taking down the enemy. Now, though, he considered his comrades just as carefully. That was why he could make such a decision.

*"What next? Should I hide behind one of the buildings? No... then it'd target Karen and Sanders. I need something else. I just have to buy more time... But how?"*

His Gundam zigzagged across open ground as Shiro's mind raced for a solution. He thought about the countless impossible scenarios from his beloved Captain Joe stories, how did Captain Joe always manage to turn the tables?

Another brilliant flash of light plunged toward him.

This time, it struck right next to his suit. Although he narrowly avoided a direct hit, the sheer force of the blast hurled his machine sideways. Somehow, he managed to land and keep upright.

*"The sheer power of it!"*

Glancing briefly at the crater gouged by the blast, Shiro's blood ran cold. A direct hit would vaporize him, no shield could withstand that.

*"No way I can afford to get tagged by that."*

As Shiro tried to resume running, a warning light suddenly blinked to life on his cockpit monitor.

Frantically, he pulled up the status display.

"Damn it!"

The left knee flashed red urgently, his knee suspension was damaged. Perhaps he'd twisted it badly during the rough landing. He'd struggled so desperately to keep upright that he'd put immense strain on it.

With that, running was out of the question. His shield would offer no protection from the enemy's attacks, and there was nowhere nearby to hide.

*"Now what?!"*

Shiro looked desperately skyward. Silhouetted sharply by the sun, the enemy loomed ominously above, charging another burst of deadly light.



The enemy mobile suit had stopped moving, its leg must have been damaged. Aina took careful aim at the stationary target.

"Firing at three percent power, narrow-focus."

She confirmed the parameters, then calmly squeezed the trigger.

A dense beam of mega particles burst forth from the Apsaras, smashing mercilessly into the surface below. It would annihilate the Federation suit along with the earth beneath it.

Through the billowing smoke, Aina quickly checked for confirmation. But before she could confirm her kill, a shrill alarm sounded urgently, the proximity warning for an enemy craft.

"From where?!"

She quickly brought the incoming threat onto her main monitor and froze in shock.

"Impossible..."

On-screen, clearly displayed, the Federation mobile suit was soaring straight toward her through the sky.



Just moments before the mega particle cannon struck, Shiro had ignited the Gundam's verniers at full throttle, launching himself straight up.

"I... I did it!"

If his legs wouldn't cooperate, the thrusters on his backpack would have to do. According to the manuals, at maximum thrust, even his ground-use Gundam could briefly achieve substantial altitude.

Backed into a corner, Shiro had gambled everything on that, and won.

The RX-79(G) Gundam he piloted was built using spare components from the legendary RX-78. Although labeled "out of spec," this merely meant these parts hadn't passed RX-78's unusually stringent quality standards, still

perfectly usable for practical purposes. In other words, even though designated “mass-production,” its basic capabilities closely approached the RX-78 itself.

Thus, like its predecessor, the RX-79(G) Gundam could use its backpack verniers to execute midair maneuvers. Unknown to Shiro, this same tactic had once been pioneered by Sergeant Amuro Ray, facing Garma Zabi’s Dopp squadron.

“So this... is Zeon’s new weapon!”

In midair, Shiro finally got a clear look at his enemy. The mysterious weapon that single-handedly destroyed Kojima Base resembled nothing so much as an enormous inverted bowl. A familiar Zaku-like head poked up from its top, but there were no discernible arms or legs, only four stubby protrusions at its corners. Were those supposed to be landing gear? Clearly, it couldn’t walk. Just beneath the Zaku head gaped a massive opening, likely the mega particle cannon’s barrel.

“The armor looks thick... but if I could hit it there!”

With renewed resolve, Shiro fired the verniers again, diving straight at his target.

The enemy swiftly moved to evade. Surprisingly agile, but not agile enough. Although it avoided letting him land directly on top, Shiro managed to grab firmly onto one of its stubby “legs.”

“You won’t get away, Zeon scum!” he shouted defiantly, dangling fiercely from the enemy machine.



“You won’t get away, Zeon scum!”

Shiro’s angry voice suddenly echoed inside the Apsaras’s cockpit.

“No—!” Aina gasped in shock.

She realized with horror that she hadn’t completely evaded the Federation mobile suit after all. The transmission was contact-based, meaning the enemy was physically clinging to her machine.

“He grabbed one of the landing struts...”

Aina quickly switched to the underside camera. There it was: a white Federation mobile suit, stubbornly gripping the Apsaras’s lower leg. Its face, oddly human-like, with two expressive eyes, sent a chill of discomfort down her spine.

“Take this, Zeon bastard!”

Again his furious shout reverberated inside the cockpit, accompanied by the violent clatter of point-blank Vulcan fire. Damage indicators immediately flared red. At this proximity, even the Apsaras couldn’t remain unscathed.

Aina’s hand darted instinctively to the emergency controls beside her seat. Among them was a switch to detach the landing legs.

*“If I do this, the mobile suit will fall...”*



Her fingertips brushed the release switch, but at that exact instant, another angry cry reached her ears.

“Zeon bastards, get off our planet!”

This time, the voice froze Aina’s hand in place. She knew this voice.

*“It can’t be...?”*

It was absurd, a one-in-a-million coincidence. Yet Aina knew only one Federation soldier personally, a young man who would pilot a mobile suit like this...

“Ensign... Shiro Amada?”

She asked hesitantly, almost afraid of the answer.

The Federation pilot ceased firing. A tense silence followed, before finally, the reply came through clearly, unmistakably.

“Aina... is that you?”

That voice belonged, without question, to the young Federation officer she had met in space, Shiro Amada.



“Yes. It’s me, Aina Sahalin.”

Shiro stared dumbfounded at the speaker. Aina’s voice had come through via contact link, and the only thing his Gundam was touching was the enemy machine he desperately clung to.

Of course, Aina was Zeon. Even when they first met in space, she’d been piloting a mobile suit. So it wasn’t impossible she’d be inside a Zeon weapon now. Not impossible, but still...

“Why...?”

That single word escaped his lips. Why was Aina piloting this new enemy weapon? Why was fate forcing them to fight again? His words weren’t so much aimed at Aina as at the cruel hand of destiny itself.

“So, it really is you, Shiro Amada.” Aina’s voice remained calm, unchanged from their first meeting.

“Aina... it’s really you? You’re piloting this mobile armor? You destroyed our entire base?”

Aina didn’t answer, and her silence confirmed his fears.

“But why? I was going to end this war and then visit you at Side 3, return your watch, I mean... God, what am I even saying?”

Shiro was overwhelmed. There was so much he wanted to say, so much to convey, but he knew he couldn’t say it all at once. He took a deep breath, gathered himself, and finally said the most important thing first.

“Aina, please stop attacking. I don’t want to fight you.”

“Very well,” Aina replied quietly. “But in exchange, there’s something I must ask you.”



"Sanders, don't miss! We've only got enough juice for one shot!"

"Understood!"

Sanders hefted the long-range beam rifle they'd finally unearthed from beneath the rubble. Power was dialed up to maximum, just enough for one powerful shot, capable of reaching the enemy machine hovering far above.

Fortunately, the enemy had stopped moving.

Sanders pulled out the long-range targeting scope from beside his headrest. The silhouette of the enemy floated clearly against the harsh backlight.

He narrowed the crosshairs. Two circles swayed and then converged perfectly around the target.

"Got you!" Sanders squeezed the trigger.



A massive shock rocked the Apsaras.

Sanders' shot had struck the underside dead-on. Even the heavily armored Apsaras couldn't shrug this off unscathed. The cockpit erupted in a chorus of alarms and flashing warnings, momentarily throwing Aina into confusion.

The engine block was compromised. Energy gauges plummeted. The Minovsky Craft wouldn't sustain itself much longer. All system warnings urgently recommended immediate withdrawal for rapid repairs.

"Stop firing, Sanders! She's not our enemy!"

Shiro's voice crackled urgently. Evidently, his comrades on the ground had secured long-range weaponry.

"Disengaging mega particle cannon. Shutting down non-essential systems. Switching engine control to auxiliary units. Implementing emergency measures through Phase 31, then awaiting further instructions."

Aina calmly assessed damage reports and swiftly issued orders. Damage was moderate, but system instability was severe. Unexpected errors were cropping up everywhere.

"Still just an experimental unit after all."

Given the Apsaras' unforeseen fragility, she decided on immediate retreat. The calculations claimed she could remain airborne another ten minutes, but she didn't dare trust them.

"Rear Admiral Yuri Kellerné, do you read? This is Aina Sahalin." She opened comms to Yuri's nearby unit. If the Apsaras crash-landed, she'd need quick retrieval.

A brief pause, then Yuri's voice came through, sounding cheerful as ever. The man came alive on the battlefield.

"Ah, splendid job, Aina! We're currently mopping up retreating Federation Forces. Your brother's little toy packs quite the punch."

"I'm still engaging Federation remnants over their base. I'll retreat via route B07. Request immediate retrieval."

"Were you hit?"

"Nothing critical. Just taking precautions."

That was a lie. But she couldn't bear telling Yuri that her brother's precious Apsaras had been damaged by Federation troops.

"Understood. I'll dispatch a recovery team. Forgive me, but I'm busy playing whack-a-mole here."

The comm link closed abruptly. That suited Aina fine; she had no desire for prolonged chatter either.

She glanced again at Shiro's mobile suit, still gripping the landing leg tightly. Maintaining flight was already difficult enough without his added weight.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, opening the emergency control box and pressing the release switch.



The Apsaras' landing strut detached.

Still clutching the severed leg, Shiro's Gundam began plummeting helplessly toward the earth.

"Aina, why...?"

He watched the Apsaras vanish into the southern sky.

She said she wasn't a soldier.

She had thanked him with a smile.

She had seemed ready to speak with him again.

"Why...?"

He couldn't understand it. Kojima Base obliterated, Zeon's powerful new weapon, and Aina at its controls. His mind whirled chaotically, so confused he hardly noticed his own rapid descent.

"Commander!"

Sanders' voice suddenly pierced his haze, snapping Shiro back to reality.



Shiro's Gundam hurtled toward the ground, firing its backpack verniers at the very last second. Its descent slowed just enough to allow a rough but controlled landing.

"Commander!" Sanders' mobile suit rushed forward first. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah... I'm fine," Shiro answered weakly, prompting a sigh of relief from Sanders.

"We have to retreat," Karen urged, her suit also racing up beside him.

"Nearly all Kojima Base forces have already pulled out. We need to fall back and regroup with rear-line units."

"Kojima Base is done for," Eledore added grimly. "Hang around too long, and we'll get left behind."

"More Zeon troops will arrive any minute!" Michel's voice trembled with anxiety. "We've already fought two battles, we're low on ammo and energy!"

Shiro, however, shook his head firmly.

"No. We can't."

"What the hell are you talking about, Commander?" Sanders protested. "We hesitate any longer and Zeon will cut off our retreat. We need to—"

"They're already here," Shiro interrupted.

"What?"

"Our retreat route is blocked. The Federation units ahead of us ran straight into a Zeon ambush."

Shiro remembered clearly overhearing Yuri's transmission with Aina, explicitly mentioning engaging retreating Federation troops. Zeon must have circled around during the Apsaras attack, closing off escape routes.

"Now I finally get it... what the Commander meant about this battlefield being made up of 'points,' not 'lines.'" Shiro recalled the Commander's words when he'd first arrived. Battles in the jungle weren't linear, units moved unpredictably. That explained how Zeon had gotten behind them unnoticed.

"So what do we do now?" Michel's voice rose desperately. "If we stay here, we'll just be slaughtered! I don't want to die!"

Understandably so.

Their allied forces were practically annihilated. Retreat routes already severed. Once Zeon finished mopping up the earlier Federation withdrawal, they'd come to secure Kojima Base. Against those odds, even the 08th Team with its three Gundams faced certain defeat.

"So I really am... I'm..."

Sanders didn't voice the word "jinxed," but his anguish was clear.

"Maybe surrendering's our only choice," Eledore muttered, half-serious beneath his usual flippancy. Captivity, to him, seemed better than death.

"Don't give up, Eledore! We're not there yet." Karen snapped.

"Who knows what Zeon does to prisoners. I heard they work them to death so they don't break treaties outright," Michel said, backing up Karen's words.

"So, you'd rather fight and die?" Eledore retorted bitterly. "Not me. I don't want to die."

"I don't either!" Michel echoed.

"Stop it, both of you!" Shiro's voice cut through sharply. Now wasn't the time for infighting.

Their situation was undeniably grim, but surrender was no option, not to an enemy willing to use poison gas on civilians. Shiro summoned every ounce of his confidence and declared firmly,

"We'll make it. I have a plan."



Unable to bear the tension any longer, a Federation GM bolted forward, desperately firing its machine gun in a wild frontal charge. Zeon's response

was merciless, crossfire pouring in from all sides until the GM exploded violently, collapsing in flames.

Moments after the explosion, a white flag rose hesitantly from the jungle's edge. Seeing Zeon hold fire, surviving Federation troops, mostly mechanics and support personnel, emerged cautiously, defeated and despondent.

"Well, looks like we're done here," Rear Admiral Yuri Kellerne remarked with evident satisfaction.

"Truly pathetic, sir," Lieutenant Alida Valli replied curtly. "They wait until they're fully encircled before attempting a breakout. Idiots, the lot of them. Seems the Federation must not bother teaching their troops much beyond basic piloting."

"Don't judge too harshly, Valli," Yuri laughed heartily. "It's a bureaucracy more than an army, bad at war, great at paperwork. Let them stay incompetent; it's better for us."

"True enough, but still," Valli admitted grudgingly, "it's a waste of perfectly good mobile suits."

A laugh burst from Yuri, amused at Valli's sincerity. Indeed, as Alida had noted, the retreating Federation forces had offered little real resistance. Certainly, they'd been battered heavily by the Apsaras, and ambushes during retreat had sown panic among them, but still...

"They're weak because they lack conviction, that's what the Supreme Commander would say."

And yes, Yuri thought, that was part of it.

Yet he believed there was more. The Federation itself was structured less like a military force and more like a policing agency. To put it bluntly, it was bureaucratic; those who excelled at deskwork advanced the fastest. Rumor had it General Revil was the only one at command headquarters who could actually fire a gun.

"Admiral!" Ensign Karl Bohm interrupted, approaching respectfully. Although Yuri's official rank was Rear Admiral, Karl, who came from a factory background, habitually addressed him as "Admiral." Technically, such a mistake could be seen as disrespectful or even insubordinate, but Yuri never minded.

"Admiral, the young lady from the Sahalin family..." Karl indicated Aina, standing quietly behind him, still clad in her normal suit.

"Finally ready to become my mistress, Aina?" Yuri teased lightly, only to be met with Aina's cold, blank stare.

"How are Federation troops faring?" she asked evenly, ignoring his jest.

"We missed a few fast runners, but we've sealed off every other route. They've nowhere left to run."

"I see..."

"The remaining troops have begun surrendering. It won't be long until the fighting's over."

"And those who surrendered?"

"They'll be listed and sent to the rear."

"Could I see that list?"

Yuri paused, puzzled by her request, then shrugged.

"I suppose. There's no harm in it."

A prisoner list was hardly classified information. But Yuri felt an immediate suspicion. Why would Aina want such a thing? She had never shown much interest even in fellow Zeon soldiers.

*"Is this Ginyas' doing? No, if the Technical Rear Admiral wanted it, he could get it without her involvement..."*

Yuri studied Aina closely again.

Her expression remained blank, yet her demeanor betrayed subtle hints of hesitation, or perhaps even worry.

*"This is strange. It's not like her at all."*

It wasn't the Aina he knew.

Yuri had known her since their days at the officer academy. Even then, she'd always been like a porcelain doll, expressionless, devoid of visible emotion. Her classmates had even given her a nickname:

The Faceless Doll.

"Admiral Kellerne—" she began hesitantly.

"Fine, Aina," Yuri interrupted gently. "I'll deliver the list personally once it's ready."

"Thank you, Admiral Kellerne," Aina replied softly.

Not being a soldier herself, Aina didn't salute but simply inclined her head respectfully. It was the first time Yuri had ever heard her express gratitude.



Zeon's losses were minimal.

In contrast, the Federation forces had been thoroughly decimated, their remnants retreating entirely to rear bases.

This was the outcome of the series of battles that began with the Apsaras's surprise attack.

The army group led by Rear Admiral Yuri Kellerne advanced their territory, establishing Kojima Base as their new forward stronghold. The Kojima Battalion was undergoing reorganization around its commander, who had narrowly escaped. The frontline was barely holding, maintained by reserve forces and reinforcements from the Crawford Battalion.

Three days after the operation, the list of surrendered Federation soldiers was finalized.

However, Shiro Amada's name was not among them.

## Chapter.02

### Holed Up

A small girl made her way through the forest.

She was missing her right leg.

Instead, she gripped a rough, wooden crutch in her right hand, using it as her missing leg, hopping along with her left. Perhaps not yet fully accustomed to walking this way, she occasionally teetered precariously.

Her name was Mati.

Yes, the same girl who had been caught in a trap while trying to warn her village about Shiro's mobile suit.

Fortunately, the trap's explosive had been designed for anti-MS use, highly destructive but relatively ineffective against human targets, allowing Mati to survive. Still, she wasn't unscathed. Mati had lost her right leg, and the lower half of her body bore ugly burn scars.

Despite this, Mati remained cheerful.

In the village, many had injuries far worse than hers, and a part of her felt a tiny spark of pride, as if she'd earned a badge of honor.

About three weeks after regaining her ability to walk, Mati insisted on resuming her "duties." After all, other adults were working hard for the village despite their injuries, and she wanted to contribute, too.

The adults assigned Mati a new task, delivering meals to her comrades, as part of her rehabilitation.

Now, Mati was fulfilling that mission.

In her left hand, she carried a bundle containing four lunchboxes, three for Kiki and her friends, one for herself. The boxes rattled softly as she walked.

The path Mati traveled was free of traps. Ever since the Federation Forces had retreated, the forest had ceased to be a battlefield. Neither Zeon nor the Federation set traps anymore. Besides, Kiki and the others had already traversed this path earlier in the morning.

Eventually, the narrow forest trail opened up into a small clearing, where three mobile suits lay covered with green camouflage sheets adorned with foliage, making them blend with the surrounding forest.

"Kiki! I brought lunch!" Mati called.

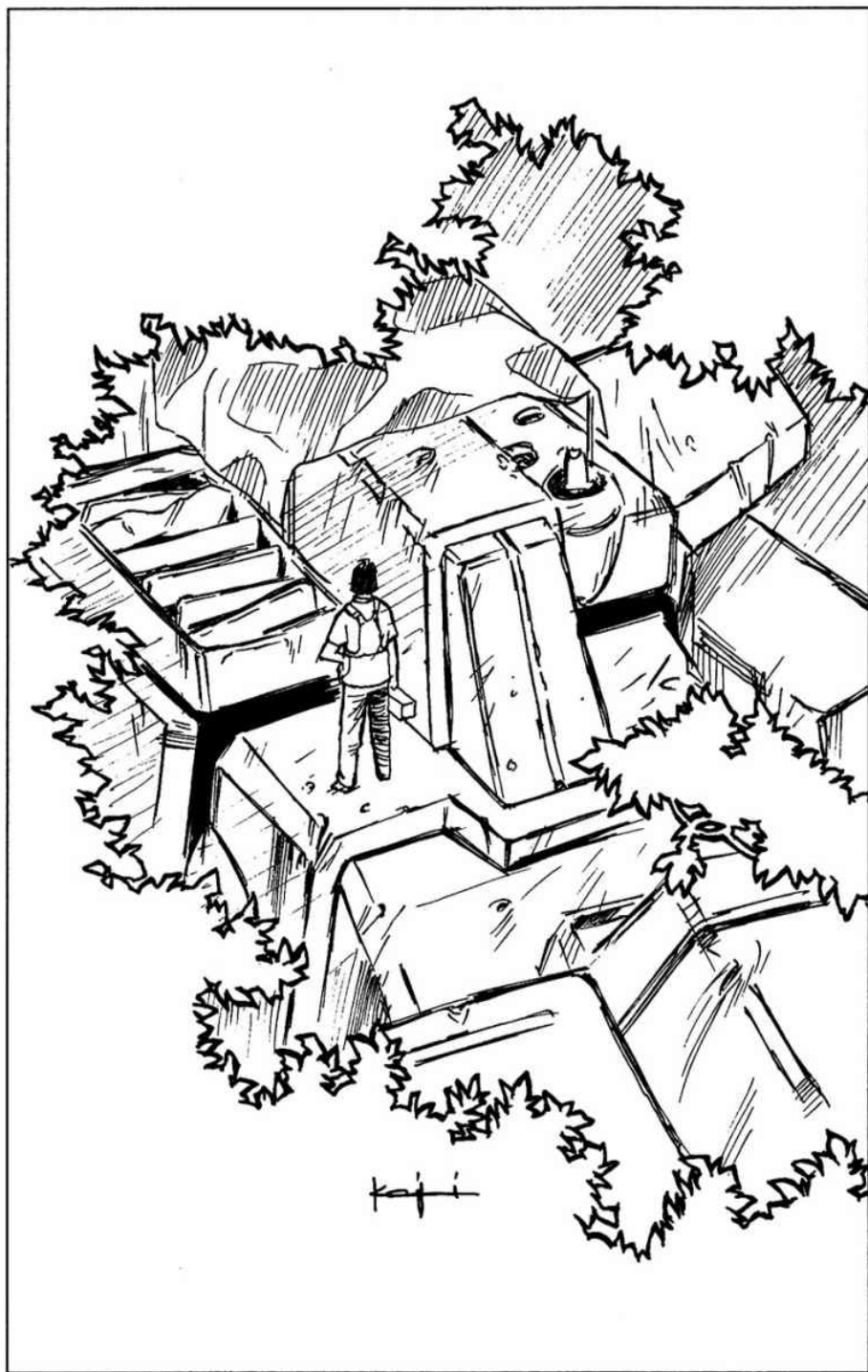
Kiki's face popped out from the belly of one of the mobile suits.

"Thanks, Mati! I'll be right down." She then turned and shouted into the machine's interior, "Hey, Shiro, let's take a break. Forget about this junker for a while and come eat."

"How many times do I have to tell you not to call me by my first name!" came the voice of the Federation soldier.

"Yeah, yeah. Or would you rather I eat yours, too?"

"Don't even think about it. You'd just eat my side dishes first!"



"Well, that settles it," Kiki laughed, turning towards the suit's knee. "Hear that, Michel? We have the commander's blessing, break time!"

"Yeah, yeah, coming," another soldier replied lazily as he crawled out from the mobile suit's left knee.

Holding their lunches, Mati slowly approached the mobile suits.



After their battle with the Apsaras, the 08th Team had sought refuge in Kiki's village, Baruk.

This was Shiro's "plan." Retreating meant running into Zeon's ambush, and staying at the destroyed Kojima Base guaranteed being overrun. So, Shiro had chosen to advance instead of retreating. As Commander Kojima had said, jungle warfare was not a linear front but rather a battle of isolated points. Just as Zeon had slipped through gaps to ambush from behind, Shiro had slipped through Zeon's defenses to hide in Baruk Village. There, they planned to repair the Gundams, waiting for tensions to ease before retreating.

"We've been here a week now, and that piece of junk still won't budge. Isn't it about time you gave up?" Kiki asked, munching on the lunch prepared by Mati's mother.

"Not happening," Shiro grumbled. "The Gundam is vital to Federation Forces."

Despite a week passing, the 08th Team's fighting strength hadn't recovered. Without spare parts, tools, or qualified mechanics, repairs were proving slow, frustrating Shiro immensely. His Gundam's left knee, damaged during the fight against the Apsaras, still wasn't fully operational. While it could walk, any running or turning quickly threw it off balance. Still, compared to Karen's heavily damaged unit, severely impaired by a heat rod, Shiro's was in better shape.

"Is the robot broken forever?" Mati asked Michel.

"It'd be easy if we had the parts. We're missing one shaft, so we have to reprogram everything to balance without it. Basically..." Michel noticed Mati's confusion and simplified, "It's like it lost a bone."

"Want mine? I don't need it anymore," Mati offered earnestly.

"Thanks, Mati. But yours might be a bit too small," Michel replied with a gentle smile.

"Commander, maybe we should cannibalize one machine," Michel suggested. "Then we'd have two fully functional Gundams."

"No way," Shiro said firmly. "Two units won't give us enough flexibility. Breaking through enemy lines with just one squad is risky enough."

"Then don't," Kiki interrupted.

"Excuse me?"

"I said don't do it. Forget going back. Just quit the war and live with us in the village."

"It's not that simple. I'm a Federation soldier, a commander, I have to defeat Zeon."

"Oh, okay," Kiki said, unconvinced.

Was that really how it worked? Kiki couldn't quite understand.

To Kiki, soldiers had always been nuisances who brought their war to her land. But meeting Shiro was shifting her perspective. These soldiers were people, just like her. This change was largely due to living alongside the 08th Team members and observing their character up close. Despite that, she couldn't understand where Shiro was coming from. Before, she would have simply dismissed such talk as the ramblings of military men who were fundamentally different from her people...

"Then stop being a soldier."

"I told you, that's not an option," Shiro said offhandedly, unaware of her inner struggle. For him, it was simply a matter of fact.

"Anyway, I'm not quitting the army, and we'll fix the Gundam. We'll push Zeon off Earth, period." His voice rose sharply, betraying his frustration. He had responsibilities as a commander, this wasn't the time for leisurely lunches.

"Michel, after lunch, let's try again. We'll reverse our approach. Instead of adapting the shaft to our program, stabilize the shaft first, then reprogram. That way, we can keep working even at night."

Determinedly, Shiro stuffed the remaining food into his mouth.



"Listen closely. The human body has five key pressure points for controlling bleeding. If someone's seriously wounded, apply pressure on these five spots. Ted, come here and lie down."

At Karen's command, a young man in a baseball cap stood up from among the group and lay down awkwardly at her feet.

"Don't worry about memorizing the names; just remember the locations. First is the base of the neck—" Karen pressed lightly at Ted's neck before slowly sliding her hand downward. "Then above the collarbone, the upper arm, the thigh, and finally..."

"Whoa!" Ted bolted upright, startled. Karen's hand had drifted dangerously close to his crotch.

"Come on, sis, that joke's not funny! You can't do that to an innocent kid like me!"

Karen scoffed loudly.

"Oh please! Who'd wanna touch your limp noodle anyway? I was pointing out the groin artery, you idiot!"

At "limp noodle," the other men exploded with laughter. Karen leaned down toward Ted, flashing a wicked grin. "Better shape up, kid, or you'll never land a girl like Kiki."

Ted's face turned beet red.

“W-who said that?! Who’s been spreading rumors?!” He whipped around accusingly at the men, but they only smirked mischievously, none willing to confess. Truthfully, all of them had eagerly informed Karen about Ted’s crush on Kiki.

Life in Baruk Village had turned out pretty nice.

Of course, initially, the villagers weren’t thrilled about having them around. They’d suffered too many casualties from Federation and Zeon traps. But after Karen successfully treated a man injured by a landmine, things changed dramatically. The grateful man began calling Karen “Big Sis,” and soon, impressed by her medical knowledge, the villagers asked her to share basic first-aid skills.

“Who told you such nonsense anyway, Sis?” Ted protested weakly. “I don’t even like girls as bossy as her—”

“Sure, sure,” Karen teased mercilessly. “I’ll be sure to let Kiki know you’re into bossy girls.”

“That’s not it!” Ted fumed, causing another round of hearty laughter from the group. Karen couldn’t help but laugh along with them.

Yeah, this place is pretty nice, Karen thought contentedly.



“How’re they getting along?” Baresto asked, taking a sip of tea and glancing toward Leonard, who was busy tidying up the tea set with his one good arm.

“Things seem fine. They’ve settled into village life well enough,” Leonard answered, deftly balancing the tea tray despite his missing limb. Ever since losing an arm in combat, Leonard had become Baresto’s trusted advisor. “Karen’s and Sanders’s lessons, in particular, are invaluable. Nothing beats training from real soldiers.”

“Yes,” Baresto sighed. “My knowledge has grown outdated.”

“What are you saying, boss?” Leonard reassured him gently. “It’s your leadership that’s kept this village safe all this time.”

Baresto was the one who initially taught the village men how to fight after returning from the army with an injured leg. But mobile suits hadn’t even existed when he served, so his anti-MS tactics were all improvised. Moreover, Baresto had minimal medical training, just enough to get by. Karen and Sanders were now filling those gaps in his knowledge.

“I admit, I had my doubts when you said we’d shelter those soldiers. But things turned out better than expected,” Leonard remarked thoughtfully.

“Yes... truthfully, I was worried myself,” Baresto chuckled quietly, prompting Leonard to raise an eyebrow.

“You certainly put on a confident front, boss!”

“I had to, or no one would’ve agreed.”

Leonard gave a wry smile. “That’s true enough. Nearly everyone opposed the idea at first. So, what made you decide to shelter them?”

"Hm..." Baresto smiled slightly, recalling his encounter with Shiro. He'd intended to turn the young officer away immediately but agreed to the meeting at his daughter's insistence. At that time, Baresto already knew Zeon had secured a decisive victory, pushing the Federation Forces back significantly, and he had no desire to antagonize the winning side.

"What exactly did that young ensign say to you?" Leonard asked curiously. Everyone in the village knew Ensign Shiro Amada as the captured Federation officer. "Did he offer you a mobile suit? Or threaten to burn down the village?"

"No, nothing of the sort," Baresto laughed, waving his hand dismissively. "The ensign didn't say anything complicated at all."

"Then what did he say?"

"'Consider this a debt,' he said."

"A debt?" Leonard repeated, puzzled. "And how exactly does he plan to repay that? Does he really think guerrillas do business based on trust?"

"Who knows?" Baresto shook his head, bemused. "All he said was, 'Consider this a debt.' Honestly, I couldn't help but admire the boy's nerve."

Shiro's unexpected words had completely disarmed Baresto, leaving him with nothing but a grudging respect. Of course, admiration alone wasn't why he'd agreed.

Sheltering Shiro's team was also insurance.

With the Federation retreating, Baruk Village had little choice but to cooperate with Zeon. If Zeon demanded labor or resources, resistance would be futile. However, Zeon might not always be victorious. If the Federation regained strength, maintaining a connection with them could prove beneficial. Thus, accepting Shiro's request became a strategic decision, though Baresto doubted he would have considered such a gamble if the officer hadn't been someone like Shiro.

"You do have lookouts keeping an eye on them, right?"

"Yes, sir," Leonard confirmed. "Reliable men are watching closely. As for the ensign, I believe your daughter herself is handling that..."

"So it seems," Baresto sighed wearily, suddenly appearing less like a guerrilla leader and more like an anxious father. "She seems quite taken with him."

"Worried?" Leonard teased.

"Of course I am," Baresto muttered grumpily, finishing the rest of his tea and motioning silently for Leonard to refill his cup.



About ten kilometers north of Kojima Base, the dense jungle canopy abruptly broke into a perfect, circular clearing, like a hole neatly punched from the forest. From above, this was Baruk Village, home to Kiki and the others.

The village consisted of around twenty modest wooden huts, arranged loosely into about four distinct clusters. The buildings were plain, unadorned, and colored in shades of natural green and brown, with virtually none of the bright reds or yellows common elsewhere.

Most of the village area was dedicated to farmland, and nearly half of these fields were covered in white flowers.

As evening fell, Shiro was returning to the village after finishing Gundam maintenance. When he reached these fields, he suddenly stopped, his gaze fixed ahead.

The white flowers spread out before him in full bloom, catching the fading sunlight so that they appeared tinged gently with crimson.

“What’s wrong, Shiro?”

Kiki, trailing slightly behind him, paused and looked at him curiously.

“Still bothered by it, huh? The fact that we make drugs?”

Kiki followed Shiro’s line of sight to the field of white blossoms.

These were landa flowers, the raw material for narcotics. The extract from their roots numbed the human nervous system. Baruk Village traded landa in exchange for weapons and medical supplies.

Their customers were soldiers, both Federation and Zeon. Not officially, of course. Certain quartermasters arranged to divert supplies to Baruk Village in exchange for landa.

Incidentally, the Federation’s contact was Jidan, with Eledore acting as courier. That’s how they had been able to use the trading network to help rescue Shiro previously (though Eledore’s motivation had been partly to use the rescue operation as a cover for his dealings).

“It’s not like we have much choice,” Kiki said defensively. “We don’t have anything else worth trading. With the war going on, merchants don’t even come here anymore.”

“I know,” Shiro answered quietly, still staring out at the blossoms.

Soldiers lived constantly on the edge of death. Fear haunted their every waking moment, driving them to cling desperately to superstitions, religions, romance, anything that provided comfort. For some, drugs were simply another form of solace.

In peacetime, such things might never be tolerated. But in a state of constant tension, with death always near, who could blame anyone for seeking relief? Shiro had encountered soldiers who turned to drugs; though he’d never condoned it outright, neither had he tried particularly hard to stop them. Even high command seemed to look the other way, at least for anything short of severe hallucinogens that impaired combat performance.

“Then why are you staring at them?”

“No reason,” Shiro replied softly. “I just thought... they looked beautiful.”

Kiki blinked, startled by Shiro’s answer. He often caught her off guard with seemingly innocent statements, whether about saving Mati or now admiring flowers. He possessed a freshness completely unlike the village boys she was used to.

"I've heard it said that the most poisonous flowers are the prettiest," Shiro mused absently. "Guess it's true."

"Huh..."

"And the same goes for guns, mobile suits, all tools designed to kill. Yet they still look cool."

Kiki thought of the village boys eagerly collecting spent Federation shell casings. Maybe boys really did have that tendency. But even so...

*"You're pretty childish yourself, talking like that at your age."*

Kiki found herself staring thoughtfully at Shiro's profile, bathed in the warm glow of sunset.

Oblivious to her gaze, Shiro continued watching the landa fields in silence.



From the window of her quarters at the former Kojima Base, Aina gazed up into the night sky.

She found the night comforting.

Perhaps because somewhere beyond that darkness lay space, home.

*"Space... It feels like ages since I've been there."*

The word "home" came naturally to Aina. She was a Spacenoid, born and raised off-planet. More than a century had passed since humanity began migrating into space. The old calendar had given way to the Universal Century, and now Spacenoids outnumbered Earthnoids.

*"It's been over six months since leaving Side 3. In that time, I've killed so many Federation soldiers, first in the experimental Zaku, then with the Apsaras..."*

Unbidden, her thoughts returned to the young Federation ensign she'd met in space.

*"But I couldn't kill him... My finger froze on the trigger. Why didn't he shoot me, either? If I asked him, would he understand why I hesitated?"*

She was once again gripped by these lingering questions.

Shiro Amada's name wasn't on the Federation prisoner list. She'd even checked photos, thinking he might've used an alias. But no one resembling Shiro had been found. Still, deep down, she couldn't accept that he was dead.

"Miss Aina, may I come in?"

A familiar voice came from beyond the door. It was Norris. Of course, Norris was the only one who ever visited her room. If it had been Ginias, he'd have summoned her through the intercom; nobody else would've had reason to see her at all.

"Yes, come in," she answered softly. "It's unlocked."

At her confirmation, Norris entered quietly, still impeccably dressed in full uniform. It must've been stifling here compared to the cooler highlands of Lhasa, but Norris showed no sign of discomfort.

"You asked for me, Miss Aina?"

Indeed, for once, it was Aina who'd summoned Norris. Usually, he checked in on her briefly, exchanging a few words before politely excusing himself. Tonight was different.

"It's nothing important," she assured, gesturing toward a seat. Norris remained standing respectfully.

"I heard that during my sortie, you engaged the Federation's new type of mobile suit."

"Yes ma'am," Norris answered humbly. "Unfortunately, that encounter prevented me from recording the Apsaras' combat data as intended. I apologize for my lack of—"

"I'm not blaming you," Aina interrupted gently.

"Pardon?"

Norris looked surprised.

"Actually, I wanted to ask you about that new model," she continued. "The mobile suit's shield, did it have the number '08' painted on it?"

"The shield?" Norris remembered clearly. After all, the Federation pilot had deflected his lethal heat rod by throwing that very shield aside. Yes, it definitely had a number.

"Yes, it did have '08' on it."

"What does '08' signify?"

"Most likely it refers to the suit belonging to the Federation's 08th Team. Officially, it would be their 08th MS Team."

"The 08th MS Team..." Aina echoed softly.

None of the captured soldiers belonged to the 08th MS Team. If someone from Shiro's squad had been captured, she could have asked about his fate, but...

"According to interrogations of other prisoners," Norris continued, sensing her interest, "the 08th MS Team was equipped with three Gundams, so the identification seems accurate."

"Gundams?"

"The name of the new mobile suit model. Although it appears to be a different variant from the one that faced the Red Comet."

Aina had heard rumors about Gundams, mostly vague talk about the Federation developing mobile suits that significantly outperformed Zeon's Zaku.

"So this Gundam was powerful, then?"

"Yes. And its pilot was quite skilled as well."

Norris studied Aina carefully, puzzled. Why was she asking about this? She rarely showed interest even in strategic matters or her own Apsaras, let alone specifics of enemy units.

"Could a pilot that skilled, with a mobile suit of such caliber, break through Admiral Kellerne's ambush?"

"If they withdrew quickly enough, perhaps," Norris answered cautiously.

"But given the length of my own engagement with them, that seems unlikely. Any delay would've made escaping through Kellerne's lines extremely difficult, even with Gundams."

"I see..." Aina lowered her gaze.

She'd known instinctively that breaking through enemy lines with only three units was improbable. Still, hearing it confirmed aloud, especially by Norris, a seasoned soldier, left her with no choice but to give up hope.

"Miss Aina, is something troubling you?" Norris asked gently, concerned. For a moment, Aina, usually so composed and emotionless, looked genuinely forlorn.

"Did you summon me merely to discuss this Gundam?" he asked carefully. "If I may speak frankly—"

"No," she interrupted firmly. Her voice, suddenly cold and mechanical, made Norris wonder if he'd imagined the sadness moments before.

"I intended to ask about my brother. How are things progressing with the Apsaras?"

"Not well, I'm afraid. Master Ginias was just seen heading toward Admiral Kellerne's quarters again."

"I assume Admiral Kellerne still refuses to cooperate?"

"Yes. The Admiral is a man of combat priorities," Norris admitted diplomatically.

The Apsaras remained far from repaired. Unlike standard Zakus, every component was custom-built, making replacement parts difficult to source. Moreover, the carefully tuned engine had been damaged so badly that they were essentially rebuilding the propulsion system from scratch.

Ginias desperately wanted to prioritize repairs, but Yuri Kellerne flatly refused.

Right now, Kellerne saw a rare chance to utterly destroy the Federation's Far East Forces. Federation troops were fighting fiercely but thinly spread, their reserves almost exhausted. Breaking through now could collapse their entire defensive line, opening a direct route to their main Far East stronghold, Madras.

Admiral Kellerne clearly did not wish to let this opportunity slip away.

"It can't be helped," Aina murmured calmly. "This is Kellerne's base, after all."

"Yes. When ranks are equal, operational authority lies with the on-site commander, in this case, Admiral Kellerne."

"Then we must obey Admiral Kellerne's orders," Aina concluded dispassionately.

No doubt her brother's appeal would fail. When that happened, would Ginias take the Apsaras back to Lhasa Base? Or remain here, stubbornly trying to complete repairs?

"Thank you, Norris. You've answered my questions fully."

Her tone signaled clearly that the conversation was over.

Recognizing this, Norris bowed respectfully and exited the room without further comment.

Though puzzled by Aina's unusual behavior, he chose not to question it. For Norris, simply having this extended conversation, his first real talk with Aina in nearly fifteen years, was more than enough.



Kiki's home was the largest building in the village, located right at its center.

Only two people actually lived there, Kiki and her father, Baresto. That might sound lavish at first, but the reality was far simpler: they occupied just a small portion of the structure. Most of it served as a communal space, doubling as the village meeting hall, food storage, and armory. In essence, Kiki and Baresto merely lived in one corner of an important community facility.

When Kiki returned home that evening, she found Ted waiting anxiously out front.

"Here," Ted muttered, offering a worn-out notebook. "Today's notes."

"Thanks, as always," Kiki replied warmly, taking the notebook and flipping through its pages.

Inside were meticulous notes Ted had taken during Sanders and Karen's daily lectures. Because Kiki spent most of her time watching over Shiro, she'd missed these important lessons. So Ted had volunteered, at her request, to record everything for her.

"But honestly, your handwriting hasn't improved a bit. Maybe you should ask Michel to teach you a thing or two," Kiki teased gently.

"Oh, shut up," Ted grumbled, pouting like a kid.

Originally, Kiki had approached Ted about the notes herself. She'd wanted to learn everything she could to help the village, but with her constant guard duties, she couldn't attend the training directly.

Kiki studied the notebook carefully, checking for anything unclear. Later, back in her room, she'd spend hours carefully practicing everything written down, often staying up late into the night. Ted knew this, he'd seen the lamp in her room burning long after midnight.

"Hey, Kiki," he started quietly, "why don't you let someone else take over the lookout job?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Guard duty. You spend all night studying and then wake up at dawn to follow them into the forest. You'll wear yourself out at this rate. Let someone else do it, and you—"

"That guy's their commander," Kiki cut in firmly. "In other words, if we keep him under control, their team can't try anything. I can't hand this job off to someone else."

Kiki spoke so decisively she almost seemed angry.

Ted lowered his gaze, frowning.

Maybe it was true, after all.

Maybe Kiki really had feelings for that Federation ensign.

Worry, insecurity, jealousy, his feelings slipped out unintentionally.

"Kiki... you really like that ensign, don't you?"

"Wh-what the hell are you talking about? Knock it off!" she shot back defensively, flustered. "Don't make me mad."

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it? When those guys first came here—"

"That was different."

When the 08th Team had first approached Baruk Village, an emergency council was held. With rumors spreading about Zeon's major offensive pushing back Federation Forces, most villagers had been eager to send the soldiers away.

Kiki changed that. She'd fiercely argued with her father, insisting this ensign was different from other Federation soldiers. Her persistence had convinced Baresto to at least meet with Shiro's group. Without her intervention, the soldiers might never have been allowed into the village.

"It was partly my responsibility that they were allowed to stay here," Kiki explained, looking away from Ted's pleading eyes. "So it's up to me to keep watch."

Ted hesitated.

"But...you don't have to—"

"Enough already. I said I'd do it, so just drop it."

Ted fell silent.

"Anyway, thanks for the notes. I'll return them tomorrow, as usual. I appreciate it," Kiki said briskly, turning quickly toward the door and slipping inside, leaving Ted standing awkwardly alone outside.

He scuffed the ground miserably with his shoe.

"I'm the real idiot here," Ted muttered bitterly to himself.



With each artillery shell landing behind them, the trenches they'd spent a full week digging were ripped apart mercilessly. Sandbags and barbed wire were shredded, leaving their defensive positions practically useless. Yet, up on the plateau, a few stubborn soldiers still held out.

"Captain, mobile suits dead ahead!" Corporal Dick Peabody shouted, voice edged with desperation.

The man he'd called "Captain," Joe, squinted through the smoke. Sure enough, gigantic humanoid shapes emerged from the clouds of dust and debris.

"Finally decided to bring out their mobile suits, huh?"

"All that prep artillery fire nearly spoiled our appetite," chuckled Stephen, the medic. To a mobile suit, barbed wire and trenches were nothing; they'd step right over them. Yet neither man looked frightened. In fact, they seemed to relish the impossible odds.

"Henry, you still with me?" Joe called out over the roar of exploding shells and flying dirt.

"Right here, Captain."

"What's left of our combat strength?"

"One Type 61 tank with busted treads. A captured Magella Base. Two Stinger launchers. Seven infantrymen. Based on Oddman calculations, I'd estimate our enemy outnumbers us roughly seventy-five to one."

Lieutenant Rick Jason's calm reply made Joe smile wryly. Who bothered with Oddman calculations at a time like this? The lieutenant was definitely more suited to academia. Joe drew thoughtfully on the stub of his cigarette.

"Captain Joe again, Commander?"

Across the dimly-lit room, Michel addressed Shiro, who was staring blankly at a portable TV.

Shiro had been doing this a lot lately, just sitting quietly each night, watching the tiny screen without much interest.

"Nothing else to do," Shiro grumbled, clearly irritated. "Repairs on the Gundams can only be done during the daytime."

"Come on, Commander, you know it can't be helped," Michel reasoned gently. "If we used lights at night, Zeon might spot us."

"I know that," Shiro snapped. "That's why I'm sitting here quietly."

According to the deal made with Baresto, the villagers allowed Gundam maintenance only during daylight. If Zeon found out Federation troops were hiding in the village, they'd surely attack and raze the place. Shiro understood the danger too well, knowing it was precisely why he felt so restless.

"Maybe you should relax and try enjoying village life more," Eledore interjected cheerfully from across the room. "It's not half bad here. Unlike Kojima Base, at least there are some girls around."

"How can you joke about that now? We still only have one operational Gundam."

Eledore grinned mischievously. "Hey, I'm just a lousy soldier."

He was referring to the under-the-table deals he'd arranged, swapping Federation supplies with the guerrillas in exchange for land. Karen had known about it for a while, but Shiro had only learned the truth after arriving in the village.

"Who knows, they might execute me once we get back."

"As long as you don't do it again, I already said I won't report it," Shiro said sharply.

"I know, I know," Eledore said hurriedly, realizing Shiro was genuinely annoyed. "Just joking around, Commander."

"Commander, it really is important to relax sometimes," Sanders said soothingly, coming to Eledore's rescue. "Honestly, it's the first time in ages I've felt this good. Even a guy they called the 'Reaper' like me can feel respected when I'm teaching people something useful, even if it is combat."

"We're not teaching them how to fight," Karen corrected gently. "We're teaching them how to survive."

"True enough," Sanders nodded. "If even one villager makes it through alive thanks to what we taught them, that'd make me genuinely happy."

Sanders' embarrassed grin suggested he meant every word.



"The villagers pick things up fast. Guess real combat experience helps."

Karen smiled lightly. "Sounds like teaching suits you, Sanders. Maybe consider becoming an instructor once you're back."

"I might," Sanders chuckled.

"Hey now," Karen teased, punching him lightly in the chest. "Stick with us until the 08th Team gets wiped out, at least."

Clearly, no grudges remained between the two.

"Well, I should head back now," Karen announced, getting to her feet.

Unlike the others, Karen didn't stay in this makeshift hut, which was formerly a warehouse. She'd been fine sharing living quarters, but the village women strongly objected, finding it scandalous for an unmarried woman to live among single men. So Karen had moved in with Lily, a local widow.

"Oh, I'll head out too," Michel said quickly.

"Yeah, me too," Eledore echoed.

"Guess I should as well," Sanders added, also rising.

Eledore flashed a knowing grin. "What's this? You guys got plans tonight?"

"Just invited for some cards," Sanders replied. "Not everyone has romance on the brain like you."

Michel frowned sheepishly. "Actually, I'm teaching the village kids again. All because Eledore blabbed to everyone about how I write letters every day. Now they think I'm some literary genius."

"Relax, Michel," Eledore laughed, slapping his shoulder. "We know you're way too spineless to cheat."

Michel pouted, mildly annoyed. "Spineless? So cheating's something only brave guys do?"

Their playful banter was exactly like back at Kojima Base. Karen and Sanders even seemed happier now than they'd ever been there.

*"How can they stay so calm?"* Shiro thought irritably, snapping the portable TV shut.

Gundams were critical assets to the Federation, especially now, with Kojima Battalion wiped out and the Far East Forces nearly broken. Shiro wanted nothing more than to get all three Gundams fully operational again, reclaim Kojima Base, and drive Zeon off Earth for good.

"There's no way I'll let Zeon win."

Recently, memories of Side 2 haunted him again. They'd faded during his time at Kojima Base, but lately, those scenes returned vividly in dreams.

"I can never forgive Zeon for what they did to Side 2. Evil must never be allowed to win. I have to fight Zeon, I'm a Federation soldier. Tomorrow, I'll head out even earlier. Even if it's dark, I can still run checks on the internal units. And we'll use the left-arm shaft from my Gundam. No point waiting for a perfect fix when Karen's suit is more severely damaged. I'll sleep early tonight. Sanders and Eledore can handle swapping out the shaft. Meanwhile, I'll help with repairs on Karen's machine. It'll never be completely fixed, so we need to cut corners and get it operational ASAP."

Having settled things in his mind, Shiro stood up abruptly.

“Hey everyone, tomorrow we start Gundam repairs—” he started, then stopped abruptly.

He glanced around and realized the others had already gone, leaving him standing alone in the empty hut.

## Chapter.03

### Thicket

Lily Valenti's husband died fighting the Zeon.

He was cut down by anti-personnel weapons while trying to stop a Zaku approaching the village of Baruk.

They were newlyweds.

"It's fortunate you didn't have children," her aunt said, attempting comfort.

"If only there had been a child..." her mother lamented.

Lily wept through the night. By morning, she'd resolved to fight in her husband's place, to exact revenge by her own hand.

"I was so young..."

It had only been half a year, yet it felt like a distant memory.

Lily glanced at the sniper rifle propped beside her bed, always ready, always within reach, and smiled softly.

In Baruk, so many men had been lost or injured that even women had begun to fight. But back then, the village had insisted that women belonged at home.

"You're up early, Lily."

Karen appeared from the adjoining room. As the only woman in the 08th MS Team, Karen had faced resistance from the village women, so she was staying at Lily's place. With their similar ages and lack of family, it had seemed fitting.

"Karen, you're just slow."

"Can't help it. They didn't let me leave till dawn," Karen said, pressing her fingertips to her temple.

"Soldiers who don't know when to retreat don't last long," Lily teased.

"Oh? You'd abandon your comrades, Lily? Desertion's a firing squad offense," Karen shot back, but both were smiling. It wasn't just their shared widowhood, they simply clicked.

"It's been a while since I spent an evening with only women. Forgot how exhausting gossip could be," Karen sighed dramatically.

"In a place like this, gossip about men and women is the only entertainment around," Lily chuckled.

"So I noticed," Karen said, looking thoroughly drained.

Last night, Karen had been dragged into an all-women gathering, essentially a massive gossip-fest dominated by whispers of romantic entanglements. Karen had become the prime target of their relentless interrogation.

"So, Karen, what's going on with that Sanders fellow?"

"No way, this one definitely prefers someone younger and more innocent, like that commander of theirs."

"What about that rock star?"

"Oh please, he's too shallow for her."

"Must've been pretty popular, surrounded by all those men in the military."

"What was your first husband like?"

"Probably older. Women like you always seem tough but secretly want someone to lean on."

"Don't be stupid, obviously younger. She's the older-wife type, can't you see?"

"I heard the army's got a lot of men-with-men and women-with-women stuff, is that true?"

"How about Gurek? He seems interested."

"No way, not that oversized oaf. How about Baresto? I think you two would look good together."

The questioning never ceased. Men's gossip, love lives, crude talk, even women who barely knew Karen gleefully indulged in scandalous banter at her expense. Karen had been the perfect sacrifice to break the monotony of village life.

"Lily, when did you sneak away?"

"I knew it'd drag on, so I retreated before the moon went down."

"You could've warned me."

"No chance. The rule here is that rookies have to suffer at least one night."

Karen groaned.

"Just like the military."

There, too, newcomers were always treated as playthings.

"Still," Lily said, smirking, "women are better than the men."

"Huh?"

"The guys are betting on who can seduce whom first."

Lily laughed with brazen amusement.



"I've got fifty on Ted getting rejected."

"Forty on the ensign."

"Seventy says neither stands a chance. Girls like Kiki never speak up and end up losing out."

"Hey, someone bet on Ted. You guys have no sense of loyalty."

"You bet on Ted, then."

"No way. A bet's a bet."

The men, sitting in a circle, threw crumpled bills into the center, calling out their bets. Leonard diligently recorded their wagers. He was handling the bookkeeping this time.

Just as Lily had said, the men were gambling over who would win Kiki's heart. The odds-on favorite was that no one would. Second was Shiro.

"What about that ensign of theirs?"

"Eledore says he's got his eye on someone else."

"Oh yeah, the girl in the photo. Probably a one-sided thing."

"He seems awkward around women."

"No doubt. Probably hasn't even done it yet."

"Bet you're right. First-timers on both sides, sounds rough."

Just then, Toothless Ben let out a raspy laugh.

"Hey, I brought the Sergeant!"

Pulled by his arm, Sanders stumbled into the room. The men erupted into cheers, welcoming a new participant.

"What's all this?" Sanders asked suspiciously.

"Oh, just a little get-together," Leonard replied calmly, as the others deferred explanation to him.

"You know the boss's daughter, right?"

"Kiki?"

"Yeah. We're betting on which guy she'll end up with."

Sanders spotted the pile of bills and smirked. "Catching on quick, aren't you, Sergeant?" Ben slapped him on the back.

"I always figured soldiers were a stiffer bunch."

"The military's no different," Sanders chuckled, settling among the circle. "We'd bet on kill counts, best performances, even the measurements of female officers."

"Seriously? Soldiers do that too?"

"Sure. So, is the betting even? Seems I'd have an advantage knowing the ensign better."

"We've known the girl since before she grew hair, so it evens out."

"Fair enough." Sanders grinned, pulling Federation bills from his pocket.

"So then...where should I place my bet?"



"You're actually pretty good," Jeanne remarked approvingly as Eledore finished playing his guitar.

But the faint praise didn't satisfy Eledore. He dropped his head melodramatically, shoulders sagging.

"Actually? Ouch. I'll have you know I'm a pro."

"Really now?" Jeanne eyed him skeptically. "Bet you think you can lie to some country girl and she won't know any better."

"It's not a lie. And for the record, I've never thought of you as some country girl. You had my attention the moment I first stepped into this village." As he spoke, Eledore casually edged closer to her.

"Hmm, not sure I believe that. Anyway, I'm more interested in the Ensign, personally."

"You're joking."

"I'm serious. There's something charming about that earnestness of his."

"You've got to be kidding," Eledore groaned, clutching his head theatrically.

Before joining the military, he had been a (wannabe) professional musician. He'd performed in clubs and bars and had done reasonably well with

women, but since joining the army, his track record had plummeted. In hindsight, maybe he should've done what Michel did and gotten himself a pen pal.

"Well," Jeanne continued, sticking her tongue out playfully, "I wouldn't want to ruin a good friendship, so I'll keep my hands off the Ensign."

"Friendship? Oh, you mean Kiki."

"Oh, so you've noticed too?"

On the battlefield, Kiki carried herself with maturity beyond her years. Yet when it came to romance, she was painfully naïve. Her feelings for Shiro were glaringly obvious, obvious to everyone except the Ensign himself.

"Yeah, everyone knows. Everyone except our fearless leader," Eledore laughed.

"I suppose they're a good match," Jeanne muttered, pouting slightly.

"Hey, you know, we'd make a pretty good match ourselves." Eledore tried again, lightly placing a hand on Jeanne's shoulder, but she deftly slipped away, rising to her feet.

"Maybe Sergeant Sanders instead. I do like strong men," she teased, gleefully dodging Eledore's advances. Named after the saintly Jeanne d'Arc, she'd grown into a far more flirtatious woman than her parents ever intended.

"I'm plenty strong myself, you know. How about you put me to the test tonight?"

"Dream on."

"I'm serious! Back in space, they called me the 'Iron Man.'"

Eledore was nothing if not persistent. Perhaps, in their own strange way, they really were a perfect match.



Inside the Bloodhound, Michel was writing another letter to BB, one more to add to the growing pile. Four letters now remained unsent. With the war severing postal routes, it was impossible to send mail out of Baruk Village.

But Michel wrote anyway. He planned to send all the letters once they reunited with Federation Forces. Until then, he couldn't reassure BB of his safety, couldn't ease the worry she'd feel when she inevitably heard he'd gone missing.

"There must be some way to get this letter out..."

Michel stared listlessly at his half-written words, unable to think of a solution. Maybe waiting for the Federation was his only choice.

"What're you writing?"

Michel jumped, hastily hiding the letter as he turned to see Kiki peering curiously over his shoulder.

"W-what the heck! You can't just barge in here!"

Michel tried to look angry, but Kiki didn't seem bothered.

"The rock star told me. BB's your girlfriend, right?"

"That's none of your business."

"Ouch! And here I was, ready to teach you a thing or two about girls."

Kiki twisted playfully inside the cramped Bloodhound cockpit, trying to peek at Michel's hidden letter. Michel desperately moved his body to block her view.

"Oh, come on, Michel! It's not like it's gonna hurt. Just a quick peek!"

"No way! These things are private!"

"I knew it. You wrote something naughty, didn't you, you little pervert?"

"I-I didn't!" Michel stammered, face going bright red. Truth be told, he and BB hadn't progressed beyond kissing yet. Despite his imagination running wild, they'd never managed anything more intimate.

Meanwhile, sharp-eyed Kiki spotted another letter wedged behind the control panel, one Michel had completely forgotten about.

"Got it!"

In a flash, she grabbed the envelope and bolted out of the Bloodhound.

"Hey! Wait up!"

Michel leaped after her, but Kiki was surprisingly quick, quick enough to give even the village boys a good chase. As Michel chased her, she tore open the envelope and began reading aloud, giggling as she ran.

"Let's see... 'Dear Michel, your letters are my only comfort as I wait here alone...' Ugh, cheesy!"

Michel's heart sank. With the ensign away fetching spare parts, there was no one else around to intervene, but at least that meant no one but Kiki would hear his embarrassment.

"Kiki, come on, stop it!"

"I'm always afraid..." Abruptly, Kiki's pace began to slow. "...that this might be your last letter."

Her playful sprint had slowed to a somber walk.

"I feel like the war is taking you farther and farther away..."

Her voice grew softer, quieter with each passing word.

"The thought of your letters stopping terrifies me. Sometimes I wish I could forget you completely, it would hurt less..."

Her feet stopped moving altogether. Kiki fell silent, no longer able to read.

Letters to a loved one separated by war. Death was instant, but letters carried a painful delay. Those carefully chosen words, desperately written to bridge the gap, this was no joke. It wasn't something to mock.

"Sorry."

Carefully, Kiki refolded the letter and slipped it back into its envelope, handing it gently to Michel, who finally caught up.

"I'm really sorry, Michel..."

"It's okay," Michel whispered, taking the envelope back. He forced a sad smile. "I knew I wouldn't see her again for a long time, once I decided to fight."

Michel's smile was heartbreakingly fragile. He was clearly trying to be brave, but failing.

Kiki stood silent, unsure what she could possibly say. Eventually, all she managed was a soft repetition.

"I'm sorry, Michel..."



"I promised her I'd come back alive. I told BB, I swore to her I would," Michel murmured, more to himself than to Kiki, as they lay side by side in the grass.

"My feelings haven't changed. If anything, whenever I get scared out here, I think about her even more. I want to see her, talk to her, hold her close..."

Kiki stayed silent, just listening.

"But... how do I tell her all that? How do I put it into words, into letters, so she understands exactly how I feel? What do you think I should write to her, Kiki?"

"Write what you just said," Kiki replied simply, staring up at the evening sky tinted red by sunset. "Honestly, plainly. Just like that. At least, that's what I'd want."

Michel nodded. "Yeah... you're right. But..."

"But?"

"She probably thinks I'm dead by now."

"What makes you think—" Kiki stopped abruptly, realizing the problem. Letters couldn't be sent out of Baruk Village. BB hadn't gotten a single letter since Michel arrived here.

"I used to write her twice a week. She must've heard by now about Kojima Base being wiped out..."

Kiki bit her lip silently.

"I'm such an idiot," Michel muttered bitterly. "I keep writing letters I can't even send."

With a dry, crumpling sound, he crushed the unfinished letter in his hand.

"Michel," Kiki said quietly, "why don't you give me that letter?"

"Huh?"

"Our village doesn't just deal with the Federation. We trade with Zeon, too. She's on Side 6, right? I might be able to get someone from Zeon to send it out."

"Through Zeon...?"

It was true, Zeon had its own postal network, just like the Federation did. Soldiers on both sides considered letters from home a precious lifeline.

Still, this was an incredibly risky, reckless idea. Michel offered her a weak smile.

"Thanks, Kiki. But don't push yourself too hard. I don't want to cause any trouble for your people."

"I won't. I promise I'll be careful." Before Michel could protest further, she deftly snatched the crumpled letter from his hand. "I won't read it this time," she quickly added.

Michel smiled faintly.

"She's cute," he thought suddenly, then hoped sincerely she'd find happiness herself someday.

"Hey, speaking of... what about you, Kiki?"

"Me?"

"You like the Commander, don't you?"

"I, " Kiki was about to deny it, but stopped. Michel had just opened his heart to her, she couldn't repay him by lying. "Yeah. But... he doesn't have a clue how I feel."

Michel laughed gently. "Not surprising. He's as dense as they come. Subtle hints don't work on the Commander."

Kiki found herself laughing along. Michel was right, Shiro was strangely childish and hopelessly oblivious. But maybe that straightforward innocence was exactly why she'd fallen for him.

"You just told me yourself, Kiki. Feelings have to be expressed honestly."

"Yeah," she replied softly, nodding. She knew. Of course she knew. But she was afraid, afraid to speak those feelings out loud. She was the daughter of a guerrilla leader; he was a Federation officer. They were worlds apart. He could leave any day, and either of them could die tomorrow.

Michel nudged her playfully. "Go on, say it. Seeing you so timid doesn't suit you."

"Hey!" She scowled at him, pretending annoyance. "Even tough girls have sensitive sides."

But inwardly, Kiki felt a surge of gratitude toward him.

"Thank you, Michel."



That night, Shiro lay in bed, idly playing Captain Joe as he stared absently at Aina's watch.

"A charm that guarantees I'll survive, huh...well, I'm alive, at least."

He was alive, but he couldn't fight. The helplessness grated on him deeply.

He'd managed to jury-rig his Gundam's arm-shaft so it moved again, but Karen's unit was still unusable. Without parts, tools, or expertise, their repairs had stalled. Maybe Michel had been right, they should dismantle Karen's Gundam for spare parts. That way, they'd end up with two fully functional machines.

"I have to make a decision soon. If we stay here too long..."

Shiro glanced around the empty room. Karen was out; Eledore, Michel, even Sanders, seemed to have integrated easily into village life. He appreciated the villagers' hospitality too, but unlike his teammates, he couldn't fully relax. The urgent pressure to rejoin Federation forces weighed heavily on his mind.

"How far back has the Federation fallen? How far must we go to catch up? If they've retreated as far as Madras...we'll never make it back. No, the

Federation line couldn't collapse that easily. We've got more mobile suits deployed now, reserves to call up..."

Thoughts churned in his head as he fiddled absentmindedly with Aina's watch.

It was a small, elegant piece with delicate feather-like ornaments, so dainty and antique-looking that Eledore had teased him mercilessly about it.

As he toyed with it, the watch suddenly clicked open. A hidden compartment popped open on the reverse side, revealing a photograph.

Aina stood beside a man, a stranger in a Zeon uniform, with his arm casually around her shoulder. He had a weary yet handsome face and wore a uniform clearly marking him as a high-ranking officer. Remarkable, given his apparent youth.

"Her boyfriend, huh... Well, figures," Shiro sighed quietly.

The charm's reassuring warmth faded instantly.

"Did I...fall in love with her?" he wondered aloud.

"Maybe."

Aina had certainly been beautiful, and they'd bonded through danger and hardship. He remembered reading somewhere that extreme situations could spark romance.

*"What book was that from? Real life never plays out like a drama, though."*

He stopped the Captain Joe recording. The show had a similar story arc, Captain Joe had fallen for an enemy woman. Ultimately, she'd died, and the romance ended tragically.

A sudden knock at the door startled him.

His teammates never knocked, which meant it was someone from the village.

"Come in," he called, quickly snapping the watch shut.



"Oh, it's just you, Shiro."

Kiki stepped through the door, wearing a different bandana than the one she'd worn earlier. It was her favorite, though Shiro didn't notice.

"Sorry to disappoint," Shiro grumbled irritably.

"Where's everyone else?"

"Sanders is giving a night-ops lecture. Michel's teaching math. Eledore's probably off losing money at cards."

"And the mighty Ensign gets stuck house-sitting all alone," Kiki teased.

"Guess without a war going on, you're not all that useful, huh?"

She laughed lightly, but Shiro didn't join in. His face remained sour.

"What do you want?"

"What kind of welcome is that? You're supposed to offer guests tea, at least."

"Guests?" Shiro muttered under his breath. "More like unwanted intruders."

Ignoring him, Kiki grabbed the portable burner from the corner and started boiling water. She already seemed to know exactly where to find the tea leaves.

"Did you come looking for me?" Shiro asked, annoyed by her determination to stay.

"Ha, don't flatter yourself. Why would I come looking for you? I was here to see Michel. Didn't know he was teaching, guess I slipped up," she lied.

Kiki knew perfectly well Michel was busy with lessons. She'd come here precisely because Shiro was alone.

"Anyway, I'll wait till he gets back. Relax, I'll make tea for you, too."

"I'm fine."

"Don't be shy. It won't kill you."

Seeing how quickly Kiki was setting out cups, Shiro gave up, rolling over onto the bed with a sigh.

"What do you need Michel for, anyway? You planning to confess your love or something?"

"Idiot, nothing like that," Kiki said sharply, pulling a brown envelope from her pocket.

"What's that?"

"A Zeon envelope. Kurt managed to talk some Zeon troops into delivering letters for us."

"What?"

"You know Michel writes letters to his girlfriend, right? I figured maybe we could get one to her."

"Are you insane?" Shiro bolted upright. "You'd basically be telling Zeon we're hiding here!"

"It'll be fine," Kiki said, defensive. "We're using Zeon paper and envelopes, and Michel said she evacuated to Side 6—"

"Michel asked you to do this?"

"N-no! It was my idea."

"Then butt out. We don't have time to mess around sending love letters."

"What did you say?" Kiki's expression darkened, her playful mood instantly vanishing. Just moments ago she'd seemed buoyant, cheerful, now she bristled, her eyes flashing.

"You don't 'find time' for love, Shiro," she snapped, voice sharp with scorn.

"You don't understand," he shot back. "I'm saying there are more important things right now."

"What, war? Is war really that important?"

"Yes, it is!" Shiro insisted fiercely. "If we don't beat Zeon, the fighting won't end. That's why we fight. It's not like your little war, where you only fight for yourselves—"

Before he finished, Kiki slapped him sharply across the face.

For a moment, he stood stunned, speechless.

"You talk like that because you're fighting a war you can run away from!" she spat bitterly.

"What?"



Shiro couldn't understand what she meant.

"This village is all we have. We can't just retreat when things get rough like your Federation soldiers do. You're always fighting in someone else's backyard, so you can leave whenever you want, set traps wherever you want."

Shiro felt a strange tightness in his chest, suddenly at a loss for words. He'd never thought about it like that before.

"You... you could just move the village! Evacuate to a safe zone where there's no fighting."

"We've tried!" Kiki said, biting her lip in frustration. "Again and again. But every time we moved, the war followed us. We kept being driven farther and farther south."

"Then rely on the Federation for protection! Drop your weapons, live as normal civilians—"

"Only works when you're winning!" Kiki snapped, cutting him off harshly. "As soon as the situation turns bad, soldiers run. Tanks and supplies matter more than people who don't fight. Isn't that exactly what happened at Kojima Base? Your Federation buddies didn't even hesitate to leave you behind."

As Kiki spoke, her anger gave way to sadness. She'd thought Shiro's team was different. But they were just like all the others, they didn't understand her, or the village, at all.

Running desperately through the forest to escape the gunfire at night.

The shocking redness of a friend's blood on the ground.

The wire traps strung through the trees.

A child's sobs over parents who would never return.

Insects swarming over bodies lying still.

The cold steel of the first gun thrust into her trembling hands.

The lonely hilltop graves holding her family beneath the earth.

War created it all.

War stole their village.

War stole her mother.

War stole the life she once had.

War, war, war... nothing but war.

"This village is all we've got left," Kiki whispered, tears spilling from her eyes. "If we don't fight for ourselves, nobody will."

Seeing her tears, Shiro suddenly realized something was terribly wrong.

"Kiki, you're crying..."

Only then did she realize it herself. "Me...crying?"

She touched her cheek, feeling the wetness. Embarrassed, she flushed deeply, crying openly in front of Shiro was the last thing she wanted.

"Kiki, I..." Shiro reached out to comfort her.

"You're such an idiot, Shiro!" She swatted his hand away, then bolted out of the hut.

"Wait, Kiki!"

Shiro ran after her, leaving the room empty.

Inside, the water boiled fiercely on the burner, forgotten and unattended, filling the hut with its hissing cry.



Moonlight bathed the narrow path as Shiro sprinted after Kiki, who ran ahead, sobbing.

Kiki was fast, unmatched among the women, and few men could catch her either. But now, blinded by tears, her running was unsteady, erratic. Each sob broke her stride, stole her breath. Against a soldier trained to move efficiently even under stress, Kiki couldn't maintain her lead.

"Wait!" Shiro called out, finally catching up. He grabbed her arm roughly, stopping her in place.

"Let go!" Kiki struggled, trying to wrench free, but Shiro's grip was too strong. The disparity in their physical strength was painfully obvious, and it only made her feel more helpless.

"Please, Kiki, just listen, I didn't mean it that way!"

Shiro pleaded as he desperately held on, trying to steady her.

"I didn't know. I had no idea you'd been through so much. I didn't understand what you, the village, had to deal with. I'm sorry..."

Her tears had left Shiro shaken, utterly thrown off balance. Seeing Kiki, the bright, fearless seventeen-year-old guerrilla leader, always full of confidence and courage, crying openly stunned him into silence. He'd never imagined she was even capable of such vulnerability.

Shiro had always been weak against tears, especially from women. Somehow, whenever a woman cried, he instinctively felt he must be at fault. But this time, he knew he really was wrong. He'd genuinely failed to understand Kiki's reality.

And yet, he'd been frustrated, too. Stuck without parts to repair the Gundams, watching his teammates easily settle into village life, discovering that Aina had a lover, all that pent-up frustration had turned him cruel and impatient. It was shameful. He'd behaved like a complete jerk.

"Kiki, I'm sorry," he whispered again, sincerely, earnestly. "I didn't know—"

Slowly, Kiki stopped struggling. Shiro mistakenly assumed his apology had calmed her down.

But then...

"Far too many," Kiki whispered bitterly, head bowed.



"Far, far too many," Kiki repeated softly, anguish filling her voice. Every word Shiro said to justify himself only deepened her sadness. He truly didn't understand. He didn't understand her at all. He didn't know why she always insisted on watching over him.

Why she kept visiting him.

Why she'd cried tonight.

"You don't get it, Shiro. You don't know anything. Maybe you never even tried. Maybe you just avoid knowing anything inconvenient."

"That's not true—"

"Forget it!" Kiki snapped, wrenching her arm away the moment his grip loosened. "You don't understand. You don't understand war or people's feelings."

"People's feelings? You mean Michel's?"

"You idiot!" Kiki lifted her head sharply, tears streaming openly down her cheeks now, but she didn't try to hide them anymore.

"You really don't get it, do you? Fine, I'll say it out loud. Listen carefully, because I know you've never noticed."

Kiki clenched her fists tightly. Determination surged inside her.

"Just say it. Tell him how you feel."

Michel's earlier words echoed clearly in her ears, "Feelings have to be expressed honestly."

She would tell him. Right here, right now.

It wasn't how she'd imagined this moment, not how she wanted it to be, but it didn't matter anymore. She was done hiding.

Kiki met Shiro's gaze head-on, her tear-filled eyes shimmering in the moonlight.

"I... I love you, Shiro."



Kiki stared straight into Shiro's eyes.

He was stunned by the look on her face, so different from any he'd ever seen. With tears wetting her eyelashes, she appeared suddenly mature, heartbreakingly beautiful in the moonlit night.

"I... I love you, Shiro," she said clearly, her unpainted yet inviting lips shaping each word slowly, carefully.

At that exact moment, a bright crimson eye flashed above her head.

*"A mono-eye!"*

Shiro realized instantly what it was.

The glowing sensor eye of a Zaku.

"Kiki!"

Without hesitation, Shiro lunged, knocking her to the ground.

## Chapter.04

### Occupation

The villagers of Baruk had been herded into the central square.

Surrounding them stood three imposing mobile suits. Two were ground combat Zakus, their menacing silhouettes a stark contrast against the tranquil village backdrop. The third was a striking blue suit, the same new model Shiro and his team had encountered before: a Gouf. The Gouf aimed its formidable 45mm machine gun menacingly toward the gathered villagers.

Nearby, in the carefully tended landa fields, two hover trucks emblazoned with Zeon military insignia had unceremoniously parked. The landa lay beneath one, undoubtedly crushed beyond saving. Yet the villagers remained silent, following Zeon orders without protest.

The Zeon forces had appeared suddenly, their swift incursion completed almost before anyone noticed. By the time the villagers realized what was happening, the trio of mobile suits was already stationed within the village perimeter. The briefest volley of intimidating gunfire into the air had sealed their surrender, fighting in open terrain against mobile suits was hopeless, especially when the guerrillas themselves had been caught off guard.

Besides, the villagers had never intended to oppose Zeon openly. Until now, they had carefully maintained neutrality, balancing delicately between Federation and Zeon influences. But with the Federation's influence now crumbling, resisting Zeon alone was impossible. Recognizing this stark truth, they quietly complied with Zeon's commands.

Amidst the anxious crowd, Shiro searched urgently for his 08th Team comrades. He kept movement minimal, aware that any suspicious activity could draw unwanted attention. A man as tall and imposing as Sanders should have been easy to spot, yet there was no sign of him.

"Do you think he's okay?" Kiki clung nervously to Shiro's arm, worry etched deeply into her eyes. Baresto was still missing.

"I'm sure he's fine," Shiro reassured her gently. "They won't harm someone who's disabled. If the chief were hurt, we'd definitely hear people panicking."

"Yeah... you're right." Kiki nodded, unconvinced, tightening her grip. Her lingering unease was palpable.

In response, Shiro softly placed his hand over hers.

"Shiro, I found them," Lily whispered discreetly, having scouted for Shiro's comrades. Normally addressing him formally as "Ensign" or "Commander," she carefully used his first name now to avoid arousing suspicion.

"Where are they?"

"Follow my gaze," she replied quietly, careful not to gesture openly. "Head towards that blue mobile suit. You'll find them at its feet."

"Thank you, Lily," Shiro murmured, not turning toward her. Gently, he disentangled Kiki's arm from his own.

"Stay here, Kiki. Lily, take care of her for me."

"Shiro..."

"I'm sorry, Kiki, but I need to go to them."

The word "them," his comrades, pierced Kiki deeply. She knew she couldn't hold him back.

"Come back safe..." she whispered, barely audible.

"I promise," he reassured her, resting a comforting hand gently atop her head.

Kiki wanted to look up and smile, but tears threatened instead, so she kept her head down. Then, she felt the warmth of Shiro's hand vanish, replaced by a chilling emptiness.

"Shiro?"

She watched as he moved away, quickly disappearing into the milling crowd.

"Shiro..."

Her voice broke softly, calling his name once more into the emptiness. Lily responded silently, placing a comforting arm around her shoulders.



"Commander, thank goodness you're safe."

Sanders was the first to spot Shiro approaching. Discreetly, he shifted his stance, allowing Shiro to slip quietly into the center of the 08th Team.

All members of the 08th Team, aside from Shiro, were already gathered. Shiro let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, relieved to see none had been detained by Zeon forces.

"Sorry for the delay. What's our situation?" Shiro asked quietly.

"We've confirmed an enemy strength of at least one full squad. Their exact intentions remain unclear," Sanders replied softly, eyes carefully averted.

"What do you suggest we do, Commander?"

"We wait. Acting rashly could endanger the villagers," Shiro responded, receiving subtle nods from his teammates.

The reason for Zeon's sudden occupation was uncertain. Were they aware the Federation troops were hiding here, or was there another reason entirely?

"Commander, we should split up," Karen whispered suddenly.

"What do you mean, Karen?"

"The locals know we're not villagers. If we stay huddled together, it'll only draw suspicion. Plus..." Karen's voice dropped even lower. "There's a chance the villagers might turn us in to Zeon."

Michel's startled gasp was barely audible.

Karen was right. If Zeon's goal was to capture them, the villagers might trade their lives for their own safety. Splitting up improved their chances of escape.

"Understood. Spread toward the edges of the crowd. If things escalate..."

"We rendezvous at the Gundam," Sanders completed swiftly, already stepping away. Karen followed suit. Michel hesitated, glancing nervously around before reluctantly trailing Eledore and Shiro toward the outskirts of the gathering.

Zeon soldiers began searching the villagers, checking for weapons. Thankfully, the villagers had already discarded any weapons, as had Shiro's team. Only a few knives were confiscated.

Once the checks concluded, a Zeon officer stood atop a jeep parked near the square.

"He must be the commander. His uniform resembles a general's, but slightly different."

Shiro mentally compared the officer's attire to his memory of Zeon uniforms from training, but nothing matched exactly. Perhaps it was a custom uniform permitted to senior officers.

"Something about him..."

Recognition struck Shiro abruptly. This man was from the photo inside Aina's watch, the one standing intimately beside her.

"Why is Aina's lover here...?"

Caught up in recent events, especially those involving Kiki, Shiro had nearly forgotten the troubling detail that Aina might already have a partner.

"Technical Officer Ginias Sahalin has something to say. Listen carefully," announced a Zeon soldier loudly.

Shiro snapped back to attention.

"Forgive the crude display of force," Ginias began smoothly. "I assure you, our intentions are purely scientific. We have no wish to harm you. We merely require accommodation, provisions, and some labor while we repair our experimental craft. Naturally, you'll be compensated fairly."

Relief visibly swept through the villagers. Zeon wasn't here hunting Federation soldiers, there was no immediate need to betray the 08th Team, whose presence many had begun to accept warmly.

"We'll requisition the largest central building and several surrounding houses. Additionally, prepare food for thirty soldiers. Labor needs will follow shortly."

Refusal wasn't an option, and the villagers knew it. A few wore expressions of bitter resentment but stayed silent, knowing resistance would only end badly.

"Now, follow the soldiers' directions. Cooperate, and you'll be treated fairly," Ginias concluded confidently, signaling his men.

"All right, everyone. We're taking a roll call. Men to the right, women to the left."

Zeon soldiers efficiently executed their orders, moving swiftly. Clearly, this was a well-trained unit.

Shiro drifted rightward with the other men, eyes unintentionally locked onto Ginias.

It was a risky choice. He should blend in, avert his gaze. Staring directly at the commander was reckless and might expose him. Yet he couldn't help it.

"That man... is Aina's lover?"

Ginias casually descended from his jeep, heading confidently toward the requisitioned house, Kiki's home, likely to become his quarters.

Suddenly, Ginias faltered. He coughed sharply, knees buckling beneath him. Just as he started collapsing, someone swiftly supported him from the side.

It was Aina.

She held him up gently yet firmly, mirroring the intimacy from the photograph in her watch.

"Aina..."

Shiro froze completely, unable to look away.

He openly stared, completely still as villagers flowed past him.

"I found her. We met again. But..."

Shiro didn't realize he'd stopped moving entirely.

"Hey, you! Keep moving!" barked a Zeon soldier.

Startled, Aina glanced toward the commotion. Their eyes met.

They had spent barely fifteen minutes together. Back then, Shiro wore a Federation uniform, his face mostly hidden by a helmet. Now he wore civilian clothes, face intentionally dirtied for disguise. It was entirely possible she wouldn't recognize him.

And yet...



"Shiro Amada?!"

Instantly, Aina recognized him.

The young man staring back at her was undoubtedly Shiro Amada.

He wore the same clothing as the villagers, suggesting he had opted to blend in rather than rejoin the Federation's retreating forces. Had he attempted to regroup, Yuri's ambush would surely have captured him, making Shiro's choice a wise one.

"He survived after all..."

A wave of relief swept over her.

Her chest loosened at the certainty of Shiro's survival.

His name hadn't appeared on the prisoner list, nor had any soldier claimed to have destroyed a Gundam marked '08.' She had hoped he'd escaped unharmed, but...

"I never imagined we'd meet again here."

Aina found herself unable to break eye contact. Her impulse was to call out, to close the distance, but doing so would expose Shiro's true identity as Federation personnel. Shiro likely remained silent for the same reason.

For a moment longer, the two stood locked in a tense, silent gaze.

The stalemate shattered abruptly as Ginias coughed violently, his strength giving out again. Aina staggered slightly, pulled down by the weight of her brother.

"Brother!"

Ginias's face was deathly pale.

Was it exposure to the cold, or had the journey through the forest exhausted him more than he'd admitted?

"Master Ginias, are you alright?"

A nearby soldier hurried forward, clearly concerned that Aina alone couldn't bear Ginias's weight.

"Miss Aina?" The soldier awaited instructions, knowing she understood her brother's condition best.

"Take him to the house immediately. Prepare a bed, water, and someone fetch the medical kit from the hover truck."

Soldiers immediately sprang into action at her command. Around them, the villagers stirred anxiously, prompting Zeon soldiers to tighten their control aggressively.

"Shiro?"

She glanced back toward the spot Shiro had occupied, but he had vanished, undoubtedly moved along by the soldiers.

"Miss Aina, quickly," another soldier urged.

Ginias, supported by two soldiers, was being moved swiftly away.

Aina took one last fleeting look at where Shiro had stood before turning to follow her brother.



Zeon's forces swiftly established their base within Kiki's residence, appropriating surrounding houses as defensive fortifications. Mobile suits filled the gaps between these buildings, while hover trucks positioned themselves securely behind them, directly in front of Kiki's house.

"Impenetrable formation," Sanders muttered, studying a map spread before them.

"They already confiscated everyone's weapons. Isn't this excessive?" Michel wondered aloud.

"The villagers still have hidden arms," Karen replied matter-of-factly.

"They would've anticipated such an occupation once the Federation retreated. Likely, what Zeon found wasn't even half the villagers' stash. Zeon knows this, hence their heavy guard."

"Why not search thoroughly then?"

"The priority in controlling locals isn't simply removing their weapons," Karen explained patiently. "It's removing their will to fight. Completely disarming them could provoke rebellion."

"Oh..."

"They deliberately leave enough weapons hidden to avoid pushing the villagers into desperation, while simultaneously showing off a formidable defense. Whoever's running this operation knows exactly what they're doing."

"What about our Gundam hidden in the forest, Sarge? I doubt the villagers would betray us, but..." Eledore questioned.

Sanders nodded solemnly. "That's a risk. But if Zeon truly only intends to repair their experimental unit, we're likely safe. With only a thirty-man unit, extensive patrols aren't feasible."

"No," Shiro finally interjected, stepping away from the wall he'd been leaning against.

"At least one Zeon soldier recognized me as Federation."

Aina had clearly identified him. Given no action had been taken yet, she probably hadn't informed her superiors. Yet safety wasn't guaranteed. Discovery was still possible at any moment.

"What do you mean, Commander?" Sanders questioned.

"I encountered someone I know. She recognized me as Ensign Shiro Amada of the Federation forces."

"What?!"

"Then—" Karen tensed, half-rising from her seat.

"Zeon knows our true identities?"

"I'm not sure. She hasn't reported me yet," Shiro clarified.

"Impossible," Eledore scoffed, incredulous.

"If they're letting us roam freely while knowing, they must have a reason..."

Sanders cut in firmly, silencing Eledore with his stare.

"Commander, please explain," Sanders prompted, eyes fixed sharply on Shiro.

Meeting Sanders's gaze head-on, Shiro slowly nodded.



"Are you feeling better, Brother?"

When Ginias awoke, Aina's face hovered gently above him.

For a brief moment, he thought he saw genuine concern flicker across her expression, but he quickly realized it was merely his imagination. Her face quickly returned to its usual impassivity.

"You're awake, Master Ginias," Norris's steady voice cut in.

"Norris... How are the villagers?"

"They remain calm. We've secured our perimeter and fully disarmed the villagers," Norris reported.

"Good," Ginias murmured softly, still reclining. Military operations were not his forte; he left such matters entirely to Norris, as he had done ever since arriving on Earth.

"And what about the Apsaras?"

"We'll head to the former Federation base tomorrow to begin transportation. By evening, we should have it moved here. Meanwhile, we're requisitioning local labor to prepare a suitable landing area in the fields."

"The fields? What kind?" Ginias queried with sudden curiosity.

"Landa fields," Norris replied.

"Landa?"

"An Asian plant, bearing white flowers. Infamously known as a narcotic ingredient," Norris clarified wryly.

"Narcotics?"

"Yes. The villagers claim it's used for dyeing textiles," Norris chuckled briefly. "Likely a trade commodity with the Federation. Let's accept their explanation, I'd rather not have them demand drug-market prices."

"Very well," Ginias said without humor, pushing himself up slightly.

"Brother, are you sure you should be up?" Aina asked cautiously.

"Yes, I can't afford to rest anymore. We've finally broken away from Yuri's meddling. Now, I can dedicate myself fully to the Apsaras."

"Yes," Aina agreed softly.

The Apsaras repairs had been frustratingly slow since the test over a week ago, delays Ginias blamed squarely on Yuri, who stubbornly prioritized conventional warfare tactics. Yuri insisted this was their best chance to break through Federation lines.

"Absurd. Once the Apsaras is complete, such measures will be unnecessary."

Ginias had persistently argued for prioritizing Apsaras' repairs, but Yuri controlled every frontline Zeon base. Despite their equal rank as Rear Admiral, Yuri's orders took precedence. Ginias, fed up with this arrangement, had commandeered this village to complete repairs independently.

"Now, at last, I'm free to continue my work. Repairing the Minovsky Craft is all that remains. With it operational, the Apsaras can fly directly back to Lhasa Base, removing the need for this rural outpost entirely."

"Just you wait, Yuri. When my Apsaras is complete, you'll understand your insignificance."

"Apsaras will obliterate everything. A rain of light, erasing all..."

Lost in his thoughts, a twisted smile crept onto Ginias's face, entirely oblivious to Aina's quiet gaze of pity.



A shrill whistle pierced the silence as the kettle announced it had boiled. Lily, who had been deep in conversation with Baresto, rose and moved swiftly to the kitchen. The noise stopped.

"Tea for everyone?" Lily called cheerfully.

With Kiki's home occupied by Zeon, she and Baresto had sought refuge at Lily's home. Lily's mother was Kiki's late mother's sister, making Lily her cousin.

"Yes, thank you," Baresto responded calmly.

Kiki didn't reply, lost in thought as she stared blankly at the wall.

"I wonder if Shiro's safe..."

Knees hugged tightly to her chest, Kiki's thoughts churned.

A full day had passed since Zeon took control. Villagers were confined indoors until construction on Zeon's facility finished, for security reasons, Zeon claimed. Everyone anxiously waited, unsure of events unfolding beyond their homes.

Was everyone else truly safe?

What exactly was Zeon doing outside? Was it truly just research?

"I hope Zeon hasn't figured them out..."

Kiki worried deeply for Shiro. Even disguised as villagers, Shiro and his squad stood out clearly to anyone familiar with local dialects and customs. She trusted her fellow villagers, yet knew the risk of a child inadvertently revealing secrets was real.

"Kiki, your tea's ready," Baresto interrupted gently.

Turning toward the table, Kiki saw three cups waiting. Lily, having returned quietly, sat down again.

"Dad, do you think the Federation soldiers are okay?" Lily asked.

Baresto frowned slightly.

"If Zeon finds out we've hidden Federation troops, we'll be in danger. Maybe a villager should stay with them, to ensure..."

"As long as they don't provoke trouble, they'll be fine," Baresto responded calmly, sipping his tea.

"Zeon isn't here hunting remnants. If we don't interfere with their research, they won't start trouble."

"What if they do something reckless?" Kiki pressed anxiously, picturing Shiro's determined face.

"Then we'll have to hand them over ourselves."

"Father!" Lily protested sharply.

Baresto silenced her with a stern glance.

He knew his daughter cared for the young Federation ensign. But he could not risk the safety of their entire village. His decision as village chief was final.

Kiki recognized the meaning in her father's stern eyes and reluctantly fell silent. The villagers she'd lived alongside her whole life versus soldiers they'd just begun to trust, it wasn't a choice. Or rather, it was one she couldn't allow herself to make.

"It'll be alright," Lily said gently, placing a reassuring hand on Kiki's shoulder. "They're soldiers, after all. They're better at assessing risks than we are."

"Yeah... you're right," Kiki replied, forcing a faint smile, appreciating Lily's comforting words.

"Exactly. Besides, Sanders and Karen are with them," Lily added encouragingly.

"Yes," Kiki said brightly. Yet her anxiety persisted beneath her forced cheerfulness.

"But still... he might do something reckless..."

Despite her optimistic words, Kiki couldn't shake the persistent, nagging worry.



Shiro explained everything.

He spoke of the battle in space, his encounter with Aina, their escape together, the watch, and finally, their reunion amidst Kojima Base's destruction.

Eledore occasionally teased him but was quickly silenced by Karen's stern glares.

"That woman, Aina, she's here, among the Zeon forces occupying this village," Shiro concluded.

"Was she the one supporting that commander, Ginias, when he collapsed?" Michel asked, recalling seeing no other woman present.

"Yes, that was Aina."

Eledore smirked. "Well, she was quite pretty. Good job, Commander. It's a Romeo and Juliet story for the Universal Century." He promptly quieted down under Karen's glare.

"Regardless, she knows I'm Ensign Shiro Amada of the Federation. For now, she seems to be keeping quiet, but we can't rest easy."

"What's our move, then? Should we escape while we still can?" Sanders asked.

"No," Shiro replied firmly. "If we run now, it could mean trouble for the villagers."

"But Commander, there's no guarantee this Aina girl won't reveal your identity eventually. It's not like you two are lovers or anything..." Eledore pointed out cautiously.

Shiro nodded seriously. Eledore was right, they weren't lovers. Their entire interaction spanned mere moments in space. The likelihood of becoming something more was slim at best.

"A current, ongoing love...?"

Shiro remembered Aina supporting Ginias. The watch's photo was old, but clearly, their bond remained strong.

"I'm clinging to illusions."

Shiro admitted inwardly he'd been drawn to Aina. Not deeply at first, just a fleeting attraction. But seeing her with Ginias had clarified his feelings.

Aina was undeniably beautiful.

Yet it wasn't her appearance alone that captivated him.

When they first met, her expression was blank, doll-like. But at their parting, her smile had pierced his heart. Even through the visor of her

normal suit, Shiro vividly remembered her eyes, her lips, her gentle expression, clearer than any scene from "Captain Joe."

"If escaping isn't an option... maybe a preemptive strike?" Sanders suggested thoughtfully. "They only have three mobile suits. A surprise attack might succeed."

"But Sergeant, what about Kiki and the others? If Zeon discovers they sheltered us..." Michel worried.

"We'll make it look like Federation Forces infiltrated from outside. The villagers can claim we died caught between Zeon and Federation Forces," Sanders clarified.

"Perfect!" Michel clapped enthusiastically. "It'll seem like the Federation penetrated deep behind enemy lines. Zeon will have to divert resources, helping our side considerably."

Indeed, jungle combat was about points, not lines. There was a possibility that a small Federation unit could penetrate deep into enemy territory by avoiding Zeon strongholds. Despite the logic, Shiro shook his head firmly.

"I'm going to meet Aina," he said, gripping her watch tightly. "I'll talk to her directly. Convince her to remain silent."

"Are you serious?" Eledore protested, throwing up his hands incredulously. The rest appeared equally skeptical, though less vocal.

"If I don't return within an hour, execute the surprise attack as Sanders outlined. Michel, you'll pilot my Gundam."

"Commander, are you sure about this?" Karen questioned gently.

"I'm sorry, Karen. But if Aina stays silent, we can avoid unnecessary conflict."

"Commander," Sanders interjected carefully, "this Aina piloted that new prototype responsible for destroying Kojima Base. She doesn't sound like someone eager to avoid conflict."

"Aina isn't like that!" Shiro shouted, louder than intended.

The squad quickly silenced him, placing fingers to their lips.

"I mean... Aina wouldn't," Shiro repeated quietly.

He knew it sounded irrational, yet he couldn't accept it, couldn't accept that Aina had truly destroyed Kojima Base.

He needed to see her.

To know the truth from her own lips.

Who was she?

She'd claimed she wasn't a Zeon soldier, and he'd believed her.

Then, who was she really?

Between the Aina he met in space and the one who attacked Kojima Base, which was real?

He needed to know.

"I suppose inexperienced guys falling in love really are scary," Eledore mused softly.

"If it were BB, I might do the same," Michel muttered, eyes downcast.

"You saved my life once already, Commander. I've no intention of holding back now," Sanders stated firmly, with unusual cheerfulness.

"Time the 08th Team shed its nickname of 'Commander Crushers.' Promise you'll return alive," Karen added, winking awkwardly. Despite their varied words, their message was clear. Do as you please. They supported Shiro's nearly selfish decision, fully aware of the risks. "Everyone..." Shiro's expression wavered between laughter and tears. He was truly fortunate to have such loyal comrades.



The room allocated to Aina in Baresto's home was the northeast corner room on the second floor, Kiki's former room.

For a young girl's room, Kiki's was starkly plain, furnished with only a small desk and a bed, devoid of any decorations. Inside the desk, hidden away, were precious memories of her mother: photographs, drawings, and a handmade doll stitched lovingly during her childhood.

Yet Aina had no interest in the room itself. Her quarters at the Lhasa Base and Side 3 were even more austere, containing nothing beyond a bed and a small dresser for clothing.

"We met again..."

Aina lay on the bed, staring upward, her thoughts swirling.

"Shiro Amada. Could this really be fate?"

It seemed too extraordinary to dismiss as mere coincidence.

Meeting an enemy soldier in the vastness of space was unusual enough. Encountering that same soldier on Earth, and now again in this supposedly neutral village, defied ordinary explanations.

Suddenly, Aina sat up, drawn to the window.

She parted the curtains, revealing the night sky, so close to the cosmic expanse she loved.

"If Shiro's here, does that mean this area is under Federation control?"

"If so, this place is dangerous. We must relocate quickly. I'll speak to Norris, my brother must be moved first... A Federation soldier is here. Informing Norris would resolve everything swiftly. Yet I haven't done so. Before that, I need to see Shiro. I must know why he spared my life. I have to be certain. If Shiro Amada is alone in this village, it poses little threat. But..."

*Tap.*

A sudden sound broke her thoughts. Something had struck softly.

*Tap.*

There it was again. This time, clearly from outside.

Aina approached the window, peering carefully outward.

*Tap.*

Now she saw clearly, a small pebble had struck the window frame.

"Below...?"

Looking down into the darkness, she noticed a figure waving up at her. A villager? No, unlikely. No ordinary villager would risk evading Zeon's vigilant guards just to approach her room. So then...

"Shiro Amada?!"

Swiftly, Aina returned to the bed, ripping the sheets into strips. She quickly began fashioning a makeshift rope to allow the shadowy figure below to climb safely up to her window.



The figure who climbed into Aina's room using the makeshift rope made from torn sheets was unmistakably Shiro Amada.

Though he was dressed in the clothing of a local villager, there was no mistaking him as the young Federation ensign she'd encountered in space.

"Why are you here, Ensign Shiro Amada?"

When Shiro hesitated to speak, Aina initiated the conversation. From the moment he entered the room, Shiro appeared uneasy, deliberately avoiding looking directly at her, mainly because she stood before him in attire scarcely more modest than undergarments, a fact she remained oblivious to.

After a moment, clearly struggling with where to focus his eyes, Shiro finally spoke.

"When Kojima Base was destroyed, I thought regrouping with the Federation Forces was dangerous. At that time, you warned me—"

"No," Aina interrupted softly, shaking her head. She wasn't interested in why he was in the village.

"Oh... right. I came because I needed a favor from you," Shiro confessed.

"From me?"

"Yes. I need you to overlook us," Shiro said, finally meeting her gaze. "If you remain silent, we'll behave quietly as villagers. But—"

"But if I speak, you'll fight. Is that it?"

"Yes," Shiro nodded slightly. "But... I don't want to fight you."

"But you're Federation, and I'm Zeon—"

"Even so, I don't want to fight you!" Shiro nearly shouted, his voice filled with raw emotion.

Aina stared, momentarily stunned. Was this man truly risking so much just for that reason?

"What a strange man..."

Aina observed Shiro anew. He was unlike Ginias, Norris, Yuri, any man she'd encountered before. Each of them differed individually, but Shiro seemed fundamentally distinct. She wondered why.

"I have a question," Aina finally said. Shiro's expression darkened.

"I... can't do anything that would betray my comrades," Shiro responded painfully. He assumed she would demand Federation secrets or troop positions.

"You misunderstand, Shiro," Aina said gently.

“What?”

“I don't want to hear about Federation military secrets or where your comrades are hiding. It doesn't matter to me which side wins this war.” As she spoke, she realized she'd spoken more today than in years.

“Then...?”

“What I want to know is about you, Shiro Amada.”

“Me?”

“Why didn't you shoot me back then?”

There it was. She'd finally asked.

“Your gun was loaded, yet you didn't fire. Why not? I was your enemy, I tried to kill you.”

“That's...” Shiro faltered, averting his eyes uncertainly. “Honestly, I don't know.”

“You don't know?”

“I don't. When I saw your eyes behind your visor, my finger froze. My mind kept yelling at my finger to pull the trigger, but it just wouldn't move. I don't understand it. I'm fine facing mobile suits, but your eyes...they just stopped me.”

Aina understood. She'd felt exactly the same.

She had seen Shiro's eyes through her own visor, repeatedly commanding her finger to fire.

“I don't really understand it, but I was scared. Pulling that trigger, killing someone, it terrified me. Destroying mobile suits is different. Knowing there was a human behind the visor flooded me with fear from deep inside.”

Fear.

Had that been her own feeling, too?

Did she also recoil from killing another human? Could such a humane emotion still exist within her?

“I can't explain it well. When I saw your eyes, I just couldn't shoot. It wasn't strategic or planned, I simply couldn't pull the trigger,” Shiro finished apologetically.

Shiro's explanation lacked clarity. It was hardly a satisfying answer.

Yet Aina felt content.

She found comfort knowing Shiro had hesitated for exactly the same reason she had. A strange camaraderie blossomed, as though they shared a secret only they understood.

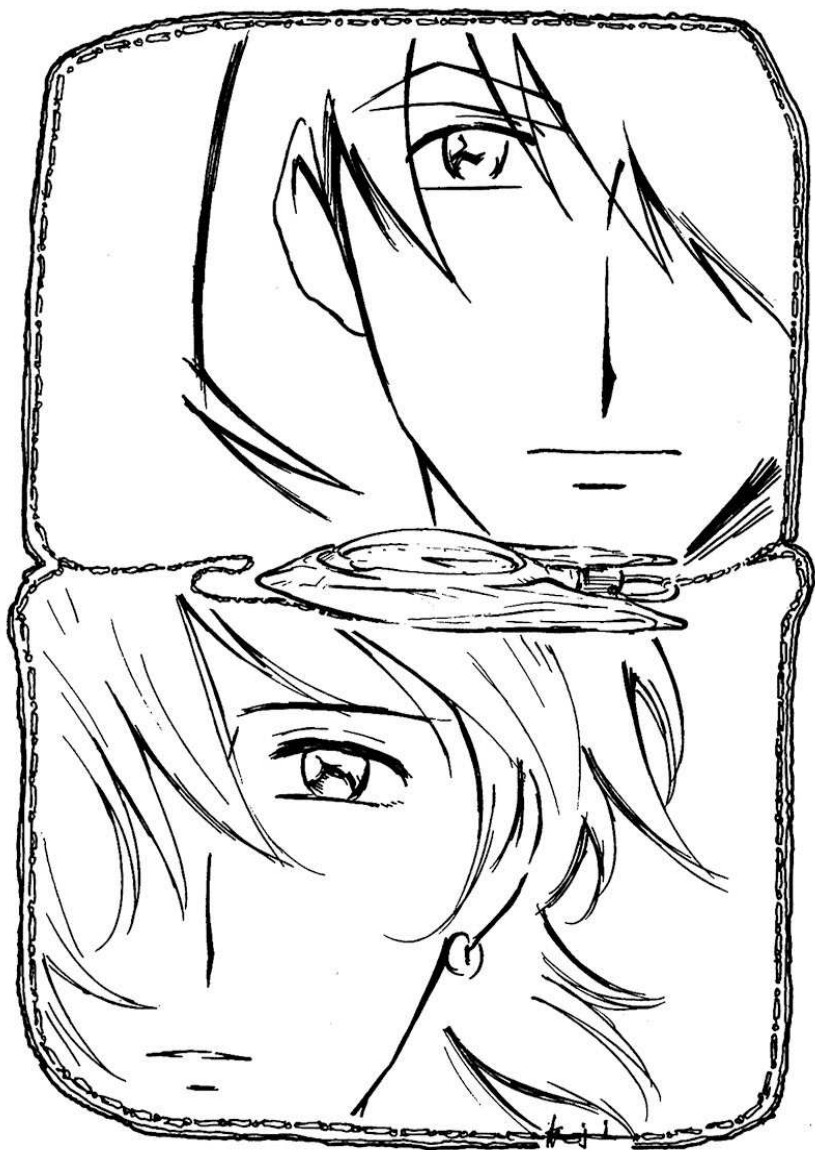
“Aina, why didn't you shoot?” Shiro asked quietly.

Aina smiled instinctively, answering softly, “For the very same reason.”



“For the very same reason,” Aina said, smiling softly.

It was the exact smile that had captivated Shiro before, the smile that first drew him to her.



"Ah, it really is..."

Shiro realized anew the depth of his attraction to Aina. Even if she already had someone, he couldn't stop how he felt.

"Aina, this..." Shiro reached into his pocket, pulling out the watch he'd borrowed from her.

"I borrowed this in space and never returned it."

"You've kept it all this time?" she asked softly.

"Yes. It helped me out in various ways. Thank you."

Aina gently accepted the watch from his outstretched hand.

"And, um... sorry for asking another favor," Shiro continued hesitantly.

Aina lifted her gaze from the watch, her expression immediately cautious.

"Can I ask for one more thing?"

Her expression grew guarded, assessing him carefully.

Shiro hesitated briefly under her scrutiny but pressed on bravely.

"Could you give me something of yours?"

"Something of mine?"

"It doesn't need to be anything valuable, just something small like a used hair clip or an old photo. Something you don't need. I'd like it as a keepsake."

Aina looked troubled by the request, clearly not having anticipated it.

Her eyes wandered uncertainly around the room, perhaps searching for something suitable, or maybe simply avoiding his gaze.

Finally, she returned her attention to him, her voice gentle yet firm.

"I'm sorry, Shiro."

Shiro felt a sharp pang of disappointment, but also a quick wave of understanding. Why would she give anything personal to a man who wasn't her family or lover? Of course, it was obvious, really. In an instant, he resigned himself to acceptance.

However,

"I'll find something for the next time you visit," Aina said softly, offering an uncertain but genuine smile.

She was completely different from the doll-like woman he'd first encountered.

And her words carried a deeper promise, a clear invitation that they would meet again.

## Chapter.05

### Exposed

Repairs on the Apsaras, moved to the cleared landa fields, dragged on at a painfully slow pace.

True, the constant interruptions due to Yuri's whims had ceased, yet the severe limitations of their makeshift facilities meant that progress was hardly better than it had been back at the old Kojima Base. Still, for Ginias, it might have been slightly preferable simply because Yuri was no longer around to aggravate him.

Within a few days, the villagers began settling back into their daily lives. But life in Baruk Village had never been ordinary; it had revolved around vigilance and drug cultivation. With both activities halted, they now passed their time with romances, card games, naps, and drinking, enjoying their enforced idleness as best they could.

The O8th Team, likewise, mirrored the villagers' leisurely façade, deliberately maintaining a low profile to avoid drawing unnecessary attention. Eledore, seeing the situation as the perfect break, eagerly indulged himself in gambling and flirtation.

Sanders strategically accepted conscriptions from the Zeon forces, hoping to glean valuable intelligence. Fortunately, his impressive physique made him invaluable to the Zeon troops for heavy lifting, and soon enough, they began calling on him by name.

Karen found herself joining the village women in sewing and laundry chores. Although there was never much actual work to do, the reality was that she spent most of her time enduring tedious village gossip sessions around the communal well.

Michel had seamlessly transitioned into the role of a teacher for the village children. Though he kept it secret to avoid teasing, he had even received a love letter from one of his young pupils.

As for Shiro...

"One night, the instructor shook us awake, handing out night-vision goggles. Things were tense with Zeon at the time, so we were all on edge, figuring it was combat. We frantically prepped our weapons, but the instructor told us we wouldn't need them."

Aina tilted her head slightly at Shiro's words, puzzled.

"Turns out, someone had decided he'd had enough of military life and bolted. We were sent to comb the mountains for him. Of course, it had to be raining. Maybe he deliberately picked a rainy night, but it just pissed us off even more. As we slogged up the mountain, we talked about what we'd do when we caught him."

Aina listened silently.

"We searched for about four hours. Suddenly, cheers erupted from the right, rolling towards us like a wave at a stadium. 'We've got him! Let's get him! He's gonna pay!' Pretty vicious cheers, honestly."

Shiro smiled wistfully as he recalled the event.

"The whole mountain seemed to shake with curses and yelling. It was incredible, better than any concert or sports match I've ever seen."

Aina listened quietly to Shiro's stories.

Initially, Shiro had been concerned about her silence. Gradually, however, he grew accustomed to their one-sided conversations. Though she never laughed out loud, he occasionally saw hints of happiness in her expression.

The man in her photograph no longer mattered. Simply being able to talk with Aina filled Shiro with contentment.

"Hey, Aina. Want to go outside sometime?"

"Outside?"

"Yeah. Being cooped up in here all the time must be stifling. There's a beautiful waterfall nearby. I could even show you that grass whistle I mentioned the other day."

"Thank you, Shiro, but... I can't go outside."

Aina lowered her gaze.

They always met here, in her room.

Each night, Shiro slipped past the guards to reach her quarters. She'd given him the patrol schedules, so he was rarely at risk of being discovered. Eledore jokingly called him a midnight visitor, but it didn't bother Shiro one bit.

Yet, Aina seemed troubled. Shiro presumed it was because she didn't want her boyfriend to catch her with him. Any man would feel uneasy seeing his lover speaking intimately with another.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'd love to see the waterfall and hear your whistle, but, "

"It's okay, I don't want to force you," Shiro reassured gently, unwilling to push her into anything that might jeopardize their time together. "I'll make a grass whistle and bring it here so you can hear it."

"But didn't you say it only grows deep in the forest?"

"Don't worry. There's no fence, and it'll be easy to get."

Zeon had forbidden villagers from leaving the area, presumably to cut off communication. However, with most Zeon soldiers focused on the home and the mobile armor, slipping unseen into the forest wasn't especially difficult.

"Please, Shiro, be careful. If the Zeon soldiers catch you, just say it was my order. I'll take responsibility."

"Relax. Those clumsy Zeon soldiers won't spot me."

Immediately regretting his slip, Shiro shrunk slightly in embarrassment. After all, hadn't he just called Zeon "clumsy" right in front of her?

With an apologetic, barely audible voice, he added, "I mean... except for you, Aina."

Observing Shiro's bashful, childlike reaction, Aina allowed herself the faintest smile.



“Teach! I’m done!”

Under a clear blue sky, Mati enthusiastically raised her hand, clutching the handwritten test Michel had prepared.

“You finished first again, Mati? Great job!”

Mati’s face blossomed into a wide grin at Michel’s praise.

Ever since Zeon's arrival had halted repairs on the Gundam, Michel had thrown himself fully into teaching the village children. In the Far East, schooling rates were notoriously low, leaving many children able to read but unable to write, capable of only basic arithmetic, and unaware of how the Earth Federation's social systems functioned. Baruk Village was no different; the outbreak of war had only exacerbated these conditions.

Thus, Michel, introduced jokingly by Eledore as a literary-minded young man, had found himself recruited by the village parents as an interim teacher. Surprisingly, Michel didn’t mind. In fact, he’d begun to wonder if teaching was perhaps his true calling, as he genuinely enjoyed guiding these children.

“Oh! It’s Kiki!”

Mati, eagerly awaiting grading, waved toward the approaching girl. Kiki, who had been quietly observing Michel’s outdoor class, smiled shyly and raised her hand in greeting.

“Sis, are you gonna join us and learn math from Teacher Michel too?”

“Nah, I’m good. Actually, I just needed to talk to the teacher,” Kiki said, glancing toward Michel.

“Me?”

“Yeah. But don’t worry, finish your class first. I’ll just wait here.”

“Are you sure? I could step away for a minute.” Michel offered, sensing it might be something private.

“No, no. It’s nothing urgent,” Kiki said quickly, settling herself behind the students.

Ah, Michel thought, suddenly realizing what Kiki wanted to discuss. The commander, no doubt. He vaguely remembered urging her to confess her feelings the day Zeon troops arrived. Had anything come of it?

He’d subtly tried to glean information from Shiro, but saw no indication anything had progressed. Perhaps Kiki still hadn’t expressed her feelings.

“All right, just wait there. I’ll be done in about fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks, Professor Michel,” Kiki grinned brightly, her usual cheerfulness intact.



"Michel, there's something I need to ask you."

As soon as the kids had dispersed, Kiki's demeanor turned somber.

"It's about the commander, isn't it?" Michel guessed.

"Yeah."

Michel's openness made it easier for Kiki to proceed. Ideally, she would've preferred speaking directly with Shiro, but she lacked the courage.

"Is it true that Shiro sneaks into that Zeon woman's room every night?"

"What?! Where did you hear—"

"Just answer me," Kiki pressed, staring directly into Michel's eyes.

After a moment's hesitation, Michel sighed, resigning himself to honesty.

"It's not exactly what you think, but yes, he does visit a female Zeon pilot regularly."

Kiki's suspicions were confirmed. She knew the woman, silver-haired, regal, undeniably beautiful, and far more sophisticated than herself.

"But, I don't think you need to worry," Michel hastily added. "Shiro mentioned she already has a boyfriend."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Apparently, she's dating that Zeon officer, the one who gave the initial speech."

Kiki pictured them together. A perfect match, she conceded. Imagining Shiro with the woman felt oddly mismatched.

"But Shiro likes her, right?"

"Well... yes."

"So does someone just stop liking a person because they have a partner?"

Kiki knew she couldn't. Even knowing Shiro's feelings for the other woman hadn't diminished her own.

"Michel, between you and BB, who fell in love first? Don't tell me it was a fairy tale where you confessed, and it turned out she already liked you."

Michel blushed slightly, scratching his nose sheepishly. "I guess I did. BB didn't even know I existed initially. She was always in the library. At first, I just thought she was cute, but after she helped me find a lost card, I started noting what books she borrowed and tried sitting nearby whenever I could."

Kiki chuckled, easily visualizing Michel hovering awkwardly around BB.

"One day, a book she was reading got adapted into a film, and I gathered the courage to ask her out. She said yes..."

"If she already had someone, what would you have done?"

"Hmm... I worried about that since she's so pretty," Michel admitted, smiling warmly at the memory. Kiki rolled her eyes, amused yet slightly jealous. "Honestly, I'd probably just have hung around hoping she'd notice me someday."

"Exactly. Feelings don't vanish because someone's taken."

"Yeah," Michel agreed quietly.

"Shiro must feel the same. He won't stop loving her just because she has a boyfriend."

Expecting Shiro to abandon his feelings felt selfish. Should she give up herself, expecting Shiro to reciprocate? Neither seemed right. Perhaps waiting for Shiro to let go naturally was her only choice.

"I'm not an expert," Michel ventured gently, "but maybe you just need to tell him how you feel. I don't know how the commander will respond, but nothing changes unless you say something."

"You're probably right. But..."

Her hesitation struck Michel as uncharacteristic, yet fitting for a seventeen-year-old girl. With brotherly gentleness, he added, "I hesitated for six months before telling BB. Take your time, Kiki. When you're ready, it'll be the perfect moment."

"Thanks, Michel," Kiki smiled warmly, glancing toward the children waiting for their teacher's return. "You really are Teacher Michel. Good advice."

"Hey, stop teasing me," he protested, embarrassed.

"Maybe sometime, you could even show me how to write a love letter," she winked, leaving Michel's heart fluttering slightly.



"Norris, may I ask you something?"

Aina called out softly to Norris as he passed by on his routine inspection. It was unusual, ordinarily, she simply nodded when Norris checked on her well-being, rarely initiating conversation. The last real dialogue they'd shared had been at the old Kojima Base, when she'd asked about the mobile suit marked "08."

"If it's within my ability to answer, certainly," Norris replied, turning to face her squarely, posture straight and formal. It was precisely the stance he'd maintained since his days as her bodyguard back home.

"Norris, do you carry a charm with you?"

"Yes," Norris answered after a brief hesitation.

"What kind of charm is it?"

"That...I cannot tell you," Norris replied, clearly flustered. His charm was tucked close to his heart even now, but sharing its nature with Aina was too embarrassing.

"I can't share mine, but I can speak generally, if that would suffice."

"That's fine."

"Soldiers' charms aren't anything extraordinary. They might carry photos, letters, coins, flattened bullets, things like that."

"Do male soldiers ever keep belongings from women as charms?"

"Well... I can't say exactly how common, but certainly many do. Soldiers with lovers usually carry something from their loved one, a photograph, a lock of hair."

"Do you do that, Norris?"

Caught off guard by the sudden question, Norris stammered awkwardly, "I, er, that is—"

"It's all right. You don't have to answer," Aina reassured him gently, smiling at Norris's bashfulness, which she found unexpectedly endearing.

"Miss Aina...?" Norris looked startled, then quickly pleased, his features softening warmly.

"You smiled just now," he said gently, looking upon her with a tender gaze.

"I did?"

"Yes. A very lovely smile."

"Oh."

Instinctively, Aina touched her cheek.

"I smiled..." she murmured, realizing she could still do something so simple, yet profound.



"I'll go check on the Gundam."

Gathering the entire 08th Team, Shiro made his abrupt announcement.

"You, Commander?"

"What's brought this on suddenly? Have you found a good strategy?"

"This isn't just some whim, right?"

The idea of returning to the Gundam had come up two days earlier. The 08th Team held daily meetings to discuss intelligence gathered about Zeon and the villagers. Sanders had suggested they needed to find out how the overall battle was developing and pass any new Zeon intel to their allies, which would require revisiting their hidden Gundam.

But the risk was significant. If Zeon discovered them, both the 08th Team and the villagers sheltering them would be in grave danger. Without a clear plan, they had postponed the decision.

"I promised Aina I'd let her hear the grass whistle," Shiro explained.

"What?" Eledore's disbelief was transparent, mirrored by the confusion on his teammates' faces.

"Just hear me out," Shiro sighed irritably. "I'm going into the forest to collect grass for the whistle. Even if I'm caught, I'll have a solid excuse. Aina's agreed to back me up."

"Wow, sounds pretty lovey-dovey," Eledore teased, earning a sharp glare from Karen.

"So you'll use this opportunity to reach the Gundam?" Sanders steered the conversation back. Shiro nodded silently.

"Well, if that's your plan..." Karen, second-in-command, had no objections.

"I guess it's fine," Eledore relented.

"We should definitely check on the war situation," Michel agreed.

The issue had never been returning to the Gundam itself, but how to manage it safely. With Shiro's cover story in place, none of them had grounds to object.

"Then I'll head out now." Shiro rose swiftly.

"You're leaving already?"

"Yeah," Shiro replied with an embarrassed smile. "I promised Aina I'd play her the grass whistle tonight."



Aina picked up the pocket watch adorned with delicate feathers. It was the watch her mother had given her. A watch that held a photograph of her and her brother. A watch that had connected her and Shiro. Beyond this watch, Aina possessed almost nothing else she considered truly hers.

"Could you give me something of yours?" Shiro had asked, yet she had still not given him anything.

It wasn't that she was unwilling.

She simply hadn't known what to give.

"Would it be strange to give this back to him?"

She placed the watch on the desk, hesitating.

"But what else do I have that's truly mine?"

Aina looked around the room thoughtfully.

Aside from this watch, her only real possessions were her clothes, and herself.

Suddenly embarrassed by the thought, Aina's cheeks flushed softly.

Herself?

"No, this will have to do."

Resolutely, she took the watch back from the desk.

Then, in a sudden moment of inspiration, she opened it.

To remove the photograph inside.



It had been a full week since Shiro had last settled into the Gundam's cockpit.

Carefully, he activated Sanders's Gundam.

Among the three units, Sanders's was in the best condition, deliberately left on standby for emergencies. Thus, if there had been any communication from Federation forces, this unit would have received it.

A faint vibration resonated through the seat as the monitors slowly flickered to life. System checks indicated everything was operational. Shiro swiftly pulled up the week's communication log.

Yet...

"Nothing..."

A disappointed sigh slipped from Shiro's lips.

He hadn't expected much, but the absence of any messages still sank his spirits. Quickly shaking off his disappointment, Shiro refocused on programming the automated reply system.

It was critical to inform any approaching Federation forces about Zeon's activities. He swiftly input his message:

"A village lies three kilometers north. Zeon forces occupy it. My team and I are hidden among the villagers. Please do not harm them. Their cooperation with Zeon is under duress, they've sheltered us."

He paused briefly, contemplating adding a request to protect Aina, the mobile armor pilot. It was because of her that he was even able to send this message, and she wasn't a soldier in the traditional sense. Surely something could be done...

Just as he considered Aina, a sharp voice pierced the silence.

"Hands up."

Simultaneously, a gun appeared before his eyes.

"Zeon soldiers? How did I not notice them?"

Disguised as a villager, Shiro wasn't armed. Had he been in his own Gundam, his CZ72 would be safely stored beneath the seat, but now he had no immediate defense.

Careful not to provoke, Shiro slowly raised his hands.

The Gundam lay flat, placing Shiro facing upward in the cockpit. The gun appeared from behind, preventing him from seeing his assailant.

"Get out."

The gun jerked towards the open hatch.

Clearly, the assailant was ordering him to exit. The voice belonged to a woman. While Shiro felt confident in a one-on-one confrontation, the risk that other soldiers might be nearby made resistance unwise.

Hands still raised, Shiro carefully exited the cockpit, stepping onto the console.

"Turn around."

Complying, he slowly turned.

Directly behind him was the open hatch, gaping like a trap. His captor stood beyond it.

And indeed, behind the hatch stood a woman, yet she wasn't a Zeon soldier.

"K-Kiki? Don't scare me like that!"

Relief flooding him, Shiro began lowering his hands upon recognizing Kiki.

"I said hands up!" Kiki snapped, thrusting the gun forward aggressively. Her demeanor was serious. Shiro immediately stopped moving.

"What are you doing out here?" she demanded harshly.

Her tone echoed their initial encounter, causing Shiro to answer cautiously.

"I came to check for Federation messages."

"You idiot! You could put the whole village in danger!"

Suddenly, Shiro understood her hostility. His actions had seemed like betrayal to her.

"You know Zeon banned entering the forest. If you get caught—"

"I'm sorry, Kiki. But it's fine. I have cover; a Zeon soldier asked me to come."

"A Zeon soldier... that Aina woman?"

"Y-yeah."

Shiro wondered how Kiki knew about Aina. Eledore or Michel must have spoken carelessly, he'd have to have words with them later.

"You trust that Zeon woman despite being Federation military?"

"Aina's... different from other Zeon soldiers."

Kiki's cheeks flushed angrily.

"Oh please! You've completely fallen for her! Just because she's pretty, you're wrapped around her finger!"

"It's not like that..."

"What's so great about a doll-faced girl like her? She has a boyfriend but sneaks around with you anyway. She's trouble!"

"Aina isn't like that!"

"You're being fooled, Shiro! Don't you get it? She's Zeon, and you're Federation, it can't possibly work!"

"I don't care if it doesn't work, I still love her!"

*SLAP!*

Kiki struck Shiro sharply across the face.

"You idiot!"

"Stop it, Kiki!"

She pounded his chest repeatedly, ignoring his protests.

"Enough, Kiki! What's gotten into you?"

"You clueless jerk!"

Shiro struggled to calm her, blocking her blows ineffectively, baffled by her outburst.

Suddenly...

"Ah!"

Amid their struggle, Kiki lost her footing.

Below, the cockpit hatch gaped open ominously. Entangled with Shiro, Kiki fell backward into it.

Her elbow inadvertently slammed into a blue button beside the controls, the Gundam's chest-mounted Vulcan cannon.

Instantly, an earsplitting blast tore violently through the forest air.



In the depths of the forest, Norris reacted instantly to the sound of gunfire.

The shot lasted only a moment.

But Norris, who had survived countless battles, did not miss it.

"Walter?"

"Sir, I heard it too," Sergeant Walter Kohler quickly replied, sensing Norris's intention.

"Alert status one. Gather everyone around the Apsaras immediately."

Norris issued the order without waiting for confirmation. He did not trust the villagers; depending on the structure or homes with unknown potential, traps would be dangerous. Furthermore, areas with many blind spots were vulnerable to surprise attacks. That was why Norris ordered everyone to gather in the open terrain around the Apsaras.

"Understood, Captain."

Walter dashed off immediately, aware that even a second's hesitation could mean death in battle.

Norris also broke into a run.

The shot he'd heard sounded like heavy-caliber Vulcan fire, suggesting the involvement of a mobile suit. Why they would deliberately alert their enemies by firing was unclear, but activating his Gouf was imperative. Mobile suits were superior for issuing commands due to their high vantage points and rapid mobility.

*"Another battle, then..."*

Running, Norris pressed gently against the good-luck charm tucked into his chest pocket.



Meanwhile, the 08th Team had also heard the Gundam's gunfire.

"What's that idiot thinking?" Eledore snapped, first to react to the noise.

"I knew letting that troublemaker handle this was a mistake," he grumbled, quickly gearing up.

"What should we do, Sister Karen?" Michel asked anxiously, adopting the guerrilla nickname for Karen.

"They'll discover the Gundam if we don't act."

"We'll have to attack first and make it look like the Federation is launching an assault from outside," Karen declared decisively.

"But won't they notice we're missing? They've made a list of everyone here," Michel worried.

"If this village becomes a battlefield, casualties wouldn't be surprising."

"Oh, right, we'll be listed as casualties."

"Exactly. Our targets will be the Zeon forces and this house. Now let's move!" Karen rushed outside, with Sanders and Eledore right behind.

"H-hey, wait up!" Michel scrambled to grab his gear and dashed after them, emerging into chaos as Zeon soldiers hurriedly mobilized.



Kiki snapped back to reality, stunned by the Gatling cannon's deafening roar.

She immediately realized the gravity of her mistake.

Zeon undoubtedly knew there was a mobile suit here now. She had inadvertently endangered Shiro and the villagers.

"I'm sorry, Shiro, I didn't mean—"

"Calm down, Kiki," Shiro gripped her trembling shoulders firmly. "Listen to me. I have to attack Zeon now. We must make it look like the Federation is attacking from outside."

"But, but..."

"I'll destroy the shack we stayed in. If Zeon questions the villagers, tell them we were killed in the Federation attack."

"But... then..." Tears welled up in Kiki's eyes.

"This is goodbye, Kiki. Thanks for everything."

"No! I can't accept that! Not... not like this..."

"Kiki, you're the village chief's daughter. Protect your people."

Shiro's words triggered memories of the villagers.

That's right.

When her mother died, she had promised her father. He would protect the village, and Kiki would no longer cry but help him instead. Since then, hadn't she taken charge, leading the men, guarding the village, even handling dangerous drug deals herself?

Yes.

Her mistake had put Shiro and the village at risk.

It was her responsibility to set things right, for Shiro and everyone else.

She had to act decisively.

Wiping away her tears, Kiki straightened.

"Okay. But promise me one thing."

"What is it?"

"Promise you'll come back. Defeat Zeon and return here."

Shiro nodded firmly.

"I promise, Kiki."

He extended his pinky finger.

Kiki intertwined her own pinky with his.

A promise.

You'll definitely keep it, right?

In her heart, Kiki repeated the words over and over.



"Federation Forces?!"

Ginias's expression darkened immediately upon receiving Lieutenant Colonel Kurt Falkenberg's report.

"Yes. Captain Norris has confirmed at least one Federation mobile suit. He advises caution regarding potential collaboration from local residents."

Falkenberg conveyed Norris's orders precisely.

"Damn that Yuri! How could he allow a Federation suit through so easily?"

According to Yuri, Zeon had forced the Federation forces back nearly to their Madras base, and *that* was supposed to fall within the month.

"This is exactly what I warned about. If they'd only left it to my Apsaras..."

Ginias inwardly seethed, turning sharply to Commander Yanowitz.

"How's the Apsaras? Can it move?"

"If we avoid heavy maneuvers, it should be operational," Yanowitz replied cautiously.

"Prepare for launch immediately. Where's Aina?"

Falkenberg swiftly answered this as well.

"Captain Norris has ordered all Zeon personnel to gather around the Apsaras. She should arrive shortly."

"Good."

Ginias felt reassured by Norris's swift reaction. When it came to military matters, Norris was utterly reliable.

"Ready Aina's pilot suit. As soon as preparations are complete, launch the Apsaras. You can skip phases 38 through 132 if necessary."

At Ginias's command, the technicians scrambled into frantic action.

"Damn Federation monkeys. You'll never touch my Apsaras. Watch as I burn this entire forest to ashes."

Ginias visualized Federation soldiers fleeing in terror amidst showers of deadly beams. Seeing the Apsaras in actual combat felt like a blessing.

"Hurry, Aina. Operate the Apsaras for me."

Behind the shadow of the massive mobile armor, Ginias's lips curled into a distorted smile.



"Captain Norris, it's the Gundam! Number 08, the one we fought before!" Lieutenant Hans Difflipp relayed urgently.

So, the shot earlier had indeed come from a mobile suit. And that Gundam, of all units...

"In their first strike, Milton's unit was heavily damaged. The enemy appears armed with a 180mm cannon."

The Gundam's cannon had greater range than the Zaku's 100mm machine gun. Milton had likely exposed himself carelessly.

"Stay sharp, Hans. If that Gundam is here, expect two more units. Given the initial gunfire, this could easily be a distraction."

"Yes, Captain. We'll hold positions until you arrive."

Norris nodded approvingly, impressed with his subordinate's growth.

He had already made contact with Rear Admiral Kellerne's forces. Within an hour, they should flank the Federation from behind. But the enemy would undoubtedly anticipate this. If these were the same mobile suits that defeated his Gouf previously, they certainly had a plan.

"Who would've thought they'd hide here?" Norris murmured, an oddly pleased look on his face.



Shiro's initial attack had successfully destroyed a stationary Zaku.

That left two enemy mobile suits and two hover trucks. The Gouf was dangerous, but three Gundams could handle it.

Complete annihilation wasn't necessary. After causing enough chaos and destroying the house they'd occupied, they'd retreat before enemy reinforcements arrived. Ideally, they'd hit hard enough to discourage pursuit.

The real threat was the new mobile armor. If it mobilized, the 08th Team stood no chance; it could easily incinerate the forest from above with its mega-particle cannon. According to Aina, the Apsaras was still under repair, but could they count on that?

"Commander!" Karen's voice crackled urgently over the cockpit comm. The rear monitor showed her Gundam approaching swiftly.

"Karen reporting, all four accounted for. Awaiting orders."

"I've destroyed one Zaku. Remaining are one Zaku and the Gouf. Sanders, cover us. Karen, aim your 180mm cannon at the house we used. And then—"

"Commander, we've got trouble! That new model is powering up!" Eledore's panicked voice cut in. His ears, tuned from the last battle, recognized the distinct signature of the Apsaras's engine immediately.

Everyone in the 08th Team understood the Apsaras's destructive power, having witnessed it destroy Kojima Base singlehandedly. They couldn't hope to defeat it in open combat.

"We have to retreat, Commander! We can't possibly win against that!" Michel's voice trembled.

"I agree," Karen interjected quickly. "With the new mobile armor active and potential reinforcements arriving, immediate withdrawal is crucial."

They all knew prolonged fighting would make escape increasingly difficult. Even now, breaking through enemy lines as a small unit posed substantial risks.

"You're right," Shiro conceded, knowing Michel and Karen spoke wisely.

Their goal was simply to destroy their temporary residence, giving the guerrillas plausible deniability. Afterward, no reason remained to stay. And yet...

"You all go ahead," Shiro said firmly, resolved.

"Oh, not again," Eledore groaned. "More reckless heroics?"

"Yes," Shiro affirmed strongly.

Silence fell, utterly incongruous on the battlefield.

Once again, their commander intended something absurdly risky. Whatever he planned, it was surely madness.

Nobody spoke, static crackling loudly through the comm.

Finally, Eledore sighed dramatically.

"Great, now he's made up his mind."

"What a commander. Are you trying to kill us off too?"

"No, it won't come to that," Sanders said confidently. "I've got your back, Commander. That's my Gundam you're piloting, after all. You won't go alone."

“Sanders...”

“What troublesome teammates and commander I have,” Karen sighed exaggeratedly, secretly smiling behind the monitor.

“Karen, at least you should—”

“And how exactly would I get back in this busted Gundam? I’m with you, Commander, whether it’s hell or anywhere else.”

“Commander, hurry and give the orders already. Let’s wrap this up quick,” Michel urged, clearly unwilling to leave Shiro behind.

Thank you, everyone.

Shiro’s resolve hardened.

He would return alive, without losing a single comrade.

“Alright! Karen, cover me with the 180mm cannon. Sanders, flank to the right and pin down the Gouf. Bloodhound, deploy smoke screens and support Karen and Sanders. Keep an eye out for enemy reinforcements!”

“Roger!” came the unified response of four voices, unwavering.



The Apsaras’s Minovsky Craft activated.

A deep, resonant hum filled the air as the massive form of the Apsaras slowly began to rise. Yet it wobbled unsteadily, drifting like a leaf upon water, clearly unstable. Ascending any higher in its current condition would be dangerous.

“It’s not stabilizing. Maybe it’s still too soon...”

Inside the cockpit, Aina carefully continued her minute adjustments, but no improvement was evident. Secretly, she felt relieved by the Apsaras’s instability.

“If the Apsaras remains unstable, maybe I won’t have to fight...”

She already knew the identity of the Federation mobile suit. No one else but Shiro would launch such an audacious attack in this remote village, especially now that the Federation was supposedly retreating.

“Please... hurry and run, Shiro. If the Apsaras fully activates, I’ll have no choice but to fight you. I can’t...”

“A Gundam is approaching!”

At the communication officer’s urgent report, Aina switched the front monitor to an external camera feed.

A Federation mobile suit was charging directly at them.

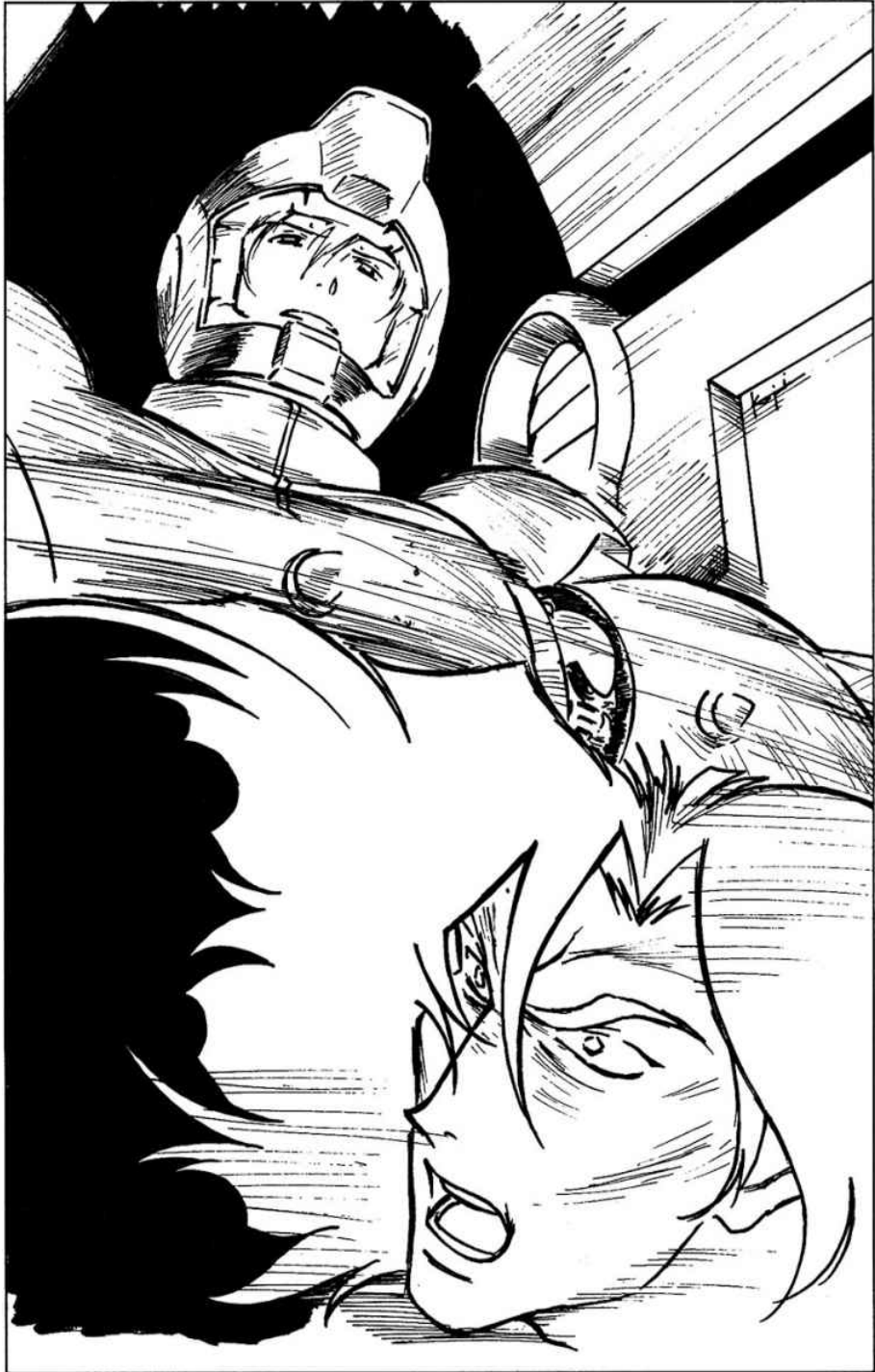
As Aina had anticipated, the unit bore the number 08.

It was Shiro.

“No... stay away!”

“Aina, fire the mega-particle cannon!”

Ginias issued the harsh command.



Though the Minovsky Craft was unstable, the engines and the mega-particle cannon were fully functional. Technically, she could fire it, but...

"But, brother, if we fire now, we'll hit the villagers and our frontline troops—"

"It doesn't matter!" Ginias snapped instantly. "Fire now! The Federation mobile suit is almost here!"

The Gundam loomed larger on the monitor. Inside was...

"Shoot, Aina! *You* are my arms and legs!"

Reluctantly, Aina initiated the charge on the mega-particle cannon. The four gauges climbed rapidly.

The Gundam advanced closer.

Charge complete.

Aina's hand hovered over the trigger.

At that precise moment, the Apsaras's communication unit intercepted a general broadcast.

"Aina! I'm taking you prisoner!"



"Aina! I'm taking you prisoner!"

Shiro shouted, broadcasting openly. Aina would hear him, as would every Zeon and Federation soldier nearby.

"Run away, Shiro..."

"I can't. I'm taking you back with me to the Federation. You don't belong with Zeon."

Maintaining his momentum, Shiro's Gundam seized onto the Apsaras, gripping the Zaku head atop its surface. It was just a guess, but the cockpit had to be near there.

"Aina, open the cockpit! I'm going to—"

Suddenly, the Apsaras's engine let out a piercing scream, louder and more desperate than ever before.



"Miss Aina!"

Though she couldn't hear him, Norris shouted desperately.

He had failed.

Pinned down by two enemy units, he'd allowed the Gundam to breach their front line. Two Zakus were vastly outmatched against three Gundams, and with the Apsaras behind them, radical maneuvers were impossible.

"Hans, cover me. I need to get to Miss Aina—"

Ignoring the risk of being shot from behind, Norris's Gouf rose urgently.

At that exact moment, the Apsaras ascended sharply.

Carrying the Federation Gundam, it spiraled uncontrollably into the darkening sky, clearly losing stability.

Higher and higher it soared, eventually vanishing into thick, stormy clouds.  
“Miss Aina!”

Staring after the now-invisible Apsaras, Norris shouted once more.

Without realizing, his hand had slipped into his chest pocket, gripping his precious charm tightly.

## Chapter.06

Doll

The Apsaras climbed higher and higher, carrying Shiro's Gundam upward into the endless blue.

They were already at a tremendous altitude. The dark storm clouds that had loomed over Baruk village now lay far below, and the raw, unshielded glare of the sun bore mercilessly down upon the ascending mobile armor.

"Aina! Bring us back down! At this rate—"

"I can't... Shiro, it's useless! The controls won't respond!"

The Minovsky Craft system had spiraled completely out of control. Altitude and trajectory adjustments were impossible. They could end up anywhere.

"Your mobile suit has an escape system, doesn't it? You need to eject now!"

"And you?"

"There isn't one in the Apsaras."

Unnecessary. A single word Ginias had used to dismiss Commander Yanowitz's earnest plea to equip the machine with an escape system. There had always been something more important, something more essential, according to him.

Ginias' cold expression surfaced vividly in Aina's mind.

"I can't do that. I won't abandon you!"

"Shiro?"

"Aina, it's because I—"

"Because I love you."

The final words were swallowed whole by a sudden explosion.

The Minovsky Craft had ignited into flames. The overstrained system had finally reached its breaking point.

"Shiro, get out now!"

"Don't give up yet, Aina!"

The Apsaras began plummeting.

Below, mountains blanketed thickly with pure white snow loomed ominously.

"We have to land softly somehow. Can you manage it?"

"There are attitude-control thrusters, but—"

"That'll do. Rotate the Apsaras so my Gundam faces forward!"

"But Shiro, if we do that..."

"Just do it! I'll slow our descent with my Gundam's thrusters!" Shiro shouted, though his voice betrayed his uncertainty.

It was true that the RX-79(G) Gundam possessed thrust vastly superior to ordinary mobile suits. But could it truly bear the enormous mass of the Apsaras?

He had no choice but to try.

This was their only chance of survival.

"We have to do this, Aina. It means nothing if we don't survive together!"

His words pierced her like a shot, and she swiftly activated the maneuvering thrusters. Though small, they proved sufficient to rotate the colossal mobile armor.

The mountain drew nearer with terrifying speed.

Through the Gundam's front camera, Shiro saw the jagged slopes fill his vision entirely. He wondered which mountains these were, how far had they drifted?

"Stop already!"

Shiro unleashed the full power of his Gundam's backpack thrusters.

Aina simultaneously activated what little remained of the Apsaras's thrusters.

But the Apsaras was simply too massive.

Their velocity refused to slow enough to be safe.

"Shiro, please, eject while you still can!"

"I won't abandon you, Aina!"

Shiro slammed down on the pedals with every ounce of strength he had.

"I have no reason to live, no will left in me. That's why, Shiro—"

The snow-covered ground rushed up violently to meet them.

"Aina—!"

Shiro's voice rang out desperately.

And then, with brutal finality, a colossal impact swallowed both machines whole.



Bathed in the eerie red glow of the emergency lights, Aina slowly opened her eyes.

A dull ache throbbed at the base of her skull. She must have hit it during the crash; without her helmet, she would surely be dead.

The instrument panel of the Apsaras had already switched into power-saving mode, meaning she'd been unconscious for a long time. The system was programmed to engage after sixty minutes of inactivity, so at least an hour had passed since impact.

Aina coaxed the Apsaras back to life, activating the monitors. The screen flickered awake, revealing a stark landscape entirely blanketed in snow, a fierce blizzard sweeping horizontally across her view.

"Shiro...?" Aina's voice trembled slightly as she hurriedly switched to the external monitor. But the Gundam was nowhere to be seen; it had likely been thrown clear during their rough landing.

*"I have to find him."*

Determined, she attempted to restart the Apsaras' systems, but the damaged Minovsky Craft had finally given out completely. The massive machine refused even the slightest movement.

Next, she checked the comms. There was no message from Shiro, only repeated attempts by Norris to contact her, requesting her location. If Shiro's communicator was functional, he would have undoubtedly reached out to her already. His silence meant it was either broken or...

*"Not good."*

With no other choice, Aina manually opened the cockpit hatch. Immediately, the freezing air rushed inside, biting through her suit.

"It's... so cold," she gasped, hastily snapping her helmet visor shut. The normal suit would keep her warm enough, but she worried whether Shiro had been wearing his. Probably not, maybe not even his military uniform.

"I need to hurry."

Just as she began climbing out, another message crackled through the communicator. But it wasn't Shiro.

"Miss Aina, this is Norris! Please respond! We're currently conducting an aerial search in a Luggun—"

"I'm sorry, Norris," Aina whispered, ignoring the call. All she had to do was send a distress signal and she'd be saved.

"This time... it's my turn to save someone."

Leaving Norris's pleading calls behind, she slipped out into the relentless storm.



Shiro trudged upward through the blinding snowstorm.

Wrapped hastily in a thin silver thermal sheet, he forced himself forward, step by exhausting step.

When the Apsaras had made its hard landing, his Gundam had been hurled downhill, tumbling until it came to rest uselessly in the deep snow. He remembered seeing the Apsaras partially buried higher up. That meant Aina was somewhere above him.

His Gundam was finished, no mobility, no communication, nothing useful left functioning. Cursing the fragility of cutting-edge machinery, Shiro nonetheless counted himself lucky; aside from bruises, he was miraculously unharmed.

"Aina... Please be safe," he muttered.

Visibility was nearly zero; even objects mere feet away vanished into swirling white chaos. Still, he continued upward.

The merciless cold steadily drained his strength. If he'd had a normal suit, the cold would have been manageable. But all he'd found inside the Gundam was a Federation uniform and a flimsy emergency thermal sheet. It offered minimal protection, but it was all he had.

"Maybe I should've waited until the storm died down," he thought bitterly.

His body neared its limit. Every step against the fierce wind was exhausting labor, the snow swallowing his legs with each stride, sapping his energy relentlessly. Determination alone kept him going.

A sudden, powerful gust ripped the thermal sheet from his body, sending it spiraling away into the void of white.

Shiro collapsed to his knees, despair overwhelming him. The freezing wind clawed at him, stripping away body heat and rational thought alike.

"Is this... really the end?"

Weakly, he pulled the emergency beacon from his pocket, clutching it tightly. But even this tiny effort drained his remaining strength.

Shiro fell forward into the snow, darkness overtaking him.



January 3, Universal Century 0079.

Shiro marked that historic day aboard the Salamis-class cruiser *Squaw Valley*. He and his fellow academy cadets were en route to Side 2 for their final training exercise. The exercise was originally planned for late January, but tensions between the Federation and Zeon had escalated alarmingly following several transport ship disappearances. In response, the Federation had accelerated its military build-up. Recruitment advertisements flooded every possible channel, and even the popular TV drama Captain Joe blatantly renamed its antagonists the Principality of Zeon, clearly echoing the growing enemy.

Yet, none of the cadets objected to the accelerated schedule. Shiro and his peers felt pride at the prospect of swiftly becoming soldiers and facing combat. This was precisely the mindset fostered by the academy, enthusiastic, patriotic volunteers eager to earn their stripes.

Once this final training cruise concluded, they believed they'd teach a harsh lesson to the Zeon saboteurs disrupting their transports. Glory, recognition, justice, promotions, the path before them seemed clear and bright.

But the optimism of January 3 quickly shattered under Zeon's sudden declaration of war and devastating surprise attacks. The Principality of Zeon simultaneously assaulted Sides 1, 2, 4, and 5, unleashing nuclear strikes via their newly deployed mobile suits on Federation garrisons.

The *Squaw Valley's* training voyage instantly became a combat mission: proceed immediately to Side 2 and rescue the civilians.

Amidst shock and uncertainty, Shiro felt an undeniable thrill. The battlefield awaited, and he reassured himself repeatedly that he was ready, trained and prepared. The Zeon bastards didn't stand a chance.

Shiro repeated this to himself like a mantra.

Yet, reality proved far darker. Side 2 was a vision of hell.

Bathed in yellowish haze, civilians collapsed by the hundreds, men, women, children, the elderly, victims of Zeon's poisonous gas deployed to quickly seize the colony. Without normal suits, they stood no chance.

Inside the colony Shiro could do nothing but watch the horrific slaughter unfold.

Parents collapsed atop their children.

Couples dead, hands still clasped.

An elderly man stretched out in agony, dying mid-reach.

A child frozen with eyes wide open, permanently caught by surprise.

A desperate man clutched weakly at Shiro, smearing blood across his visor in a futile plea for help.

Shiro screamed helplessly.

And he hated Zeon.

He would never forgive such brutality. Zeon were demons, worse than beasts.

*Screw the Zeon.*

*Kill the Zeon.*

*Fuck the Zeon.*

"Zeon!"

Shiro awoke violently, gripping a Zeon soldier by the throat.

"I'll never forgive you, Zeon bastard!" he snarled, squeezing relentlessly, intent on murder.

Yet, the soldier offered no resistance. It was only then that Shiro registered her face.

"Aina!" he gasped, quickly releasing his grip.

The "soldier" he'd nearly killed was Aina Sahalin.

"I, I was..."

Just a nightmare. Another grim flashback to the massacre at Side 2.

"Your hands are frostbitten," Aina gently told him. "Don't strain yourself."

Only then did Shiro feel the painful, numbing sensation.

"If only we had some warm water to treat them properly," she murmured.

"I'm sorry, Aina... I..."

"You had a terrible nightmare," she said softly. "You were delirious for quite some time."

As Aina spoke, her expression radiated a gentle, motherly tenderness.



Inside the makeshift snow cave that Aina had crafted, the two waited.

Waited for the blizzard to cease.

Waited for the other to speak first.

Over an hour had passed since Shiro had woken, yet scarcely a word had passed between them. Apart from a brief exchange when he awoke, hardly enough to be called conversation, they sat in silence.

"What am I supposed to do...?"

Shiro grappled internally, the nightmare having rekindled the buried turmoil within him.

Aina said nothing.

She merely sat close to Shiro, gazing silently toward the storm outside.

The blizzard showed no signs of relenting. Venturing out now would mean wandering lost until they froze to death. Waiting inside this snow shelter was their only option, their only choice.

Yet...

"I hate Zeon," Shiro finally uttered, unable to bear the silence any longer. His voice came strained, burdened with emotion.

Aina remained silent, patiently waiting for him to continue.

"What they did at Side 2... no, at every colony... slaughtering civilians like that, I can't forgive it."

When Shiro first joined the military academy, he harbored no particular hatred toward Zeon. As a Spacenoid himself, he even sympathized somewhat with Side nationalism. But after witnessing Zeon's poison gas attack on January 3, they became his sworn enemies, targets of deep, relentless hatred.

"But..."

His voice trailed off.

"But?" Aina gently prompted.

Gathering his courage, Shiro continued, "But since the day we met in space, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you."

Aina was surprised, but remained silent.

"I hate Zeon, but you're different. Even if you already have someone, I still..."

"Someone?"

"I saw the picture inside your watch. The commander who visited the village was in the photo with you..."

As Shiro awkwardly explained, Aina softly laughed.

"That was my brother."

"Your brother?"

"Do you remember his name, Shiro?"

Shiro searched his memories. The commander had announced himself clearly during the village speech, and his name appeared frequently in Zeon communications...

"I think it was... Technical Rear Admiral Ginias Sahalin... Ah!"

Aina Sahalin.

Ginias Sahalin.

The same surname.

"Oh... your brother? Ha-ha, I can't believe I jumped to conclusions like that," Shiro laughed at his own foolishness.

"Thank you, Shiro," Aina said suddenly.

For a moment, Shiro didn't understand.

"Thank you for thinking of me that way. But..."

"But?" Shiro asked nervously.

"But I can't return your feelings."

Shiro's shoulders slumped. Of course, it wouldn't be that easy.

"No, that's not it!" Seeing his reaction, Aina hastily corrected herself. "I'm very happy about your feelings. I might even feel the same. But it's just not possible."

"Because I'm Federation and you're Zeon?"

"No... no..." Aina shook her head desperately, tears welling. "I belong to my brother. My body, my arms, my legs, even my heart..."

Her words dissolved into anguished sobs.

"I... I..."

Shiro couldn't bring himself to press her further.



"Enter."

At Norris's knock, Ginias's curt reply came from behind the door.

"Excuse me," Norris said, stepping inside and bowing respectfully.

As usual, Ginias remained focused on his computer screen.

Since Aina and the Apsaras had disappeared, Ginias had delegated the search entirely to Norris. Initially, Norris believed this indicated Ginias's trust in his abilities. Recently, however, doubts about that assumption had crept in.

Ginias was already working on the Apsaras III. Evidently, he'd decided creating a new model was faster than recovering the lost prototype.

Yet...

"Master Ginias, I am departing once more to search for Miss Aina."

"Mm," Ginias responded indifferently, never turning away from his screen, continuing work on the Apsaras III, while neglecting the irreplaceable life of his only sister.

*"Does Master Ginias not worry about Miss Aina?"* Norris wondered.

Previously, Norris assumed Ginias's distant manner was a façade. Given accusations of nepotism for making his civilian sister a test pilot, Norris had believed Ginias adopted this cold stance deliberately. Deep down, he convinced himself the man genuinely cared for Aina, hence choosing her as the pilot.

Now, Norris feared that had merely been wishful thinking.

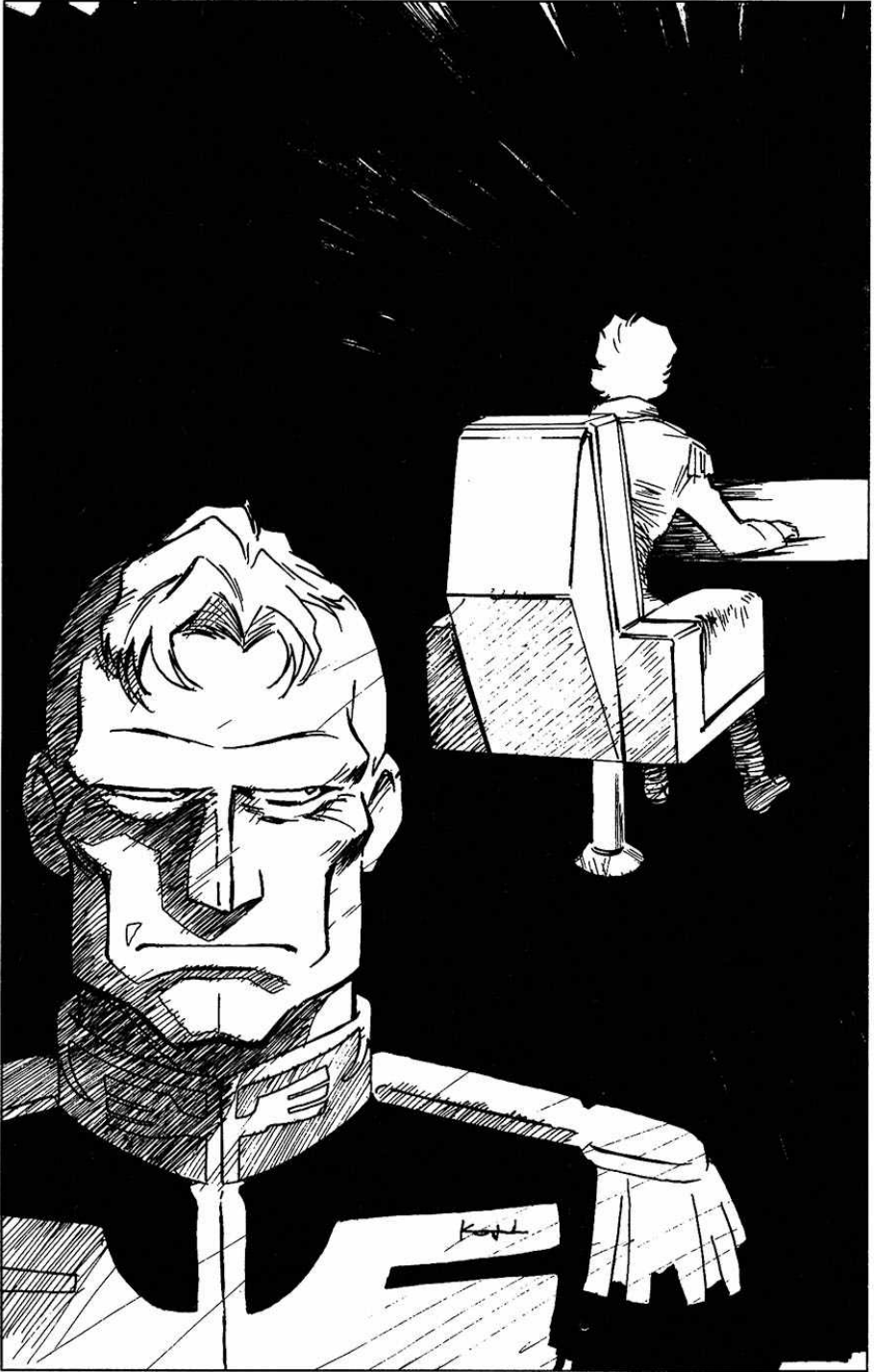
"This time, I plan to widen the search radius by five kilometers from the last known location."

"Mm."

Ginias's response remained unchanged, heightening Norris's frustration. Did he truly not care?

*"Master Ginias, you..."* Norris remembered the words Ginias murmured when the Apsaras's signal vanished.

"This might cause slight inconvenience."



Words Norris wished he hadn't heard. He cursed his battlefield-honed instincts. Had he not overheard, had he remained unaware, he could have continued serving Ginias as before.

"I will not return until I find Miss Aina."

"Mm."

Infuriated by Ginias's indifferent reply, Norris slammed the door shut behind him.



"Lower it a bit more," Shiro instructed, standing atop the Gundam's right hand, looking up toward Aina seated in the cockpit.

"Is this enough?" she asked softly, carefully lowering the Gundam's massive hand. Clenched in that hand was the hilt of a beam saber.

"Perfect, stop there." Shiro lifted his bandaged hand. By protocol, Shiro should have piloted the Gundam himself, after all, it was the Federation's latest weapon and highly classified. However, his frostbitten hands prevented any delicate maneuvering. Hence, he had entrusted the controls to Aina.

"Federation or Zeon... that doesn't matter now. All I know is..."

Shiro reached inside the beam saber's hilt, activating the energy CAP release lever.

Instantly, steam enveloped him.

The immense energy stored just shy of condensation burst outwards, instantly vaporizing the snow beneath them.

"Incredible... even at minimum output..." Shiro marveled.

When he shut off the lever, the snowy ground had transformed into a steaming pool, resembling an inviting hot spring.

Leaping down from the Gundam's arm, Shiro approached the water's edge and carefully submerged his frostbitten hands.

"Using a beam weapon to heat water..." Aina's voice sounded softly from behind.

The idea had been Shiro's. After Aina explained warm water was best for treating frostbite, he'd improvised this unique solution.

"You always surprise me," she continued warmly. "First, Morse code in space, and now this. Another idea from your favorite drama?"

"You mean Captain Joe? No, this one's all mine," Shiro replied, wincing. "Ah, it's tingling now."

"That means circulation is returning." Aina gracefully seated herself beside him. "Give me your hands, I'll remove the bandages."

"Ah... thank you." Shiro offered his hands obediently.

As Aina gently unraveled the soiled bandages, Shiro's eyes caught on her hands. "Her hands are so delicate..."

Compared to his own, her skin seemed like porcelain.

"It's getting warm, isn't it?"

"The steam's warming the air. Your cheeks are flushed."  
"Ah, yeah..." Shiro's face burned, but not from the heat.  
"It really feels like a hot spring," he stammered awkwardly. "Almost makes me want to hop in."  
Aina nodded seriously.  
"Then why don't we?"



Aina waited until Shiro immersed himself fully before removing her normal suit.

Beneath it, she wore only a simple tank top and underwear. Typically, she felt no embarrassment about such attire; during her experiments, she'd often appeared in far less, even fully nude before groups of male researchers.

Yet now, she stole a glance at Shiro. He sat submerged to his shoulders, hands carefully covering his eyes at her request.

Though she'd suggested entering the improvised hot spring herself, the thought of undressing before Shiro now felt unexpectedly intimate and embarrassing.

*"Why should this matter? I've stood unclothed before plenty of researchers, even young men."*

Carefully watching Shiro, she slowly began removing her undergarments.

*"Is it because it's Shiro? Could it be that I'm attracted to him? Is that what this feeling is?"*

Slowly, Aina stepped one foot into the steaming water.

Hot, almost uncomfortably so. It prickled her skin at first touch.

"You can look now," she called softly once her body was fully immersed.

With exaggerated caution, Shiro lowered the hands shielding his eyes, almost as if fearful of what he might see.

He released a long-held breath, shoulders visibly relaxing. Aina found the earnestness of his reaction unexpectedly charming, even amusing.

"You're beautiful," Shiro murmured, eyes narrowing gently as though shielding them from a bright light. "Just like a doll."

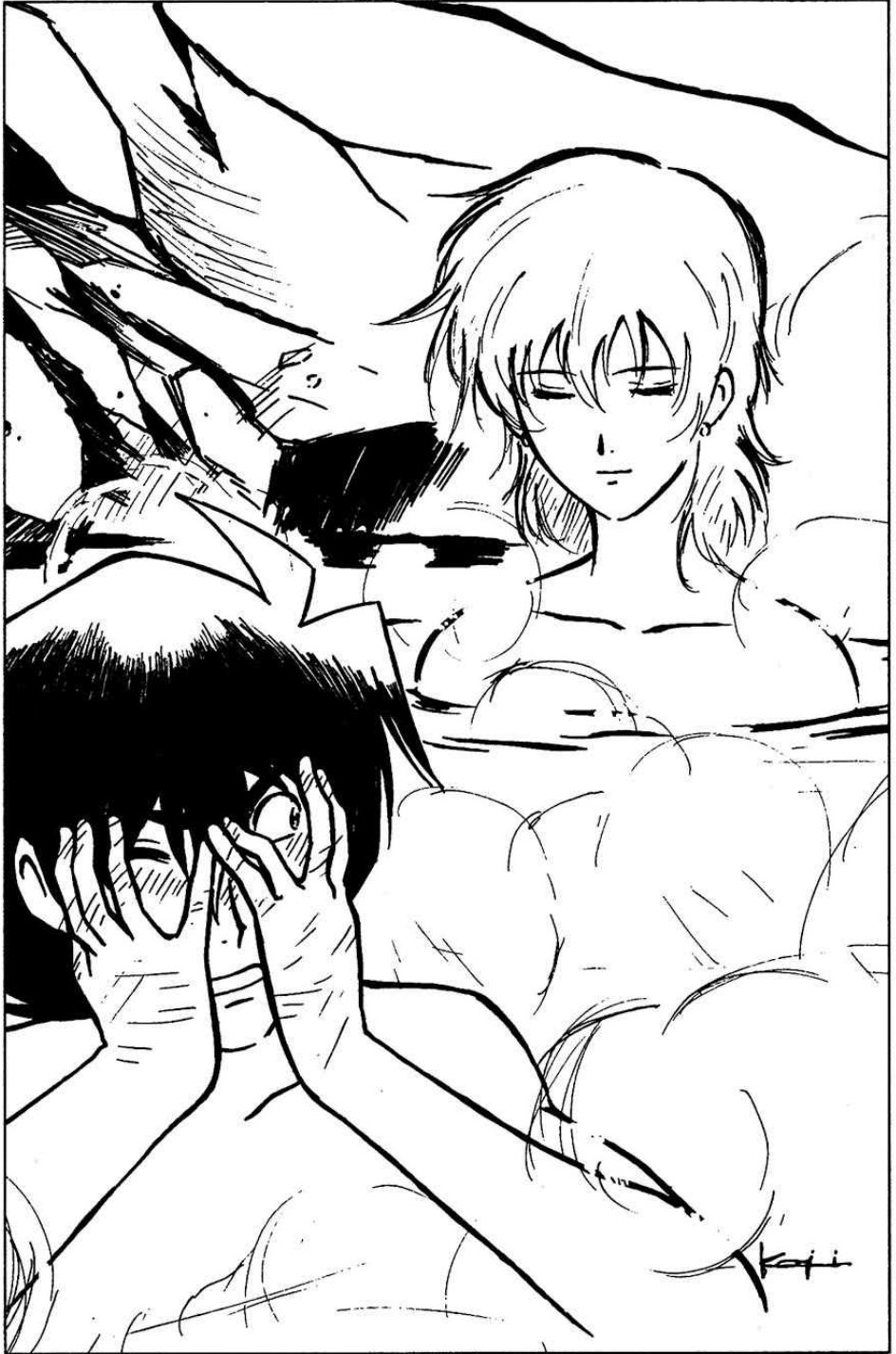
A doll.

Aina had heard those words countless times before. Soldiers often called her the "faceless doll," a label she'd never felt inclined to deny. After all, it accurately described her existence until now.

Shiro clearly meant it as a sincere compliment. But still...

*"Yes, I've been a doll. For fifteen years, I've been my brother's doll. My brother's words penetrated me deeply. Ever since, I've been nothing but his doll. But... I thought my heart had died."*

Yet, looking into Shiro's gentle, admiring gaze, she realized she'd been mistaken. Her heart remained, quietly awaiting the right moment to awaken fully.



She discovered she could still laugh, still mourn, still fall in love. And the man responsible stood right before her now.

*"This man..."*

She gazed steadily at Shiro, whose eyes were fixed softly upon her.

"This man awakened a heart that had slept for fifteen years. How can I express this to him? How do I respond to these newfound feelings?"

"Shiro," she suddenly said, rising from the steaming water.

Fully exposed now, she stood openly before him, arms outstretched.

"My body... belongs to my brother."

She concealed nothing. To this man, she was ready to reveal everything.



When Aina was five years old, fifteen years ago now, Side 3 was still known as the Republic of Zeon, not yet the Principality. Zeon Zum Deikun, the Republic's founder, still lived, and the Sahalin family was esteemed among great houses like the Matsunagas.

On that day, Side 3 planned to unveil its newly constructed spaceport. Officially intended to support population growth and trade, in reality, it served as a covert military port, enabling the newly independent Republic to maintain a strategic military presence against increasing Earth Federation pressure. With the Federation enforcing economic blockades and naval demonstrations, Zeon needed to bolster its defenses.

The Sahalin family received an invitation to the spaceport's opening. As a prominent figure with several trade businesses, Aina's father was an indispensable figure as a local dignitary.

Young Aina, accompanied by her then twelve-year-old brother Ginias, joined their parents at the ceremony. However, the event soon proved dull for a child.

To relieve her boredom, Aina coaxed Ginias into exploring the gleaming new facility. Ginias hesitated momentarily before giving in, after all, the allure of a brand-new port was irresistible to a twelve-year-old boy.

Evading their parents' watchful eyes, the siblings sneaked away from the VIP seating area.

Waxed hallways gleamed invitingly. Ships awaited departure. Staff wore crisp, impressive uniforms. Outside, protestors waved banners opposing the military build-up. Everything captivated them, fueling their youthful adventurous spirits.

Lost in wonder, they ventured deeper into the complex.

Then disaster struck.

Multiple explosions simultaneously erupted throughout the port.

Federation operatives had targeted the facility, hoping to destroy the military port and instill anti-war sentiment among Zeon citizens. Chaos consumed the opening ceremony.

Newly assigned security personnel, unfamiliar with the port layout, struggled to facilitate evacuation. Confusion worsened as both district police and national defense forces conducted overlapping rescue operations, exacerbated by the unclear boundary between military and civilian sections. Given these circumstances, it was inevitable that rescuing the missing Sahalin siblings was delayed.

Ginias wisely stayed put, comforting a terrified Aina, as rescue efforts stalled. Had they moved even slightly, deadly cosmic radiation awaited beyond the protective barriers. Thankfully, their position provided some minimal shielding.

Terrified by blaring alarms, Aina clung desperately to her brother. Despite their age difference, Ginias was more dependable than any adult she knew. Secretly, she had admired him deeply, her very first love. His calm reassurance finally helped her stop crying.

Eventually, a soldier from the national defense forces discovered them.

The soldier wore a heavy spacesuit because the protective walls against cosmic radiation had been largely destroyed by the explosions. He carried a single spare normal suit for rescued survivors. Facing a difficult choice between a small girl and a seemingly more mature boy, the soldier quickly put the oversized normal suit onto Aina. There was no time to wait for additional help, as the air was thinning rapidly.

Holding Ginias under one arm and the suited Aina under the other, the soldier raced toward safety, unavoidably crossing radiation-exposed areas.

"That's how my brother and I were carried out by the soldier from that room," Aina recounted calmly.

Shiro listened silently, offering no interruption.

"At first, I was innocently joyful, we had survived. My brother even smiled reassuringly at me. But I soon realized that only I had truly survived."

"...?"

"My brother, without a normal suit, absorbed a massive dose of radiation during the escape. As the soldier ran with us, we looked at each other to stay brave. But, before my eyes, my brother's face began to change."

"Change?"

"Probably the radiation. His skin turned a ghastly green, mottled with black spots. Blue blood streamed continuously from his nose..."

Aina vividly recalled it again, the horror of her brother's face transforming into something no longer human. Perhaps it had only been an illusion created by trauma, but from that moment onward, her dreams became permanently haunted by that nightmare.

"I couldn't look away. I was forced to watch closely as my brother changed into something monstrous."

As her brother's face warped horribly, guilt overwhelmed her. It had been her idea to go exploring, yet only she had protection. Even though it was the soldier's decision, her young heart was crushed by guilt.

"Still, we survived, and three months later my brother was discharged from the hospital. He returned with the face I remembered. But he'd lost almost

all muscle function in his limbs, and even his internal organs now depended heavily on mechanical support..."

"Aina..."

"When he returned, he asked me to become his arms and legs. To me, his words felt like salvation. Becoming his limbs meant I could somehow erase my guilt."

"That's absurd..."

"At least, that's how it felt to me at the time," she smiled faintly, perhaps self-mockingly.

"So, I became his limbs. We were inseparable, I was always with him, always acting on his behalf. Eating, bathing, sleeping, we were constantly together."

Though Ginias's condition had improved considerably over time, initially he was entirely dependent on her.

"Later, when the Sahalin family fell into ruin and our parents committed suicide, I became even more reliant on my brother. That's when I stopped thinking altogether. I became his limbs, and he became my mind. Thinking became his responsibility..."

Shiro remained speechless, clearly stunned.

Understanding his reaction, Aina continued softly.

"Limbs don't need hearts. Bodies don't require emotions. So, I stopped smiling. I stopped crying. I stopped feeling anger. Perhaps, deep down, I wanted it that way. Locking away my heart meant I couldn't be hurt anymore. Yes, that's why I became a doll..."

"You're wrong," Shiro interrupted suddenly, his voice edged with fierce emotion.



"You're wrong!"

Shiro's voice erupted unexpectedly loud, frustration boiling over.

He couldn't bear it.

Without knowing exactly why, anger surged within him.

"You're wrong, Aina..."

In the hot spring water, Shiro clenched his fists tightly.

"You're not a doll!"

"..."

"I mean, yes, I said you were beautiful like a doll, but that's not..."

"I understand. I know you didn't mean it that way," Aina gently reassured him, her kindness only deepening Shiro's pain.

"Aina... I have feelings for you..."

"Thank you. But I belong to my brother..."

"Please, listen!" Shiro interrupted firmly.

"Ever since we met in space, I haven't been able to forget you. The one thing I keep remembering is your smile."

"My smile?"

"Yes! Don't you remember? You smiled at me back then."

"I smiled...?" Aina murmured, sinking lower into the water again.

"You said you stopped smiling. But that's not true. Because your smile was what drew me to you."

He vividly recalled her smile when she had sent him off into space. At first, she had seemed expressionless, indeed like a doll. But the moment she smiled, everything had changed. Shiro realized that beneath the mask of emotionlessness lay her true self, and he was deeply drawn to that true Aina.

Now, he understood clearly.

*"I really am attracted to Aina..."*

Shiro abruptly stood, shouting toward the mountains.

"I love you, Aina!"

His voice echoed through the snow-covered peaks, an earnest declaration of his feelings.

"Shiro..." Aina's voice was gentle, almost embarrassed.

Ignoring her hesitation, Shiro continued shouting.

"I love you more than anyone else in the world!"

It wasn't his first love, yet he had never felt anything this intense before.

"Even if I have to fight the entire world, I will protect you!"

Yes, even from your brother.

"I want to stay with you!"

Forever.

"I want to hold you!"

Tightly.

"I want..."

He paused as he felt Aina softly embrace him from behind, her tender warmth sending his heart racing.



"You intercepted a Federation distress signal?" Norris asked, pausing as he was about to don his helmet.

"Yes, sir. Near the last known location where we lost track of the Apsaras. It likely originated from the mobile suit attached to it," Lieutenant Hans Difflipp reported.

"Well done!" Norris's face broke into a rare, relieved smile.

The Apsaras had to be close. Forced to abandon their last mission due to deteriorating weather, Norris vowed this time would be different.

"Miss Aina, hold on... I'm coming for you."

Discreetly touching his chest pocket where his lucky charm rested, Norris quickly issued orders.

"Right, contact the nearest friendly forces to that location. Dispatch the slower Lugguns first. Equip the following Dopps with anti-MS rockets."

"Understood, sir." Hans saluted briskly.

"I had been thinking exactly the same thing."

Norris almost seemed to hear Hans's unspoken thoughts.

Hans waited only long enough for Norris's nod of approval before running eagerly toward his craft, clearly excited about the mission. Watching Hans sprint away enthusiastically stirred a nostalgic warmth in Norris.

"Captain Norris," another voice called quietly.

Turning, Norris saw Lieutenant Colonel Kurt Falkenberg approaching. Unlike Hans, Falkenberg was a seasoned veteran who had served in the Side 3 National Defense Forces. Norris had personally recruited Falkenberg as his experienced deputy upon joining Ginias's special guard, and the two shared a long history as comrades. He was also a close friend.

Norris asked with casual familiarity, using Falkenberg's nickname earned from his ever-present cigarettes, a rare habit these days.

"Well, sir..." Falkenberg hesitated, his expression unusually grave.

"What's wrong?" Norris asked again, lowering his voice in concern.

"Odessa... has fallen."

The news struck like a hammer.

Odessa had been the cornerstone of Zeon's European operations, vital not just militarily but also economically due to its proximity to resource-rich Ukraine and Baku. Losing Odessa meant Zeon would now depend heavily on supplies from the Moon and Axis. Furthermore, Odessa's fall was evidence of the Federation's significant recovery, inevitably reshaping Earth's power dynamics.

"The balance of power on Earth... is shifting," Norris murmured gravely.

Falkenberg nodded solemnly.

"Lieutenant Colonel Falkenberg, get in touch with Admiral Kellerne. Coordinate closely with the frontlines, ensuring our forces don't become isolated."

"How should we inform the troops?"

"I'll speak to them myself upon returning. Until then, instruct them firmly against spreading rumors or unconfirmed information."

"Understood. I'll gather additional intelligence on Odessa from other channels. Please return as swiftly as possible."

"Understood. I'm counting on you."

"Sir." Falkenberg responded, saluting slowly and deliberately, markedly different from Hans's brisk enthusiasm. Carefully, Falkenberg stepped back, withdrawing from Norris without drawing undue attention from other personnel.

"We must hurry," Norris resolved, looking determinedly toward his reconnaissance craft.

There was no shortage of tasks demanding immediate action.



The recording unit was attached behind the Apsaras's seat; beneath that, Aina recalled seeing a Type-C connector plug.

She quickly removed the recording unit and opened the control panel behind it, revealing a densely packed array of units interconnected by colorful wires, backed by multiple layers of electronic components. Carefully, she located the specific Type-C connector plug she needed.

"This should get the Gundam moving again..."

With its Minovsky Craft broken, the Apsaras was permanently grounded. However, Shiro's Gundam could still be operational if they salvaged parts from the Apsaras. Using the mobile suit, descending the mountain wouldn't pose much difficulty. Attempting the trek on foot through the snowy mountainside would be near-suicidal.

After double-checking the plug's number, Aina swiftly wrapped it in bandages.

At that moment, suddenly, the radio crackled to life.

"Miss Aina, please respond. We've detected a Federation distress signal and are en route to your location."

It was Norris.

"A Federation distress signal?"

She hadn't accounted for this. She'd deliberately disabled the Apsaras's beacon, but had completely forgotten about Shiro's Gundam.

Yet, she couldn't fault Shiro. Not sending a distress signal in their situation would have been absurd.

"Norris is coming. We'll be rescued, but..."

Aina gripped the bandaged plug tightly.

"Shiro would become a Zeon prisoner. And knowing the Apsaras's secrets, my brother would probably..."

Of course, executing prisoners violated the Antarctic Treaty. However, her brother would hardly hesitate. He would unquestionably choose the most effective method to ensure secrecy.

"Miss Aina, please respond. The situation on the front has drastically changed, we're running out of time. If you can hear me..."

Norris continued hailing her.

Clearly, he was searching by aircraft. The blizzard had now ceased, meaning both the Apsaras and Gundam were easily visible from the air. Discovery was merely a matter of time.

Aina stepped away from behind the seat, examining the radio. The signal's origin was approximately eighty kilometers north, within half an hour's reach even for the sluggish Luggun reconnaissance craft.

"What do I do? What can I do to save him?"

Aina stared at the radio, Norris's voice distorted by static.

If she answered, Norris would rescue her and return her safely to her brother. But Shiro...

"There's no time left. I must decide before Norris arrives. Shiro? Or my brother? What do I do? Whom do I choose...?"



Aina descended from the peak of the massive bowl-shaped structure, the Apsaras, sliding gracefully down its sloped surface. Though the soft snow below ensured no risk of injury, Shiro instinctively tensed, half-rising as she approached the ground.

"I'm alright, Shiro," Aina reassured him with a gentle laugh, noticing his anxious expression.

"I've found the Type-C connector plug. This should enable the Gundam to walk again."

"Thank you, Aina. And... sorry, you're not only rescuing me but also repairing the Gundam."

It had been Aina who successfully restored the Gundam's nuclear fusion reactor to the point it could operate using the Type-C connector plug. Although Shiro had some knowledge of mobile suit maintenance, handling the reactor itself was well beyond his capabilities.

"It's fine. But are you sure? It is a brand-new Federation unit after all."

"It's alright. Just pretend you never saw anything classified," Shiro laughed, carefree. Life mattered far more than military secrets, of that, he had no doubts.

"Also, I found something useful in the cockpit," Aina said, presenting a small syringe.

"What's this?"

"An emergency nutritional supplement. You haven't eaten since yesterday."

"Oh, right. What about you?" Shiro asked as he took the syringe.

"I... already took mine in the cockpit."

"...?"

"It's just... I would have had to remove my normal suit."

"Oh, sorry."

Even though they'd seen each other unclothed the night before, perhaps women were just like that? With his limited experience, Shiro readily believed Aina's awkward excuse.

Rolling up his sleeve, Shiro pressed the needle-free injector against his skin. It dispensed its contents automatically when squeezed firmly.

"Hey, Shiro?"

Aina spoke up once Shiro had finished administering the supplement.

"Why did you join the military? Was it because you hated Zeon?"

"No, that's not it. I hate Zeon now, sure, but I didn't feel that way back then," Shiro recalled fondly, thinking of his eighteen-year-old self upon first joining.

"I didn't really have a clear reason. After graduating high school, I didn't know what to do. I had options, but none felt right."

Ray Fulmer had gone to university to become a doctor, Fred Harris dreamed of becoming a novelist, and Ed Tierney planned to build spaceships at Anaheim. But Shiro had lacked such clear ambitions.

"Honestly, I didn't think too much about it. It wasn't a lifelong career choice, just something slightly cooler than other jobs. At least, that's how I see it now. Back then, I made up plenty of other reasons."

"What made it seem cool? It doesn't look that way to me," Aina commented softly.

Shiro laughed sheepishly.

"Probably TV's fault."

"TV?"

"I mentioned before, there was a show called Captain Joe. The main character was really cool. As kids, we always played pretend, mimicking machine guns, da-da-da-da-da! Every construction site nearby turned into our battlefield. Looking back, it seems... kind... of..."

Suddenly, Shiro's body swayed heavily. His strength rapidly ebbed away, leaving his limbs powerless.

"My... body... is?"

He recognized this sensation.

It was just like anesthesia.

But why?

"A...ina..."

Slowly, he collapsed into the soft snow, which gently cushioned his fall.

"I'm sorry, Shiro," Aina whispered quietly, watching his collapse without surprise.

Shiro realized instantly, the syringe had contained anesthetic.

But why...?

"Help will arrive soon. But I can't go with you," she said softly.

"A...ina..."

"Thank you, Shiro. Your feelings meant a lot to me."

Slowly, she approached and gently pressed her lips against his. They were soft, warm.

But it was the last thing Shiro would ever feel of her as consciousness rapidly slipped away, enveloping him in a deep sleep.

## Chapter.07

### Turning Point

November 7th.

The Federation launched its grand counteroffensive, Operation Odessa.

General Revil's 2nd Mechanized Corps spearheaded the Federation's European Forces as they surged across the Dover Strait, pouring into the plains of Central Europe like an unstoppable flood.

It was a battle of quality versus quantity.

The Principality of Zeon relied heavily on mobile suits. In terms of both pilot skill and tactical use of these machines, Zeon held the upper hand. The Federation possessed mobile suits as well, but their mainstay remained traditional weaponry, aircraft and tanks.

Yet the Federation's sheer material resources far exceeded Zeon's expectations.

A relentless barrage of artillery and airstrikes churned Zeon's positions. Zeon forces resisted tenaciously across multiple fronts, even pushing the Federation back in a few sectors, but these were fleeting victories. Dragged into a punishing war of attrition, Zeon's forces steadily crumbled until their defensive lines broke wide open. With no reserves left to patch the breaches, their defeat was inevitable.

Zeon commander Captain M'Quve fled back into space. Thus, Operation Odessa concluded successfully, and General Revil triumphantly declared victory.

The fall of Odessa dramatically reshaped the geopolitical landscape on Earth.

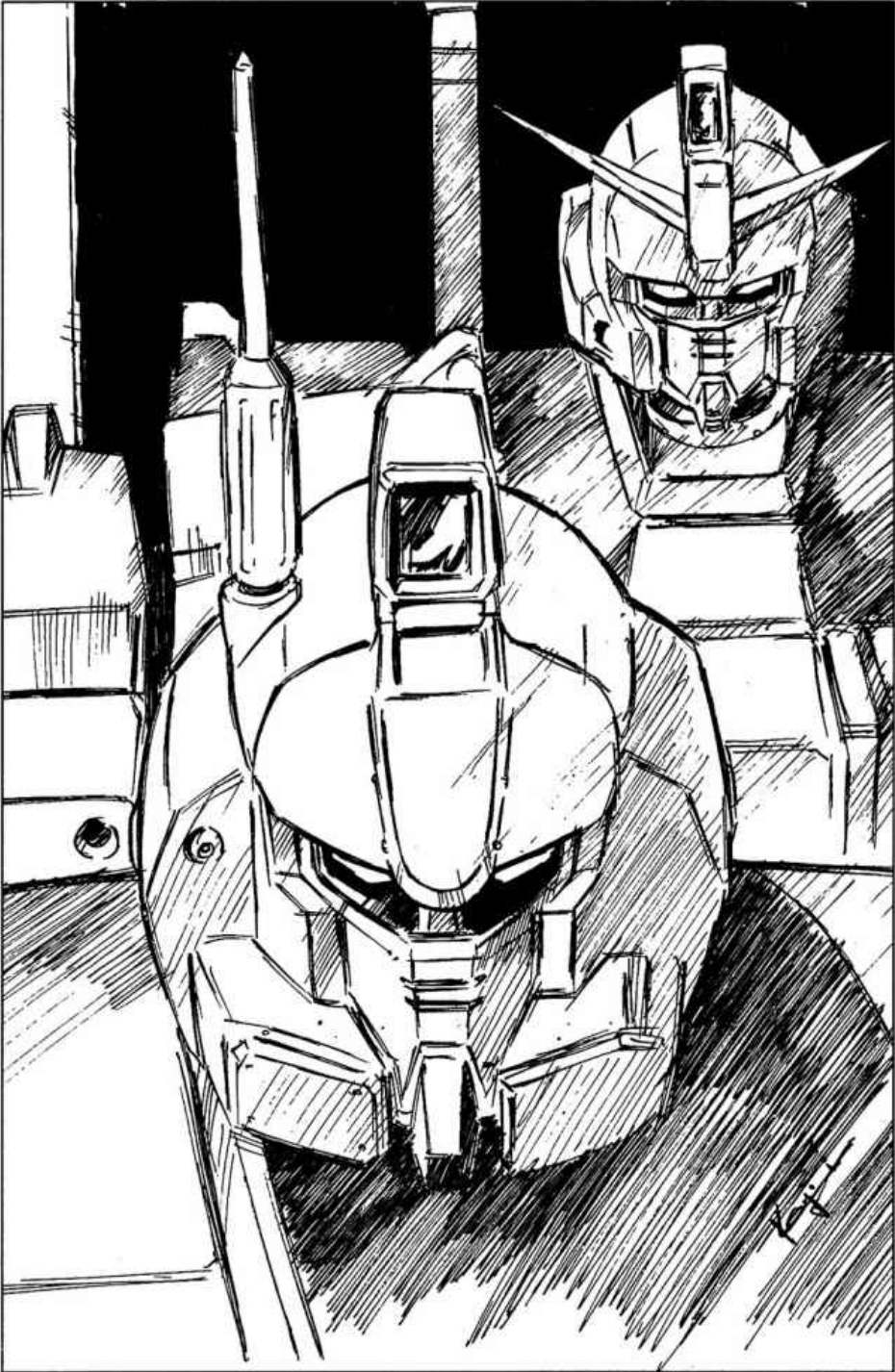
Europe and Russia, centered around Odessa, fell into Federation control. This sudden shift reverberated through neighboring Asian and African theaters, forcing drastic realignments. Particularly hard-hit was the Zeon Asian Command, now caught dangerously between Federation Forces at their rear. They had no choice but to significantly shrink their front.

Not even Zeon's Far East Command, having decimated Kojima Base and pushing toward Madras, was exempt from this retreat. Vice Admiral Yuri Kellerne swiftly ordered a full-scale pullback to consolidate the overextended front, leading his battered troops northward toward the Tibetan Plateau.

The Federation Forces wasted no time, launching an aggressive pursuit. Kojima Battalion, now reorganized into a mechanized mixed battalion, joined the chase.

And then...

The ground erupted.



The Gundam's mortar shells struck with devastating precision. As if synchronized with the explosion, infantry concealed in the underbrush surged forward, timing their advance perfectly.

Yet Zeon had anticipated this. A Zaku's 100mm machine gun hammered into the charging soldiers, scattering them like leaves caught in a storm.

But Federation numbers were overwhelming. Despite heavy losses, wave upon wave of infantry advanced methodically, slowly reclaiming the terrain. The jungle was soon crawling with Federation soldiers, swarming like ants on a carcass.

The moment had come.

The customized Gundam, the Ez8, having just fired its mortar, swiftly switched to its 100mm machine gun.

"We're going in," said Ez8's pilot, Shiro Amada. "Karen, provide covering fire. Sanders, follow my lead and punch through."

"Hey now, isn't it a bit early for that?" Eledore interjected over comms.

"No. They're already starting to pull back. One decisive strike now and they'll collapse completely."

"Still..."

"We can't afford to let them retreat intact. We have to deal damage before they link up with their rear forces," Shiro said, eyes briefly flicking toward the cockpit console, where Aina's watch dangled.

"I'll bring you back... I swear."

Shiro tightened his grip on the controls.

He had no choice but to fight.

Fighting was the only way he could reclaim what he'd lost.

"Let's go! I'm counting on you for cover, Karen!"

Roaring the command, Shiro charged ahead.

Amid the infantry, the towering white Ez8 stood out prominently, immediately drawing concentrated enemy fire.

"Commander!" Karen cried, unloading suppressive fire from her 100mm machine gun at the Zeon troops targeting Shiro. Hidden behind thick cover, however, the enemy remained largely untouched.

Undeterred, Shiro activated his thrusters, plunging headlong into the heart of the enemy's position.

"Reckless bastard..." Sanders muttered, maneuvering his mobile suit to follow.

The faint light filtering through the canopy was soon blocked entirely by Federation attack aircraft overhead, plunging the jungle battlefield into darkness as if night had suddenly fallen.



"Don't you think he's pushing himself a little too hard?" Eledore muttered, sipping the awful military coffee.

"He's always been reckless," Karen replied quietly, feeding another log into the central fire.

"It's desperation," Sanders said, rhythmically lifting dumbbells beside the flames.

"Maybe he got dumped and he's acting all self-destructive," Michel chimed in, looking up from a letter he was writing to BB.

A brief silence hung in the air. Then, almost simultaneously, all four turned their eyes upward toward Shiro's mobile suit. He had secluded himself inside the cockpit of his customized Gundam, the Ez8.

Ever since Shiro had miraculously returned alive and rejoined the 08th MS Team, he'd acted this way. Sleeping, resting, it was all done within the confines of the Ez8's cockpit. Shiro insisted it was so he could launch at a moment's notice, but no one believed him.

"What the hell's he doing in there anyway?"

"Nothing," Michel answered Eledore's question. "Just staring at that watch, the one from Aina."

Michel had once climbed up to Shiro's cockpit out of sheer curiosity, though the message could have been relayed via comms. Inside, he found Shiro blankly staring at Aina's watch, not angry, not smiling, just utterly expressionless. A portable TV at the side was playing Shiro's favorite show, Captain Joe, but it seemed he wasn't even listening.

"That's why I figured he must've gotten dumped," Michel explained.

"Serves him right for falling for a Zeon girl," Eledore grumbled, gulping down more of the bitter coffee. "A girl like that was out of his league anyway. He'd be better off with one of those guerrilla girls or something."

Michel glared at Eledore, who opened his mouth to retort but decided against it under Michel's fierce gaze.

"Speaking of which," Michel said, changing the subject, "I wonder how Kiki and the others are doing."

His thoughts drifted back to peaceful days in the village of Baruk. Since Shiro had flown off with that new enemy mobile armor, he'd left without even saying goodbye. Michel regretted not being able to thank them for their shelter, and for delivering his letters.

"They're fine," Sanders said encouragingly. "Knowing them, they'll be alright."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Michel quickly agreed.

"Those guys are tough, crafty bastards," Eledore added, attempting reassurance. "They're fighting against the military and dealing in drugs at the same time. They wouldn't spill secrets that easily. They'll play dumb about us for sure."

Michel nodded, and Karen and Sanders joined him. They all wanted desperately to believe everything was fine.

"Hey, Michel, go get the Commander," Eledore suddenly suggested, cutting off further discussion about Baruk Village. "When you're heartbroken, drinking and letting it all out is best. Drink, cry, make some noise, and by the next day, you're good."

"Oh? Is that your method for dealing with heartbreak, Eledore?" Karen teased.

"Wh—what're you talking about, Karen? I'm speaking in general terms! I don't mess up enough to get dumped!"

"Well, if you never date, you can't get dumped either," Sanders remarked dryly.

"You know, I've seen Eledore flirting plenty," Michel said seriously, "but never successfully."

"Shut up! I'm a city guy. I can't get my groove on with these country girls. Hey, wipe that smug look off your face just 'cause you've got a pen pal!"

"If you're jealous, you could always start writing letters yourself," Michel shot back. "After all, you must've been pretty popular in the city."

"You've been pretty mouthy lately. It's time you learned about seniority in the military!" Eledore lunged at Michel, wrestling him to the ground.

"Hey—stop, Eledore! Ahahaha!" Michel squirmed under Eledore's tickling assault, his laughter ringing out. Karen and Sanders laughed at the scene.

At long last, laughter returned to the 08th MS Team.

Yet each of them knew this laughter was hollow.

They wanted to laugh.

They desperately needed to laugh.

Sanders reflected bitterly on what a wounded comrade had once told him before being sent to the rear, "We've all gotten too good at pretending to be strong."



*Dear Shiro,*

*I'm so sorry, Shiro.*

*I'm writing this inside the cockpit of the Apsaras.*

*It seems a Zeon search party is nearby. Within half an hour, they will undoubtedly find us.*

*If that happens, you'll become a Zeon prisoner. While Zeon adheres to the Antarctic Treaty prohibiting prisoner abuse and forced labor, your situation is different. You've seen classified details about the Apsaras. My brother won't let you live.*

*So I've decided to put you to sleep.*

*The search party is only looking for me. If I return with them, they'll withdraw quietly. I won't ask for forgiveness. But saving you required this choice.*

And then, at the end...

*Thank you, Shiro.*

*Your feelings meant everything to me.*

*But I can't leave my brother's side. He needs me.  
Thank you, and I'm sorry, Shiro.  
Please, forget about me quickly.  
This is my final request, coming from someone who was always being  
saved by you.*

In the cockpit of the Ez8, Shiro reread Aina's final letter once again. When he'd awoken back then, he'd found this letter waiting for him. Beside it were the Type-C connector plug, instructions for its installation, and Aina's watch.

*"It was me who was saved."*

Shiro's eyes lingered on the last line, "someone who was always being saved by you."

*"I survived those snowy mountains because of you. Without you, I would've frozen to death in that blizzard. Even during our first fight against the Apsaras..."*

It had only been a month or two since he first encountered Aina in space. Yet it felt like something from a distant past.

*"I will bring you back. No matter what it takes. I'll fight, keep fighting, until I reach you. You told me about the secret base in Lhasa. I'll find it, I swear."*

The Federation was rapidly regaining territory. By tomorrow, they'd reach the position of the former Kojima Base. The road to Lhasa was still long, but...

*"I will see you again. And I'll take you back from Zeon and your brother. I'll rescue you."*

Shiro clenched his fist tightly.



Lhasa Base was in utter chaos.

Soldiers retreating from the Russian front poured in continuously, each group bringing weapons and machinery needing immediate repairs. They urgently sought permission to utilize the facilities at Lhasa Base. Thanks to Norris's intervention, Ginias granted them limited access, as long as it didn't impede the Apsaras III development. Consequently, there was fierce competition for base facilities, with crowds of soldiers clutching their unit's equipment and wandering about in confusion.

Yet, compared to the researchers, the soldiers had it easy.

The Apsaras prototype that had crashed in the snowy mountains had self-destructed to preserve secrecy. In its place, Ginias announced the rapid advancement of the Apsaras III project, pushing the researchers to their limits. Sleep had become a luxury, as they worked ceaselessly around the clock.

"Commander Yanowitz, cockpit assembly completed," reported Ensign Bill Harlow, the youngest engineer on the Apsaras team, into a dangling microphone.

"Good. Send in the pilot. I'll leave the briefing to you, Ensign Harlow."

"Yes, sir."

"The pilot" in question was Aina Sahalin.

The researchers never referred to her by name. In public, she was "the pilot," and among themselves, she was known as "the doll."

"Who gives a mannequin a name?" Joseph Sirola, notorious for his sharp tongue, had once scoffed.

When Bill first joined the Apsaras project, he couldn't understand his colleagues' disdain toward Aina. However, after spending time around her, the reasons became clear. She felt disturbingly artificial, completely devoid of humanity. Talking with her sometimes gave him the disorienting feeling he was addressing a wall.

Behind Bill, the door opened.

The pilot, Aina, entered.

"I understand preparations are complete?" she asked.

"Yes. Please, take a seat. I'll start the briefing immediately." Bill quickly stood, grabbing the documents scattered across his desk.

"The primary focus is integrating the Minovsky Craft control system. You'll need to confirm 176 checklist items, followed by four virtual flight scenarios."

"Understood."

"The 176 checkpoints are divided into seven stages, beginning with startup processes from checks 1 through 27..." Bill's voice began trailing off as drowsiness overtook him.

It wasn't surprising. For the past week, Bill had slept less than four hours each night. The rapid completion of the Apsaras III demanded no less.

"For the final phase, we'll handle three malfunction scenarios: switching to rocket engines, single-side flight using either left or right units, so-called 'one-lung flying'..."

Suddenly, consciousness slipped from him.

Exhaustion had won.

Bill collapsed, the sharp pain from his shoulder striking the floor jarring him back awake.

"Are you alright?"

For a moment, Bill couldn't identify whose voice it was.

But there were only two people in the room. If it wasn't his voice, then it had to be...

"Sleep deprivation. You should lie down for a while."

It was Aina who was speaking to him.

Bill was stunned.

Aina rarely spoke voluntarily, let alone showed concern for someone else. The faceless doll was worried about him.

"I'll read the briefing notes myself. Please, rest over there."

Aina's expression was gentle and caring.  
Bill had never seen this side of her before.  
"Th-thank you..."

He stared at her in disbelief, wondering if he was hallucinating or still dreaming.

Aina reached down, extending her hand toward the fallen Bill.  
"Come."

As if enchanted, Bill grasped her hand.  
The first touch of Aina's hand was warm.



As Sanders had predicted, the guerrillas of Baruk Village had indeed "managed well."

Baresto persistently feigned ignorance, maintaining that Shiro's attack had come from outside their group, something they knew nothing about.

Of course, there were plenty of suspicious circumstances, but Ginias saw no further reason to press the issue, as Baruk Village no longer held strategic value. Norris also prioritized the search for Aina over investigating guerrilla activities.

In the end, the guerrillas provided labor without compensation during Zeon's withdrawal, in exchange for Zeon ceasing any further investigation into Shiro and his comrades.

Once Ginias and his forces had withdrawn, Baruk Village swiftly returned to life. The fields were replanted with landa, and Kiki and her group retrieved their hidden weapons and resumed patrols around the village.

After Zeon had departed, the rulers of the forest soon changed hands. Zeon retreated northward through the forests like an ebbing tide.

The Federation soon filled that void. Ted, who had been the first to spot the incoming Federation Forces, eagerly proposed testing the tactics he'd learned from Sanders, but Baresto advised caution. Engaging the military head-on was futile, and more importantly, unnecessary if their land was no longer a battlefield.

"We'll greet them as a liberation army," Baresto declared to the gathered villagers. "Now that Zeon is gone, we have no choice but to cooperate with the Federation. We'll present ourselves as unfortunate villagers who had been under Zeon occupation."

The villagers burst into laughter.

"Forced to carry weapons, how pitiful we were!"

"Those Zeon bastards made us turn our vegetable fields into landa crops!"

"That's right, and look how tough our women became... Ow!" Ben joked, dramatically clutching his shoulder after his wife punched him playfully. The women burst into laughter.

"All right then," Baresto concluded with a wry smile. "From now on, we're the pitiable villagers. Hide most of the weapons, leave only the minimum. As

for the fields, well, we can't exactly hide those, so let's just say Zeon made us plant them."

Villagers dispersed, returning to their duties. Hiding weapons, tending fields, informing family members back home. There was plenty to do.

"Daddy, do you think they'll be there too?" Kiki asked quietly after everyone had left.

"Oh, they'll be there for sure. Karen, the Chief, the rock star, the teacher, and of course, that ensign," Baresto said confidently. "Those stubborn fools wouldn't let Zeon get the best of them. Besides, they still owe us."

"Yes... that's right!" Kiki's face lit up.

"They can't go dying on us before they pay back what they owe. We'll sell them the landa at double the usual rate. They'll have to keep their promise to let us ride a mobile suit. And they'll help us restore the fields, in fact, we should get the mobile suits to do that part..."

Baresto watched his daughter excitedly listing all the favors to reclaim, smiling fondly.

It had been a long time since he'd seen her so genuinely happy.



Three mobile suits advanced cautiously through the dense jungle.

Aware of potential traps left by Zeon, they stepped carefully, checking each move thoroughly, their heads occasionally turning to scan the surroundings.

Two eyes, twin horns, Gundams.

The two suits trailing behind were RX-79(G) Ground Type Gundams, mass-produced experimental mobile suits. Leading them was the Ez8, a field-customized RX-79(G).

The RX-79(G), built using surplus RX-78 parts, suffered from a chronic shortage of spare components. Thus, frontline units frequently resorted to using parts from other mobile suits for makeshift repairs, resulting in numerous customized Gundams. Shiro's Ez8 was one such customized model.

"It seems they've completely withdrawn," remarked Shiro, the Ez8's pilot, monitoring his screen carefully.

"They got us good," Karen replied. "Feinting a counterattack only to retreat suddenly, they completely fooled us."

Sure enough, as Karen noted, the enemy had been cunning.

Two days earlier, a substantial Zeon force had appeared in front of the advancing Federation units. The Federation command assumed Zeon intended to establish a defensive line there and organized their forces accordingly. Yet, overnight, Zeon had quietly withdrawn far to the rear.

"At this rate, we probably won't encounter any resistance until we reach the former Kojima Base," Michel observed.

"Don't get complacent, Michel. It could be another trick," Sanders warned sternly. Even without enemy troops present, traps were likely.

Federation command shared Sanders's concerns. Consequently, the 08th MS Team, highly mobile thanks to their Gundams, was tasked with scouting ahead of the main force.

"Commander, we're nearing the former Kojima Base. Should we wait for the main force?" Karen asked, updating the map data. With Shiro acting as point man, mapping responsibilities fell to her.

"No. Once we check in with the main force at the designated rendezvous, we'll proceed further north towards Point 304. Follow this red line." Shiro transmitted the updated map data to each mobile suit. "The points marked with an X indicate rest stops. Anyone have objections?"

The updated maps appeared on everyone's screens, detailing the area around Kojima Base. A red line stretched northward from the former base location, marked with an X at one point, a clearing indicating habitation.

Indeed, that X marked where Baruk Village should be.

"No objections here, Commander," Karen responded, her voice brightening.

"As if we'd have any," Eledore retorted with a cheerful whistle.

"Roger that, sir," Sanders said, sounding upbeat.

"Thank goodness, I left my lessons incomplete. Mati was still learning multiplication, and I promised Dean and Reggie I'd show them how to use the dictionary... and I wonder if Pamela memorized her alphabet," Michel reminisced warmly about his students.

It seemed no one had any objections.

"All right, changing course. Let's not fall behind Crawford Battalion."



Led by Lily Valenti, the village women ran desperately through the dense forest. Those with greater stamina carried small children on their backs, pushing forward without pause.

No one spoke a word. There was plenty to say, but each woman clenched her mouth shut, concentrating solely on moving ahead.

Their destination was the hideout near the waterfall, set up long ago by Baresto for precisely this emergency.

"Lily..."

A whisper called softly to the woman. It was Kiki, who was supposed to be covering the rear.

"What's wrong?"

Seeing something troubling in Kiki's expression, Lily halted and waved the others onward.

"We're being followed," Kiki whispered urgently into Lily's ear, careful that no one else overheard. Such news would spread panic.

"I spotted them when I climbed a tree earlier, at least ten soldiers."

"Do they know we're here?"

"I can't tell, but if we keep going like this, they'll catch us."

The pursuers were soldiers, trained and conditioned despite their heavy gear. The villagers were mostly women, burdened further by young children and wounded companions. There was no way they could outrun their pursuers.

"Then we have no choice," Lily said grimly, raising the sniper rifle from her shoulder. Known as "Sharpshooter Lily," her accuracy was unmatched.

"I'll stay and slow them down. You lead Jeanne and the others to the waterfall."

"No, Lily. Even you can't hold off that many alone. Besides, stopping them here will reveal the direction of our escape."

"But—"

"I'll be the decoy," Kiki declared decisively.

"No! If anyone is a decoy, it'll be me—"

"They'll underestimate me because I'm just a kid. If it's you, Lily, they'll shoot without hesitation."

Kiki was right. Lily's imposing presence would immediately draw enemy fire. In their current situation, the best decoy was someone the soldiers might foolishly think they could capture easily, someone who would make the enemy drop their guard.

"If we both leave, the others will panic. Please," Kiki pleaded.

"Kiki..."

"I'll be fine. I won't be stupid enough to get caught by Federation soldiers. You know how fast I am, Lily."

Kiki slapped her slender legs confidently.

One of them had to lead the group of women. Apart from Lily and Kiki, no one else could step up and guide them.

One had to stay behind as a decoy. Otherwise, the enemy, the Federation, would inevitably catch up.

Lily knew which choice gave their people the greatest chance of reaching safety.

"All right," Lily nodded slightly, her clenched fist trembling.

"Thank you, Lily."

"If things go badly, surrender immediately. Promise me."

"I promise," Kiki lied smoothly.

She had no intention of surrendering to the Federation, even at the cost of her life.

Lily saw through Kiki's lie but chose not to confront her. Instead, she embraced Kiki tightly, saying just one last thing.

"Promise you'll come back alive."

Kiki silently nodded.

Of course, she fully intended to return alive.



The people of Baruk village welcomed the Federation soldiers with smiles, but the Federation answered them with gunfire.

The AR75 rifles barked mercilessly, cutting down the young men who had come forward to greet them, without any warning. The guerrillas had deliberately arrived unarmed as a gesture of goodwill, and now they stood helpless as the Federation troops hunted them down.

Those still capable of fighting quickly armed themselves and tried to counterattack, but they were hopelessly outmatched against the three invading GM mobile suits. Even the tactics they'd learned from Sanders proved ineffective due to insufficient preparation and the sparse terrain that offered little cover.

Baresto wasted no time ordering Kiki and Lily to evacuate the women and children. The village men charged forward, confronting the colossal mobile suits, fully aware they had no chance, their only purpose to buy time for their loved ones to escape.

Why was the Federation attacking them?

Did they mistake Baruk for a Zeon-aligned village? Or was there some other, darker reason?

No one could answer those questions. The only certainty was that these Federation soldiers were enemies.

*"Would Shiro understand why we're being attacked?"*

Kiki clutched the empty cartridge casing Shiro had left behind. Ever since his disappearance, she'd carried it as a talisman, always keeping it close.

"Protect me, Shiro," she whispered.

Drawing a deep breath, Kiki darted off conspicuously in the opposite direction from the waterfall where the villagers were hiding.

"There she is!" a soldier shouted.

"A girl, huh?"

"Just a kid."

"Heh. We'll make her a woman."

The soldiers chuckled crudely, their decision unanimous.

*"That's right, come after me."*

She glanced back, confirming their pursuit, and picked up her pace. Despite their physical advantages, she was lighter, unburdened by heavy gear, and this forest was her home. She knew every tree, every twist, every hidden path.

"Catch her!"

"Damn she's quick!"

"Pfffft, just a girl. She'll tire soon enough."

Already, their faces slackened with arrogance. Even knowing the villagers were guerrillas, they underestimated her youth.

*"Like hell I'd get caught by Feddie scum."*

She ran faster, steadily widening the gap between them. It was almost too easy. She even slowed occasionally, careful not to lose them entirely. Her plan was simple, she'd lead them to Boar Rock and vanish.

But suddenly agony pierced her leg, and she tumbled painfully.

"Ah!"

Realizing he couldn't keep up, one soldier had opened fire.

*"No, no no... At this distance, with all these trees..."*

"Bingo! Got her!"

"Nice shot, pure luck!"

"One-in-a-million shot, first try!"

Their voices carried on the wind, mocking and distant.

"Damn it..."

Kiki slammed her fist into the earth. She'd been so close. Why did luck abandon her now?

She staggered upright, only to collapse again under the searing pain.

Standing was impossible, let alone running.

"Found you," came the voice she dreaded.

She pushed herself up, heart hammering.

"Game of hide-and-seek is over, sweetheart," the soldier sneered, approaching with a lewd grin.

A shudder of revulsion ran through her.

But she wouldn't surrender so easily. Summoning every ounce of courage, she forced herself to speak boldly.

"You guys are Federation soldiers, right? Aren't you fighting the wrong enemy?"

She hoped her bravado would deter them. Instead, their smirks widened.

"Oh, we're Federation all right. Protecting worthless civilians like you from Zeon."

"We risk our lives for you. What's wrong with enjoying a little perk now and then?"

"Miserable village. No valuables, nothing but guerrillas and poverty."

Kiki felt ice crawl down her spine.

These soldiers had come intending to plunder Baruk from the start, to prey upon the very civilians they were supposed to protect.

"Well, time to collect our due," one soldier said, loosening his belt.

She recoiled instinctively, but he moved faster, pinning her down before she could escape. She struggled fiercely, but other soldiers grabbed her limbs, immobilizing her.

"Don't fight it," he growled. "We'll make you feel good real quick."

His fetid breath made her gag, a stench of corruption and cruelty.

*"No..."*

Hot tears threatened to spill from her eyes as the soldier drew a knife, slicing slowly through her clothes. The blade touched her skin, its cold bite causing her to shiver violently.

*"Help me... Help me, Shiro... Shiro. Shiro!"*

"SHIRO!"

Pinned helplessly beneath her attackers, Kiki screamed.



It was a ruin.

When the 08th MS Team arrived at Baruk village, all they found was devastation.

Not a single structure remained intact. Fields were scarred by massive craters, utterly destroyed. There was not a soul in sight.

Shiro descended from his Ez8. One by one, the others climbed down, instinctively gathering around their leader, unable to bear the emptiness alone.

"They found out we were hiding here," Michel choked, his voice barely holding back tears.

"I never imagined they'd go this far," Sanders said, his voice trembling with rage.

Sadness and anger, these two emotions alone held the team captive.

No one spoke. The silence pressed upon them heavily, threatening to crush their spirits.

"Damn Zeon..." Shiro's voice finally broke the oppressive quiet, strained and hoarse, but he couldn't say more.

Poison gas attacks, a colony drop, and now this massacre of Baruk village...

"Zeon, I'll never forgive you for this."

Shiro's fists tightened, knuckles white with fury.

"I'll drive you off this planet. I'll chase you all the way to Side 3 itself and show you exactly what you've done. Count on it!"

With a furious roar, Shiro slammed his fist into a charred pillar. It felt as if the flames were still smoldering beneath the surface.

"Commander," Michel urged softly, "let's look around more. Someone must have survived. We have to—"

"Who's there?" Sanders suddenly barked.

Instantly, the 08th Team snapped into a defensive circle around Shiro, weapons ready, each soldier scanning the ruins for threats.

"Don't shoot," came a woman's voice from beyond the collapsed remains of a house.

"Kiki—?!"

Shiro spun around, hope flaring momentarily, but the figure that emerged from the scorched rubble wasn't Kiki.

"Lily!" Karen exclaimed, immediately lowering her gun.

Lily had been her housemate and the owner of their temporary refuge in Baruk. They had spent long nights talking like old friends, bonding in ways that went beyond their shared status as widows. Seeing the woman alive sent a brief surge of relief through Karen.

"You're safe, Lily. We thought you—"

"Stay away!" she sharply interrupted, halting Karen's approach.

"Lily...?"

"Just leave. Now," Lily said with cold rejection. It was a tone Karen had never heard from her before.

"What's wrong, Lily?" Shiro interjected gently when Karen fell silent. "Did Zeon threaten you? It's okay now. We're here. They won't hurt you anymore. We'll avenge the village—"

A stone whizzed past Shiro, landing at his feet.

The entire team turned toward the source. There, standing defiantly, were the surviving women of Baruk village.

Survivors.

It hadn't been a complete massacre.

Shiro felt a flicker of relief, but only for a moment.

"Hostility?"

Their eyes were cold, filled with unmistakable anger. This was no joyful reunion.

Confused, Shiro looked back to Lily for answers.

"It wasn't Zeon who destroyed our village," Lily spoke, her voice tight with bitterness, avoiding Shiro's eyes. "It was your friends, the Federation."

"That's impossible!" Shiro shouted instinctively.

This couldn't be true. It had to be a mistake. The Federation Forces were supposed to protect civilians from Zeon's brutality, from poison gas and colony drops. They were supposed to be the force of justice, fighting against the evil that was Zeon.

That's why I'm here. Isn't that why I joined this fight? To defend what's right, even at the risk of my own life?

How could the Federation do this?

"No... it can't be..." Shiro muttered weakly, shaking his head in denial.

He didn't want to believe it, yet the villagers' piercing gazes bore into him, silently affirming Lily's accusation.

"Now that you understand, please leave. If you stay here any longer, I can't guarantee your safety," Lily said without looking at Karen.

Karen understood. Lily was doing her best to save their lives, holding back the villagers' rage for now, urging them to flee while they still could.

"Commander, let's go. Lily is right," Karen urged Shiro, but he didn't hear her.

"Where's Kiki?" Shiro murmured, almost inaudibly.

He needed to know just one thing.

"She's dead," one village woman spat out. "Those Feddie fuckers *raped* her. She bit off her own tongue."

Shiro's mind went utterly blank.

Dead.

Her Tongue.

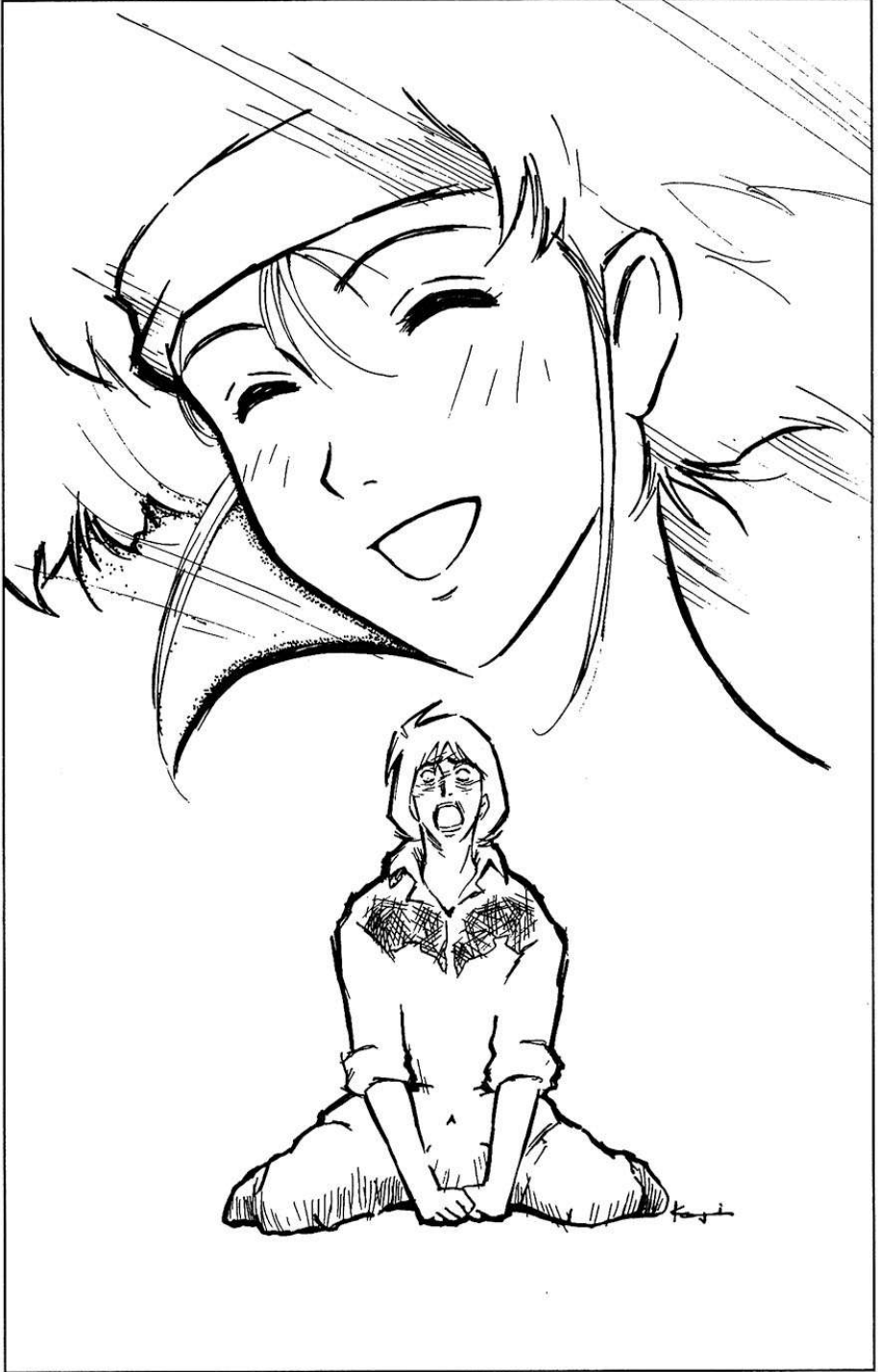
Feddie fuckers.

Raped.

Kiki.

Bit off.

Each word tore viciously through Shiro's consciousness.



It's a lie!

His mind screamed against it. The bright, innocent image of Kiki smiling appeared before him, only to be brutally extinguished beneath the faceless bodies of Federation soldiers. Her smile was crushed, erased, obliterated.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

Shiro's anguished scream echoed through the ruins, shattering the silence.

In that agonizing moment, he realized the horrifying truth, the harsh realization that what he had convinced himself was a righteous war amounted to nothing but meaningless slaughter.

That nowhere in this world could such a thing as a truly just war ever exist.