

THE 08th MS TEAM

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM

VOLUME.03

Original Plan by
Hajime Yatate

Written by
Ichiro Okouchi



Zeonic|Scanlations

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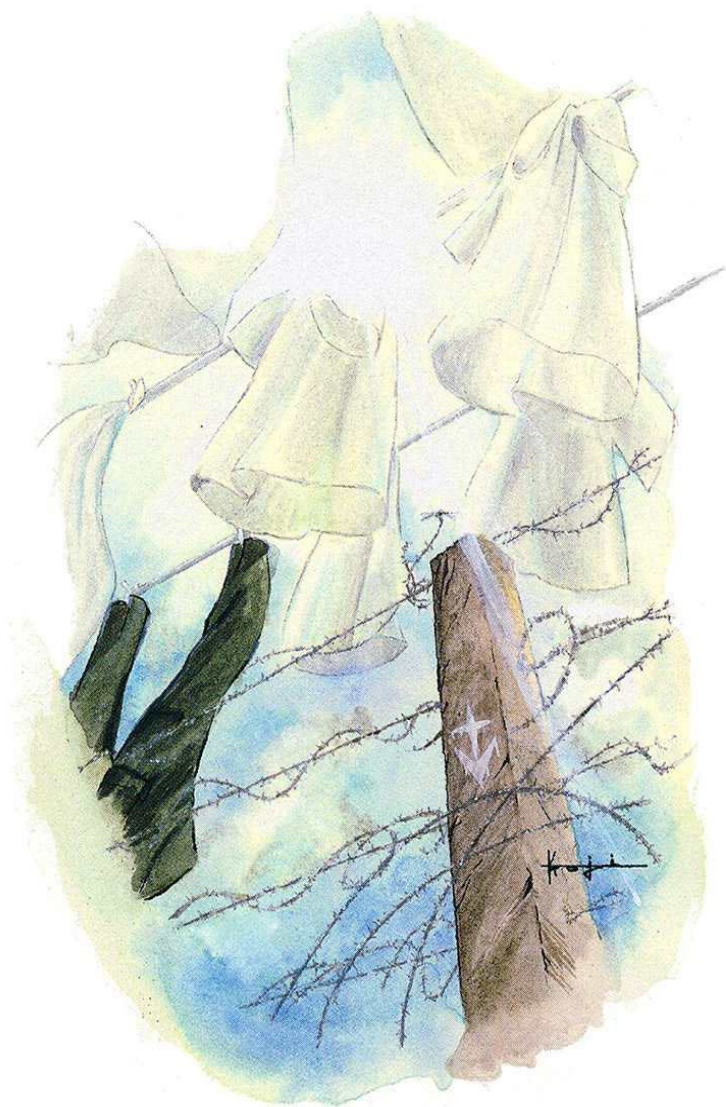


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Red light flooded my vision.
Sirens wailed relentlessly.
The air itself was slipping away.
The children stood there, brother and sister.
The same blood.
The same time.
The same place.
And yet, what they saw was not the same.
"I'm sorry."
The sister, staring at the shifting face of her brother.
"How beautiful."
The brother beheld only the rain that fell like grace.
And in that instant, their paths were sundered.

Chapter.01

Despair

The dimly lit passageways of the heavy land assault carrier Big Tray swallowed the sound of Ensign Alan Baxter's footsteps as he trudged forward, his shoulders hunched, his hand pushing a rattling steel service cart. Every few steps, a weary sigh slipped from his lips, thin and exasperated, echoing faintly along the metal walls.

On the cart sat a single meal tray. Just one. The cart was built to hold twenty, yet all that weight of polished steel wheels, grating axles, and clattering trays bore down on him for the sake of delivering a single lunch. Alan's mood soured further at the thought. If not for this one damned tray, he could have stayed behind, could have kept playing his game in peace. But no, here he was, doing the kind of work suited for a prison orderly.

"Why the hell am I stuck with this grunt work..." he muttered, his voice curling bitterly through the empty corridor.

Before this war dragged him forward, Alan had lived a different kind of military life. He'd been assigned to General Headquarters, his work involving the management of food supplies. His duties had been simple: cataloguing stored rations, applying a number to each shipment for easier control. Push a button in his air-conditioned office, and the computer system did the rest. He barely broke a sweat. Since the day he'd enlisted, he had never worked overtime. Not once.

That easy life had collapsed the moment the war intensified. As casualties mounted and front-line numbers thinned, he had been summoned to fill the gaps. In truth, if not for his father's position as a career officer, Alan might already be dead on the battlefield. His father had managed to keep him from the worst of it, pulling strings to keep him out of the mud and blood. Yet Alan felt no gratitude.

"If the old man had a little more pull, I'd be sitting pretty down in Jaburo right now. Would've been a cushy life," Alan grumbled, more sour than thankful.

He finally reached his destination: a reinforced steel door, locked and barred, its surface scarred with years of use. A narrow viewing window cut into the upper half allowed a glimpse inside. Alan leaned closer, peering through the slit.

"Hey. Chow time," he called, pitching his voice without much enthusiasm. No response.

Not that he expected one.

His eyes scanned the dim cell until he found the figure inside. As always, the man sat perched on the edge of his bunk, knees drawn tightly to his chest, arms wrapped around them. He hadn't moved in days, not in any noticeable way. Alan had been delivering his meals for a week now, and

never once had he caught sight of him asleep. He was always like this: motionless, locked in some private world, staring blankly at the wall.

"What the hell is wrong with this guy..."

He wasn't violent, he didn't shout, didn't rant or struggle. In some ways, Alan thought, he was the perfect prisoner, silent, subdued, no trouble at all. And yet, the stillness was unnerving.

"He's like a corpse. Gives me the creeps."

Alan still couldn't reconcile it. This listless shadow of a man was the same person who, out of nowhere, had lashed out at his own commanding officer? A man supposedly reckless enough to throw a fist at a battalion commander? Looking at him now, Alan found it impossible to imagine that kind of fury coiled inside.

"Whatever. He's not dead, that's something."

With a resigned huff, Alan swiped his card against the panel by the door, unlocking a small delivery hatch. The hinges shrieked with rust as it swung open. He pulled out the tray he had left that morning. Untouched. The food sat exactly as he'd set it down, cold and congealed, without a single bite missing.

"Damn it. Again. He didn't eat a thing."

Grinding his teeth, Alan shoved the untouched meal aside and slid the fresh tray into place.

"For God's sake, eat something. You're making me look like an idiot, hauling food here every day just for it to sit and rot."

As expected, silence.

"Expecting him to act normal is pointless. After all, this is the lunatic who swung on a battalion commander, a man he didn't even serve under. First meeting the guy, and he just decides to punch him."

It wasn't like some scuffle between junior officers. Alan himself had seen ensigns take swings at lieutenants. That sort of thing happened. But this? This was different. This was an ensign striking a lieutenant commander. Four full ranks above him. A gulf that should have been untouchable.

Alan slammed the hatch closed with a bang.

Whether the man inside lived or wasted away didn't matter to him. But if he starved to death in this cell, Alan would be dragged into the mess. He was the one responsible for bringing the meals. If the prisoner died on his watch, the stain on his record would follow him forever. And Alan Baxter refused to have his career marred by someone else's madness.

"Listen. Lunch is here. Eat it. Don't make me come in there and deal with you again."

He needed the man to eat. Only days ago, the prisoner had collapsed from malnutrition, and Alan himself had been forced to administer a nutrient injection to keep him alive. A distasteful task he had no intention of repeating.

His voice rose, sharper this time, pushing through the slot.

"Hey. You hear me, Ensign Shiro Amada? You damn well better eat it."

At last, there was movement inside. The prisoner's head turned, slowly, almost reluctantly, until his face came into view.

Shiro Amada's eyes met his, except they didn't. Those eyes were lifeless, glassy, devoid of any spark. They were the eyes of something hollowed out, the vacant stare of a dead fish drifting in stagnant water.



Michel sat in a cabin aboard the Big Tray, staring at a blank sheet of stationery. His pen hovered uselessly in his hand. It had been an hour since he first sat down, and he had yet to write a single word.

Ever since learning of the massacre at Baruk Village, he hadn't written to BB. He simply didn't know how to begin.

That day, when the 08th MS Team arrived in Baruk and were told of Kiki's death, they had no choice but to flee. They hadn't even been allowed a moment to lay flowers on the villagers' graves.

It was Shiro who first stepped forward. Michel followed without thinking. The others did the same.

No one spoke as they marched.

Even Eledore, usually unable to keep his mouth shut, said nothing.

The 08th Team pressed on, trailing behind Shiro's Ez-8 through the forest. Where they marched, how far, Michel couldn't recall. In the end, they rejoined the Far Eastern Army's Strategic Assault Battalion, the Crawford Battalion, as it was known, already advancing ahead of them.

If Kojima's battalion formed the right wing of the pursuit force, Crawford's held the left. And clearly, Crawford's troops had been pushing forward a step faster.

The Baruk Village raid could only have been the work of units under Crawford's command. No other Federation force could have reached the village first.

But there was no proof. No clear sign which of Crawford's subunits had done it. And no one was about to admit to it under questioning. Crawford himself would surely bury the scandal, such stains could cripple a man's career. In short, exposing them was impossible.

"Welcome, heroes of the Kojima Battalion."

Lieutenant Commander John Crawford greeted them in a voice laced with theatrical antiquity.

"For you to have caught up with us must mean the Zeon forces on our flank have been routed, excellent news indeed."

Behind him, his men nodded eagerly, as though they truly grasped the archaic words he used.

"The tide of battle has turned completely. The Federation Forces have seized the initiative and begun counterattacks across every front, reclaiming territory once stolen by Zeon. And Zeon, reduced to a nest of panicked rats,

scurries in defeat. The outcome of this war is decided. All that remains is to see how swiftly we exterminate these vermin.”

His tone was swelling now, shifting from greeting into sermon.

“Zeon has shown its true colors. They are no demons, merely savage beasts. Look around you, we have victory in our grasp. And why? Because justice stands with us. Justice does not belong to beasts. It is ours to wield.”

Justice in war.

Crawford spoke the words with full conviction.

And that was when Shiro struck him.

His fist crashed into Crawford’s face before anyone could move. For a heartbeat, even the Lieutenant Commander himself stood frozen in shock.

“There’s no such thing as a just war!”

Shiro’s words hit as hard as his blow.

Crawford gave a strangled cry, finally remembering to react, and only then did his men rush forward. Shiro didn’t resist.

They couldn’t comprehend why he’d lashed out. But Michel understood all too well.

There is no justice in war.

Don’t you dare use that word to cover the stench.

You have no justice.

When Shiro’s fist connected, Michel had heard the cry in his heart as clearly as if Shiro had spoken it aloud.

In the end, Shiro was detained for assaulting his commanding officer. The rest of the team was confined to the Big Tray as well.

And so here Michel sat, staring at blank stationery, trying to compose a letter.

And yet...

“How the hell am I supposed to write this?”

He cradled his head in his hands.

Every letter from the front was censored. Anything touching on military secrets was blotted out before it reached its recipient. Spies, after all, could be anywhere.

If he wrote the truth, the page would be smothered in black ink by the time it reached BB. And when she opened it, how much more would her fears grow?

“Better to just tell her I’ve been reassigned to the rear. No need to burden her with this.”

Michel lowered his hand toward the pen, when Kiki’s smile flashed before his eyes.

“Kiki!”

His heart seized, as if gripped in a vice.

Are you really going to erase it?

The whisper struck him like a blade.

If you forget, is that all it takes?

If you keep silent, is that enough?

Is that who you are?

The voice that condemned him was his own.

"Kiki... I..."

A tear fell, staining the untouched page.



"Quite the record you've built for yourself, Sergeant Terry Sanders Jr."

Lieutenant JG Mike Krempels spoke with full awareness of the single bar on his shoulder that placed him above the man seated before him.

"Counting joint actions, you've downed five mobile suits. And despite your unit being wiped out four separate times, you alone survived every time. That sort of resilience, attack and defense both, earns high marks."

Sanders listened in silence. Since being hauled into this interrogation room, not a single word had left his lips.

"But skill in combat alone isn't what makes a soldier, Sergeant. A soldier needs discipline, loyalty. An army without obedience is no army at all. Imagine your left foot and right foot walking in opposite directions, you'd fall flat on your face. The same principle applies here."

Krempels circled him deliberately, the sharp click of his heels on the floor punctuating each step.

"You're not some hastily conscripted recruit pressed into uniform after the war began. You know full well what this organization demands. I shouldn't have to spell it out."

He leaned down suddenly, face close to Sanders', eyes narrowing. Yet Sanders gave nothing, his gaze remained fixed straight ahead, blank, unyielding.

Krempels coughed into his fist, composing himself.

"Very well. Today, surely, you'll speak. About Ensign Shiro Amada of the Kojima Battalion's 08th MS Team, your former commander."

Still nothing.

"You know as well as I that he assaulted Lieutenant Commander John Crawford of the Strategic Assault Battalion. You were there. We know what happened. What we don't know is why it happened."

A smile crept across Krempels' face as he circled behind Sanders.

"You must know. Why would he raise his hand against a superior? Had he not voiced anti-Federation sentiments before? Perhaps he had... *unique* opinions regarding Spacenoid independence?"

Sanders' silence was absolute.

"He was discovered in the Arakan Mountains, far west of Kojima Base. And his mobile suit, well, it contained Zeon parts. To us, that is proof of collusion with the enemy. What say you, Sergeant?"

Still nothing.

"You needn't fear punishment, Sergeant. Ensign Shiro Amada is no longer your commanding officer. You owe him no loyalty. There's nothing to be gained by protecting him. So tell us what you know."

Krepfels softened his tone, almost coaxing. And then he waited.

But Sanders remained silent.

“At any rate, we could always fill out a blank report however we please.”

Now the honeyed words curdled into threat.

Sanders’ jaw tensed, but he said nothing. His eyes locked forward.

“Silent, then? I expected more sense from you, Sergeant.” Krepfels shook his head as if baffled.

“I’ll say it again: The army is one body. You are its hands. The hands do not think, they obey. The head commands, the hands strike. That’s all you are meant to do.”

“.....”

“But you, your lot, fail to grasp this. A soldier must learn not only to act as a cog in battle, but to see through the eyes of—”

The desk thundered as Sanders’ fist slammed down.

“*You’re* the ones who don’t understand!”

The shout was raw, defiant, reverberating in the cramped room.

Krepfels flinched so hard he toppled backward in a graceless heap. That was the gulf between a man who had stared death in the face countless times and an officer whose only battles were waged on paper.

Shrill with panic, Krepfels screamed for the guards. In the end, the only words Sanders uttered during the entire interrogation were those.



Chief Petty Officer Karen Joshua nursed her drink in the PX, head swathed in haze. For the first time since enlisting, she was drunk.

The ceiling speakers poured down syrupy music drenched in echo, the singer’s voice splitting into ghostly choruses.

She’d always drunk, cans of beer knocked back as easily as juice, but never like this. No soldier on the front drank to oblivion. The risk was too high; the next battle could come at any moment. A careless recruit might overdo it to drown his fear, but Karen was no green soldier. She was sharper than that.

And yet here she sat, drowning herself nightly since they threw Shiro in the brig. This far corner of the PX had become her private sanctuary.

She tipped her head back and drained what little was left in her can.

“*All gone already...?*”

A 350mL can was far too small for her now. She had no idea how many she’d ordered tonight.

The empty can clattered as she hurled it against the PX wall, the dregs inside spraying out in foamy arcs before it struck with a sharp metallic clang.

The sound summoned one of the attendants from the back, carrying another beer. If they didn’t, the next thing hurled might be a chair.

Karen snatched the can from the tray, popped the tab, or tried to.

Her fingers fumbled, slipping uselessly against the metal.

“*Definitely drunk.*”

A crooked smile tugged at her lips.
If Zeon stormed in now, it'd be the end of her.
But that wasn't going to happen.

This was no battlefield. This was the Big Tray of Major General Ethan, commander of the Far Eastern Army. In truth, it was the Army's headquarters. Since Odessa had fallen, Zeon had been in constant retreat. Ahead of them, entire divisions, reinforced by fresh troops from Jaburo, with Crawford's battalion among them, stretched across the front. The odds of this place becoming a battlefield were slim to none.

At last the tab gave way with a hiss. She drank deep, the carbonation biting her throat, her thoughts drifting further into memory.

The last time she'd let herself reach this state was before she joined the army, after her husband died.

When he'd told her he wanted to become an army doctor, she had resisted. The army would take him away. The world was already simmering with conflict. Sooner or later, he'd be dragged into danger.

But he had gone anyway. In the end, she had given in, extracting a promise from him, not to take risks. A promise no soldier could keep.

"Men..." she muttered bitterly, and drank deep.

"They're all the same. Always running ahead, always grabbing every burden for themselves."

An old memory surfaced, his back, small yet solid. A back she could lean on.

"Men..." she whispered again.

Her eyes blurred, and in the shape of that memory she saw another.

It was Shiro's back. Shiro's face.

She drained the can in a single swallow, heart twisting with grief and rage she couldn't name.



Eledore sat in his assigned quarters aboard the Big Tray, strumming his guitar.

A slow ballad drifted from the strings. It was a love song he had written long ago, but in this space it sounded more like a requiem. Each note seemed to sink under its own weight, carrying sorrow instead of melody.

Abruptly, Eledore stopped. His hand fell from the strings.

"This isn't my guitar anymore," he muttered. "Right, guys?"

His eyes drifted to the four names scrawled across the guitar's body, the signatures of his old bandmates. Before the army, they had tried to be musicians together. Tried, though "musicians" was a generous word. They were beginners, scraping together pocket change from the odd chance to back another act. Rent for a studio was beyond their means; their days were filled more with part-time jobs than with music.

"I wonder what those guys are up to now."

He brushed a finger across the strings, coaxing out a soft, lonely chord. Like him, they had all been swallowed by the war, drafted into different units. He never asked where they had ended up. It was safer not to know.

"Probably thrown into the thick of it. No connections, no favors... must be the front line."

He said it flatly, without sentiment.

In the Federation, postings were half-determined by family ties. Rumor said nearly half the children of majors and above ended up in uniform, yet on the front lines Eledore had never once run into such privileged types.

Still, he had no stomach for railing against corruption. Connections and cash ruled everything, not only the army, but the civilian world he'd come from.

Fine, he thought, then I'll earn some myself. That was why he'd agreed to help Jidan run drugs.

Drugs. Embezzlement. Bribes. Theft. Looting. Assault. Every crime imaginable lived inside a war.

And why shouldn't they? War constituted nothing more than sanctioned slaughter writ large.

"The plunder at Baruk Village wasn't anything special," he told himself.

"Happens all the time. As normal as a sergeant smacking around his men, as normal as those Jaburo brats calling their mamas 'Mommy.'"

Yes. Normal.

Just as normal as the buddy chatting beside you one moment and lying cold the next.

Just as normal as knowing that next time, it could be you.

For a man to lose his head and swing at a battalion commander over it, that was pure stupidity. Enough to land you in a court-martial. He wasn't a child; he should have known better.

But maybe confinement wasn't so bad. For Eledore, it meant one thing: no more fighting.

No killing.

No being killed.

This was better.

This was...

He kept whispering it inside himself, as if to hammer the thought home.



The smoke screen laid by the preparatory bombardment drifted and tore. From its shifting curtain, the Federation charged.

Six ground-type GMs, shields braced before them, sprinted forward. Behind them came the Type 61 tanks, the Federation's trusty warhorses, with lines of infantry surging in their wake.

The soldiers shouted as they ran, names of lovers, prayers to gods, charms and curses, wordless screams, anything to drive them up the slope where Zeon held the high ground.

It was the fifth charge that day.

But Zeon's counterfire was merciless. Not once had a Federation assault reached the defenses.

And this time was no different.

The lead GM's left leg exploded in a fireball.

The shot had come from a Zaku dug into the earth, its weapon a massive 175mm recoilless cannon, repurposed from a Magella Top's main gun.

The crippled GM pitched forward, crashing down on a Type 61 tank below.

The mobile suit was the deadliest weapon on the field, but in ground combat even they had their weakness.

The legs.

In space, legs were little more than balancing appendages. On Earth, under gravity, they were everything. Lose them, and a mobile suit became nothing more than a giant pillbox, its sword arm severed, its strength wasted.

The Zeon gunners ignored the fallen GM and picked off the others, one leg after another.

Every time a GM toppled, Federation screams rose. With each loss, the will that drove the infantry upward faltered. By the time they reached the base of the slope, all six suits had been crippled, and the soldiers' determination, their true weapon, was broken.

"Pathetic. Same damn pattern every time."

Yuri Kellner watched the failed assault with contempt.

"They wait until we quiet down a bit, then rush headlong at us. You'd think they'd have learned by now."

Lieutenant Alida Valli gave a wry smile.

"You can't expect much from clerks and scholars. Number-crunching is all they're good for. Try anything outside the manual and they fall apart."

By "scholars" she meant, of course, Rear Admiral Ginias Sahalin. Back when the Apsaras had been stationed at the old Kojima Base, Alida had been appointed as liaison. The ordeal had left her embittered.

"Don't hold grudges, Alida," Yuri said, half-laughing. "There's no one else they could have sent."

"Admiral!"

The shout came from below the Magella Top where Yuri stood. Ensign Karl Bohm, his face pale.

"Lieutenant Ron Stokes is down."

The laughter vanished. Both Yuri and Alida stiffened.

Lieutenant Stokes had been holding the left slope. If it had fallen, so would their whole position.

"Ron, dammit..."

Yuri grieved first, before strategy.



Ron had fought at his side since landing on Earth. He was a lousy mobile suit pilot, but unmatched in aerial combat with the Magella Top, and a man who cared for his troops.

"We've held this ridge for two days. Given the disparity in strength, that's a victory in itself," Alida said quietly.

"You're right. Time to shift to the withdrawal. What's the Federation right flank doing?" Yuri asked, his tone back to that of a commander.

"Overextended, oblivious to the bait," Karl replied.

"Good. When their next charge comes, we'll abandon the ridge and sweep down on that flank. Cut it clean through, break out to the right. Pass it on."

"Yes, sir."

"Understood."

Alida and Karl sprinted off.

That should buy them space. The foolhardy Federation would pay again. But Yuri knew such tricks wouldn't work forever. Retreat too far, and the Zeon rear would be crushed between here and the European front.

"We'll need a secure line of retreat..."

He bit down on his lip and leapt from the Magella Attack.



The Lhasa Base, carved deep into the mountains, resembled less a fortress than a field hospital.

From the shattered European front, waves of broken, battered men had poured in, retreating soldiers with haunted eyes and ruined bodies. The facility, never meant to serve as a frontline infirmary, groaned under the strain. Built as a research installation, its medical wing was scarcely equipped for even a platoon of casualties. The infirmary's cots were long since filled, and so the overflow had been laid out in converted storage rooms, once meant for crates and supplies.

There, on the bare stone floor, they lay not on beds but on thin blankets spread across the cold ground. Dozens of motionless forms sprawled together in the windowless gloom could have easily been mistaken for corpses, their shallow breaths the only sign of life.

From somewhere amid the rows of wounded, a low groan rose.

"...Ugh..."

A boy's voice, raw with pain.

"...I'm scared... Mommy..."

The words slipped from the lips of a feverish youth, tangled in his own sheets. His dog tags gleamed faintly in the dim light: Corporal Kurt Landen. Barely out of adolescence, he couldn't yet have reached his twentieth year.

"Mommy... help me..."

His hand jerked upward, clawing weakly at his chest as though fending off invisible terrors. He was dreaming, nightmares had him in their grip.

Then, gently, another hand reached down, enfolding his trembling fingers with warmth.

“Mommy?”

“Yes. I’m here.”

A woman’s voice, steady and kind.

“You’re safe. I’ll stay with you, always.”

“...Mom...”

The terror etched into Kurt’s young face softened. His rigid muscles slackened, the desperate tension draining away as though some specter had been banished. His breathing steadied, and soon he drifted into a deeper, peaceful sleep.

The woman kept her hand upon his, smoothing the crumpled sheets and tucking them tenderly around his shoulders.

“So, this is where you were, Miss Aina.”

The voice came from behind her. She knew it at once and didn’t bother turning.

“You’ve returned, Norris?”

“Yes. Only moments ago.”

He still wore his normal suit, dusted from battle. He had just returned from shielding the retreating remnants of their forces, dismounted from his mobile suit, and come straight here.

“And what are you doing here, Miss Aina?”

“Making my rounds.”

“Rounds? Of the wounded?”

“Yes. Many of them are plagued by nightmares.”

Her gaze swept across the rows of prone soldiers. In her eyes lay a tenderness that once would have seemed unimaginable. The same Aina who had been mocked as a “faceless doll” now carried warmth in her expression.

“It’s strange, Norris. Just by holding a hand, so many of them grow calm. No medicine, no sedatives. Only a hand. Who would have thought it could have such power?”

Her expression glowed with quiet joy.

Her face shone with a smile, fragile yet radiant.

And it was a face again, alive with expression. No longer the mask of a doll.

“Miss Aina has changed...”

Norris watched her, struck by the sight. It had been fifteen long years since he had seen her so alive. Since that terrible incident, her light had seemed extinguished. But here she was, luminous once more.

“She was never a doll. The incident forced a mask upon her, nothing more.”

“I am no doctor,” Aina went on, “nor can I fight to defend others, as you do. But at the very least, I can do this much. ...What is it, Norris? Is something amusing?”

He startled. Without realizing it, he had been smiling. The sight of her restored humanity had brought it out of him.

"No, nothing at all." He straightened quickly, schooling his face.

"That didn't look like 'nothing.' You seemed very pleased."

"Please don't tease me, Miss Aina. It was truly nothing."

"If you say so," she replied, mischief dancing at the corner of her lips.

That smile, Norris remembered it. Fifteen years ago, when he had first served as the Sahalins' bodyguard, the young Aina had been mischievous, full of pranks hidden from her parents. The look she wore now was the same one she had worn back then.

"This is the true Miss Aina. Not the puppet the soldiers whispered about. It was the incident that forced the mask on her, nothing more. What it was that changed her... that much, I cannot say."

"Captain Norris, here you are."

The interruption came from Lieutenant Colonel Kurt Falkenberg, "Smokeman," as they called him. A veteran from the old Side 3 Defense Forces, he commanded whenever Norris went into the field. In military matters, he was the second most powerful man in Lhasa.

"Smokeman. Anything unusual while I was away?"

"None during your absence," Falkenberg replied, though his eyes flickered toward Aina.

"But a transmission has arrived. For you."

"A transmission? From which unit?"

"...That is..." Falkenberg hesitated, rare for him.

"Out with it. Where is it?"

"This way. I'll take you."

He did not say aloud where the message waited. Clearly it was not something Aina was meant to hear.

"Only myself and Miss Aina are here. Then you mean... she mustn't know, Smokeman?"

Falkenberg's answering glance was wordless but certain. *Yes.*

The bond between men who had survived countless battlefields together needed no further explanation.

"Miss Aina, I must take my leave. Do not overexert yourself, or you'll end up a patient among them. Please take care."

"Thank you. And you as well, Norris."

"Yes, ma'am."

He saluted crisply and stepped away.

At his feet, Corporal Kurt lay smiling faintly in his sleep. Whatever nightmare had haunted him had been replaced by a gentler dream.



"It's the first time we've spoken face-to-face like this, isn't it, Captain Norris Packard?"

The man who appeared on Norris's room monitor was Vice Admiral Yuri Kellene. Behind him stood a strikingly beautiful woman, his secretary,

Cynthia. No one else was in sight. Clearly, this was a call meant to be overheard by no one.

“What business do you have with me?”

Norris’s voice carried a note of guarded suspicion.

“No need to be so on edge,” Yuri replied, throwing back a glass of brandy in a single swallow. As soon as it was empty, Cynthia stepped forward smoothly and refilled it with practiced ease.

“Normally, one would think it proper for you to contact my direct superior, Technical Rear Admiral Ginias Sahalin.”

“That fool understands nothing of war,” Yuri cut him off with a single, dismissive remark.

“What I want is to talk about the war, about battle. With you.”

That explained Falkenberg’s earlier concern for Aina. It was Yuri who had insisted Norris be summoned in secret, without Ginias’s knowledge.

“I serve under Master Ginias. Any conversation I have with you, Admiral, I will report to him afterward.”

“Do as you like. That’s your judgment to make.”

Yuri spoke with a confidence that suggested he was certain Norris would never actually report it.

“I dislike dancing around the point. I’ll be direct.”

The ever-smirking Yuri now wore a tightened expression.

“I want you to ready the Kerguelen for departure.”

“The Kerguelen?”

“Yes. My men will board her, and she will return to space.”

The Kerguelen, a Zanzibar-class space cruiser stationed at the Lhasa Base. Its defining feature was its ability to break through Earth’s atmosphere. Unlike the Musai, Chivvay, or Gwazine classes, none of which possessed such capability, the Zanzibar was Zeon’s only combat vessel, aside from HLV transports, that could cross the atmospheric barrier.

“Right now, the only Zeon forces left in Central Asia are us and Lhasa Base. The route to link up with the Chinese front has already been cut. If things continue, we’ll be crushed beneath the overwhelming weight of Federation numbers.”

“But the Zanzibar-class can’t carry that many personnel...”

“I know. Ordinarily, it would be impossible. But strip out every bunk, every fitting, every round of ammunition, and of course, leave the mobile suits behind. What matters are the soldiers’ lives.”

The soldiers’ lives. On that point, Norris was in complete agreement.

“Those mechanical dolls can always be built again. But people? People are finite. Especially battle-tested men.”

At last, Norris understood. The question was simple: which held greater value, machines or soldiers? A scientist like Ginias would answer “machines” without hesitation. He would never consent to an evacuation aboard the Kerguelen.

“So that’s why you contacted me?”

“Exactly. Bitter though it is to admit, the war on Earth is lost. But in space, our home ground, we can still fight on equal terms, even better. And for that, I need men who’ve known the crucible of battle.”

Zeon’s mobile suits could never fully demonstrate their potential on Earth. Against swarms of aircraft and artillery they were forced into attritional slogging matches. But in the void of space, mobile suits were unbound, able to maneuver freely, employing hit-and-run tactics that no fighter craft could match.

“I understand your point, Admiral. But the Kerguelen’s launch is not mine to authorize.”

“Of course. Command of the Kerguelen rests with Ginias. I cannot override that. Which is why I’m negotiating with His Excellency Gihren now, to have authority over the Kerguelen transferred to me.”

“His Excellency Gihren...”

The absolute top of the Principality was Sovereign Degwin Sodo Zabi, but that was in name only. The true power of Zeon lay with his son, Supreme Commander Gihren Zabi, both head of government and commander-in-chief of the military. If Gihren granted Yuri authority over the Kerguelen, not even Degwin himself could oppose it.

“I refuse to let my men die needlessly. Surely, Captain, you understand that sentiment?”

“...I do.”

Norris did understand. Every soldier fighting in this war yearned for true independence for the Spacenoids. The young men who had staked their lives on that ideal, he could not stomach seeing them squandered.

He remembered how much the Federation had bled the colonies dry before independence. The crushing economic blockades. The suffering of Zeon’s people. The brutal suppression of those who dared cry for freedom. All of Zeon bore those scars. Even Ginias’s metabolic disorder might have been treatable, had proper medical facilities and drugs been available under Federation rule.

That was why Zeon’s soldiers believed they must win. If they could not break the Federation’s grip, this war would mean nothing.

“Look at this.”

The screen shifted from Yuri’s image to a tactical map.

Blue dots had entirely surrounded the red. Dozens of times their number. The blue dots were Federation forces; the red, Zeon’s.

“A week at most... that’s all we have.”

“Even assuming we fight our hardest, yes. Once the Federation reaches Lhasa, the Kerguelen will never leave the ground.”

“Indeed.” Norris nodded gravely. He knew well: during atmospheric ascent, a Zanzibar was utterly defenseless. It could not fire, could not evade. A single hit to the booster unit meant instant immolation. It was like flying with a giant bomb strapped to one’s back.

That left them no more than a week. Preparations had to begin immediately.

"I'm asking you, Captain Norris Packard."

The monitor had returned from the tactical map to Yuri's face.

"This is my request, not as a superior officer, but as a fellow Zeon soldier."

Then, astonishingly, Yuri bowed deeply. Such a gesture seemed utterly alien coming from him.

Norris had always thought of Yuri as reckless, brash, supremely confident. But clearly he was more than that. After all, only a man of substance could command such devotion from his troops.

And yet...

"Let me think on it." Norris lowered his eyes. He understood Yuri's reasoning. As a soldier, he even agreed with it. But he could not bring himself to betray Ginias and Aina. When their father had died, Norris had sworn he would protect the young siblings.

"...I see."

Yuri did not press further. He knew the torment behind Norris's hesitation.

"I'll be counting on you, Captain Norris Packard."

With a rare, solemn expression, Yuri spoke the words. Then the transmission ended.

Norris remained hunched forward, unable to lift his face for a long while.

Chapter.02

Resolve

Norris wrestled with it through the night.

But no answer came.

"I should do as Admiral Kellerne says. To waste the lives of countless soldiers would be unforgivable. If I can return them to space, Zeon will still have the strength to fight on."

Thus spoke Norris the soldier.

"Have you forgotten your debt? Would you betray Master Ginias, would you turn your back on Miss Aina?"

Thus accused Norris the man.

The two voices within him argued until dawn, yet no conclusion was reached.

"There isn't time. To carry as many troops as possible, we must lighten the Kerguelen as much as we can..."

Norris gazed at the Kerguelen, slumbering in its dock. Ever since Ginias had descended to Earth, the ship had lain unused. Nearly half a year they had left a precious Zanzibar-class mothballed here, an extravagance, to be sure, but befitting a plan sanctioned directly by Sovereign Degwin himself.

"So many people..."

Around the Kerguelen, the bustle of men and women was constant. Originally, Lhasa had been a research installation, a secret base where human presence was sparse. The docks had been so empty you could have played soccer on them. Now they were jammed with mobile suits awaiting repair and soldiers crowding in as refugees.

"With this many personnel gathered at Lhasa, even the dullest of the Federation cannot fail to notice. They won't ignore such a flow of people."

It could no longer be considered a secret base; one had to assume its location was compromised. The moment the Kerguelen launched, its position would surely be known.

Ginias claimed that once the Apsaras III was completed, it could sweep aside the advancing Federation and even bring Jaburo to its knees in one strike. But war was never so easily changed by a single weapon. Even if such a miracle were possible, could the machine be finished before the Federation struck Lhasa?

"What am I to do...?"

Norris reached into his breast pocket and withdrew a small charm. It was a clumsy bit of origami. It resembled a pinwheel, but the child who had made it had declared it a medal.

"Norris, what are you doing?"

It was Aina's voice.

Startled, Norris hastily tucked the charm back into his uniform.

“M—Miss Aina...”

She stood there in the garb of a medic, a plastic case of supplies cradled in her arms.

“What were you hiding, Norris? A lover’s photograph? In that case, I’d have to be jealous.”

“N—no, it isn’t... that is—”

“I’m joking.”

Aina smiled.

“Don’t worry. I won’t pry.”

Norris stared at her in astonishment.

“Miss Aina... made a joke?”

Since that incident, she had hardly spoken at all, let alone jested. Yet now, her smile was radiant. To Norris, in that moment, she shone like a goddess herself.

It felt as though a divine oracle had been delivered to him.

“Miss Aina... might I beg a moment of your time?” Norris asked, at last resolved.

Aina answered with a gentle smile.

“If you don’t mind waiting until after I’ve delivered this medicine.”



“Forgive me. It’s such an empty room.”

Aina offered Norris the chair by the desk, then sat herself down on the edge of the bed.

Just as she said, the room was barren. A desk, a bed, a wardrobe, the standard furnishings, nothing more. No decorations, no personal touches. Not even a tea set with which to serve a guest. That was what she meant.

And yet, to Norris, the room no longer felt the same as before. Nothing had changed, and still, it was different. He could sense life here. The presence of someone truly living within these walls.

“Excuse me,” Norris murmured, bowing before he lowered himself into the chair.

“Don’t be so formal with me, Norris.”

“But I...”

“It’s true, you once served under my father and were later hired on as his bodyguard. But that was then. Things are different now.”

To Norris, her father had been his superior during his days in the Directorate of Military Affairs for the Supreme Commander. When the man left the post, Norris had been brought over as his personal guard.

“You took such good care of us after our parents died. The moving, the school paperwork, disposing of the estate... If it hadn’t been for you, my brother and I would have been lost.”

“I only—”

"No, Norris. When our parents died, everyone else around us drifted away, snatching what they could from my father's inheritance. But you, only you, remained."

"I owed your father a debt. I was simply repaying it."

"Even if that's so, I am grateful."

Aina's smile was soft, warm. Gratitude shone in her expression, and Norris felt it in his very bones.

"You may not like to hear it, but I think of you as the parent I lost. And so..."

"Me? Miss Aina's parent?"

"Until now, I never tried to see beyond my brother. I ignored you, the soldiers, the war, even the enemy. All I ever saw was him. But I understand now, the world around me, and your place within it. To me, Norris, you became like a father. And for that, I thank you."

"Miss Aina..."

"Thank you, Norris. And forgive me. I have been a terrible daughter. I never once did anything to be a daughter to you."

Norris's hand went to the folded paper medal in his breast pocket.

Aina had changed.

Undeniably, she had changed.

The doll-like girl he had known was gone. Now she spoke of him as a parent, her eyes alight with life. What a miraculous transformation.

And yet...

"Miss Aina, you've changed so much. Has something happened?" he asked, concern tugging at him. Too much good fortune only stirred unease; that was his nature.

"I've fallen in love."

She answered without the slightest hesitation.

"With a Federation soldier. I've fallen in love with him."

"Then... you mean..."

"Yes. The one I asked you to spare that day."

That day, when Norris had rescued Aina from the snowbound mountains, she had begged him to let the Federation soldier live. Because of her plea, he had left the Gundam he'd found unscathed, and returned to base.

"I see. So Miss Aina... has fallen in love."

Norris spoke with deep feeling. That she had given her heart away, it stirred a faint loneliness in him, yet more than that, he was glad for her.

"But why..."

"Why I didn't run away with him?" she asked, smiling unexpectedly.

"I cannot abandon my brother. I could never forsake him now."

Forsake him, something in the way she said it snagged at Norris. But stronger than that was his unease at why she could not leave her brother's side.

Catching his questioning gaze, Aina went on.

"Fifteen years ago, after that incident, I swore an oath. That I would be my brother's hands and feet, since he had lost the use of his own."

She turned her eyes away, a faint, sorrowful smile on her lips.

"How young I was, to think such a promise could truly help him."

"But Master Ginias's metabolic disorder... it's nearly healed."

His dystrophy had improved significantly. At the very least, daily life, walking, eating, was no longer hindered. Heavy strain, like test piloting, was out of the question. That was why Aina herself was flying the Apsaras in trials.

"Yes. But we can't go back. Not now. Not after what my brother and I have done together."

"...?"

"I became his hands and feet in war. I piloted the Apsaras and killed so many. And together, my brother and I will cause many more deaths still. That is why I want, no, I need, to save lives in return."

"You mean... tending to the wounded?"

"I may never atone, not in my whole life. But still, I want to save. The way he saved me."

To save.

To help.

To hear such words from Aina's lips, Norris felt as though heaven itself had spoken.

"My mind is made up."

Norris rose to his feet.

His course was set. There would be no more hesitation.

"Miss Aina, let us save them. As many of our comrades as we can."

"Yes."

Aina's nod was firm, resolute.

She did not, of course, realize what decision Norris had just sealed in his heart.



Construction of the Apsaras III pressed forward at a fevered pace.

By the time the Apsaras I had gone missing, Ginias had already set his sights on developing the third unit. He had written off the unstable first prototype without hesitation. That was why, when the Apsaras I was later discovered in the mountains, he ordered it destroyed on the spot rather than recovered, though truthfully, recovery would have been impossible under the circumstances.

The Apsaras III was a colossal mobile armor, twice the size of its predecessor.

In place of the instability that plagued the Apsaras I, this new machine carried a nuclear fusion engine on each flank. Two engines meant two Minovsky craft systems. If one faltered, the other could keep the machine aloft.



And more than stability, the twin reactors brought an exponential surge in output, opening the door to even greater power for its mega particle cannon.

"Perhaps we should consider altering the cannon's design," suggested Technical Lieutenant Colonel Walter Yanowitz.

"Altering the design?" Ginias spun his chair around sharply to face him. "What are you implying, Yanowitz?"

The Apsaras cannon was unlike a conventional beam weapon. Instead of a single lance of energy, it could unleash hundreds of beams simultaneously, up to 256 in a single volley, each capable of striking a separate target with unerring accuracy. Against a massed enemy air fleet, it could annihilate them from beyond their effective range. That was why the Apsaras III carried no dedicated anti-air weaponry; the cannon was designed to take its place.

"I propose converting it to a standard converging type. In fortress assaults, you'll be concentrating the beams into a single shot regardless. If we return to the operational purpose of the Apsaras—"

"The specifications will not change."

Ginias turned his chair away once more, dismissing him. But Yanowitz pressed on.

"Sir, with the increased output, the synchronization with the mirror array is beginning to break down. I acknowledge the current type's usefulness against enemy forces, but time is short. If we specialized the weapon exclusively for destroying Jaburo—"

"No."

Suddenly Ginias wheeled back around, seizing Yanowitz by the shoulder with startling strength. It was hard to believe such force came from his frail body.

"M—my lord..." Yanowitz gasped.

But Ginias did not release him. His eyes burned, fixed inches from Yanowitz's own, gleaming with a manic light.

"Light must spread," he said, breath ragged.

"It must spread... covering the earth like rainfall. My Apsaras cannot be otherwise."

His gaze had lost all focus. Clearly, he was no longer looking at Yanowitz, but at something beyond, something only he could see.

Terrifying.

The thought seized Yanowitz's heart. His commander, was he mad? The unspoken blasphemy made his body tremble.

"A rain of light..."

Ginias repeated it, his voice hushed, rapt with ecstasy and delirium.

"My Apsaras will shower the earth in light. A rain of light... radiant, beautiful..."



"Hans has arrived."

A man's voice broke the silence of the darkened room.

"My apologies for being late."

"Think nothing of it. The summons came without warning. Are we all here?"

"Yes, not a man missing."

"Captain, what is this about? To gather us in such secrecy..."

"The Federation?"

"No. Nothing of the sort. Lights."

Norris gave the order to Sergeant Walter Kohler, standing by the wall.

Walter rose and flipped the switch. The dim chamber bloomed with light, revealing bare pipes and the hard faces of uniformed men.

They were assembled in the Kerguelen's engine room. Norris had deliberately chosen this place, away from Giniias's eyes. Every room in the base was monitored by cameras. Yes, the system could be tricked, but tampering risked discovery.

"First, look at this. A deployment map of Federation and Zeon forces, six hours old."

Norris spread a chart of the Far East across a table. Nearly twenty men crowded in, their eyes drawn to it.

"A grim picture," muttered Lieutenant Colonel Falkenberg, "the Smokeman", letting out a heavy sigh.

"Damn the Federation... where were they hiding this many troops?" growled Ensign Hans Difflipp.

Overwhelming. Even a glance made the disparity plain. The Federation's numbers dwarfed their own, ten to one at least. Their symbols spread across the map like an iron tide, smothering every sector. Zeon's meager forces were penned in, one thin line under Vice Admiral Yuri Kellerne, and the beleaguered garrison at Lhasa.

"Kellerne is a fine soldier, but..."

"No admiral can make good such odds."

"A week at most, I'd say."

"We're cut off. Completely."

Their voices were heavy with resignation. Anyone with even a soldier's sense could see: in this theater, Zeon had no hope of victory.

"Captain, is this why you called us here?" Smokeman asked, speaking for them all.

"Yes. The truth is bitter, but the war on Earth is already lost. Yet in space, Zeon can still fight as equals, more than equals."

Norris's gaze swept the room. No one spoke against him.

"And so, we must send our soldiers home. Mobile suits can be built anew. Seasoned men cannot. We must raise them into space."

"You mean to use the Kerguelen for evacuation? But..."

"I know, Smokeman. One ship cannot carry them all. So we strip her bare, seats, bunks, fittings, main gun, munitions. Anything not essential to flight."

"Mm. The gravely wounded who can't endure reentry will have to surrender. But yes... it could be done."

"But Captain," said Lieutenant Joe di Reda, the maintenance officer, frowning deeply. "Including booster installation for atmospheric ascent... the work will take a week. If the Federation closes before then, we'll be cut down the instant we breach the stratosphere."

"You are right, Lieutenant. That is why I ask this of you."

Norris looked from face to face.

Sergeant Walter Kohler scratched his nose, a nervous tic.

Young Hans Difflipp's eyes shone, almost eager.

Smokeman met Norris's gaze squarely, unflinching.

All waited for his words.

They knew what was coming, a task dangerous, likely fatal. Yet not one man faltered. Every face bore the look of resolve.

"Give me your lives."

Norris's words were spare, stripped bare.

He did not say entrust them to me. He could not promise their return.

But,

"Your orders, Captain."

"You have a plan then? A way to bloody the Federation."

"I've fought beside you since the days of the National Defense Force. My life is yours to spend."

"Let's do it, Captain. Let's send the Kerguelen into the sky with a roar."

"Captain!"

"Your orders!"

They were the men Norris had chosen, the ones he believed would follow him. That they accepted so readily did not surprise him. And yet...

"Forgive me."

His eyes burned hot. He pressed a hand against them, but the tears came anyway.

He wept.

And his soldiers looked upon him with pride. A commander who could shed tears for their sake was a commander worth dying for.

They did not fear death.

What they feared was to die having done nothing at all.



For the first time in three days, the brig door opened.

Not since the day Shiro had collapsed from malnutrition had anyone come. Yet he did not stir, his gaze fixed on the wall.

"Meal time... perhaps?"

The thought drifted lazily through his mind. But his sense of time had long unraveled; he could no longer recall when food had last been brought, nor whether it had been breakfast or supper.

"But if it were a meal, they'd have slid it through the hatch... ah, what does it matter. Firing squad, starvation, it's all the same. Let them do as they please. I'm finished..."

"Well now, Newbie. Been a while, hasn't it?"

The familiar voice pulled Shiro's eyes upward in surprise.

"Whatever you've done, why not just say it? Odds are, it's about why you're always so damned newbie, eh?"

Lieutenant Jidan Nickard stood grinning, flashing him a jaunty V-sign.

"You're the same as ever. Always pitching straight fastballs. You'll never win the game that way, you know."

Shiro turned his face aside.

Of course he knew. He had always lived clumsily, without finesse.

But to live cleverly, that, he despised. If winning at life meant that kind of victory, then Shiro wanted no part of it.

"Well, if you won't talk, that's your choice. But there's always an easier way."

He leaned into Shiro's line of sight, forming a circle with thumb and forefinger.

Money. A bribe.

"You slip a little something to the right people, and problems dissolve. One man vanishes from the front, another goes in his place. And tell me, who wants the front? No one. They'll thank you for the chance. Not a soul will object."

Likely true.

And that truth only deepened Shiro's disgust for the military.

"I know your justice, boy. But what good is justice while you're rotting in here? Even your beloved Captain Joe—"

"Stop."

For the first time, Shiro's voice broke the silence.

"Don't speak of Joe. Not anymore."

He loathed Captain Joe now, loathed himself for ever loving it. That show had glamorized war, made it look noble, even heroic. He hated it for luring him into believing.

He pitied the fool he had been, who had gone to war swept up in that lie.

"Well, well. Seems there's no getting through to you."

Jidan rose with a groan, brushing dust from his trousers.

"But mark me, sitting here staring at walls won't change a thing. Sooner or later, you'll have to step out of this cell."

"..."

"You've always been too hasty, boy. Maybe now's the time to slow down. Think a while. Stew in it."

The heavy clang of the door closing echoed through the chamber.

Jidan was gone.

And Shiro, unchanged, unmoving, remained as he had before, staring blankly at the wall. He was not yet ready to return.



“Cynthia, patch me through to Lhasa Base. As before, Captain Norris’s quarters.”

Back in his cabin aboard the Gallop, Yuri spoke as Cynthia stepped forward to take his coat.

“You mean to hear his answer,” she said, slipping behind him to draw the heavy cloak from his shoulders. Yuri let her do it, her motions practiced, almost ritual.

“Will the Captain side with us?”

She hung the coat neatly on its hanger and then moved to sit before the comm console.

Cynthia had once been a bureaucrat in the Supreme Command’s Intelligence Bureau. Yuri had coaxed her away, not as a secretary, at first, but as a woman. Since then, she had transferred to his service and never left his side.

“I hear Captain Norris and Technical Rear Admiral Ginias Sahalin have known each other since before the academy. Would he truly betray so old a bond?”

“He will. I believe it.”

“And why is that?”

“Because Norris Packard is a soldier to the bone.”

A career man since the old National Defense Force, Norris’s record dwarfed Yuri’s own. Whatever ties he held with the Sahalin siblings, Yuri could not believe such a man would allow sentiment to cloud his judgment. Or rather, he chose to believe it.

“He will understand. I know he will. That man, “

But just then the line opened.

It was not Norris who appeared, but a composed officer with a neatly trimmed mustache.

“Lieutenant Colonel Kurt Falkenberg, aide to Captain Norris.”

“Where is the Captain? My business is with him.”

“The Captain has departed on a sortie.”

Falkenberg’s face was taut with anguish as he spoke.

“What?”

“You need not worry, Admiral. I have assumed responsibility for the Kerguelen’s launch preparations.”

Assumed responsibility?

“At present, we are dismantling the ship’s interior fittings while simultaneously installing atmospheric boosters. In ninety-eight hours, launch preparations will be complete.”

Ninety-eight hours, four days. Conveniently timed for Yuri’s unit to return. But what of Norris? Even if he had set out immediately after their last contact, the margin for completing his mission and returning was perilously

narrow. One delay, one sharp response from the Federation, and he would miss the launch.

No. Yuri understood.

Norris never intended to board the Kerguelen.

"I see... the Captain has gone out."

Yuri recognized the same anguish etched in Falkenberg's features. No doubt the man had wished to follow his commander. But someone had to remain behind. Someone had to be persuaded that this task, preparing the Kerguelen, was no less vital than joining him.

"Did the Captain leave any word?"

"Victory, Admiral. That is his word."

Victory...

Yuri closed his eyes.

Yes. Victory was all that mattered. Without it, war was meaningless. For the comrades already lost, for their blood, victory was the only answer.

His eyes snapped open.

"Very well. Tell him this: Yuri Kellner will see that word fulfilled."

He straightened and offered the deepest of salutes.

It was a gesture of utmost respect, for a man who would likely never hear it.



"Ensign Rob, why haven't you driven them back?"

Lieutenant Sheldon Jacobs, the newly appointed commander of the 2nd MS Company, barked in his gravelly voice.

"The enemy's force is a tenth the size of ours, or so I'm told. Crush them. Show them the spirit of the Federation!"

The spirit of the Federation, what a joke.

Rob, leader of the 07th Team, made sure the captain couldn't see him and snorted audibly before answering.

"The enemy is well-trained. And we can't be certain what we've seen is the whole of their strength..."

"Bah! To be shamed by Zeon, of all people? Pour fire into their center until your barrels glow red!"

Rob no longer had the will to argue. Jacobs was a Jaburo officer, one of those who thought war began and ended with frontal charges. A Don Quixote who knew nothing of tactics. Reasoning with him was pointless.

"You useless bastards, that's why Zeon's pushing us back in the first place."

Ignoring Jacobs's tirade, Rob switched his display over to the tactical map.

Since Odessa, the shattered Kojima Battalion had been reinforced with raw recruits and officers who'd spent the war cowering in rear-line posts. They could manage when advancing, but the moment they were counterattacked, they panicked and crumbled. Utterly useless.

"Damn, I almost miss that soft-hearted ensign."

Rob thought suddenly of Shiro.

The gallant little officer who'd dared parley with guerillas. It was Rob himself who'd nicknamed him "Drugstore," but there had never been malice in it. On the contrary, he'd respected the boy.

"Naïve as hell, but he wasn't a coward. If only these Jaburo men had half his guts..."

Looking back, before the Apsaras wrecked them, the Kojima Battalion had been solid. Ill-disciplined, sure, but never spineless.

"Captain, O6th Team's in trouble!"

Joyce's voice cut in over comms.

The newly formed O6th Team had an officer straight from Jaburo commanding a squad of fresh recruits. A recipe for disaster. But then, half the battalion was like that now.

"Frankie, O6th is in danger. Move left, pin their legs. Joyce, you and I will plug the gap. Got it?"

"Roger that, Commander."

"Tch. Babysitting duty again."

Rob spat a curse, powering up his own machine, a brand-new GM Sniper.

"Nice that it's fresh off the line, but we're not a sniper unit. A little more thought in assignments would've been nice."

Before advancing, he swept the field with a spray of 100mm machine gun fire.

The GM Sniper's standard long rifle was slung on his back. In the O7th Team's role, forced into assault duty, the heavier machine gun, borrowed from a ground-type GM, was far more useful.

"O6th Team, don't retreat! Hold the line, keep your eyes on the enemy! They're half our number at best!"

Roaring at his faltering allies, Rob charged forward.

And in spite of himself, he envied the ferocity of Zeon's soldiers.



"Still no breach? The gap isn't open yet?"

Inside his cockpit, Ensign Hans ground his teeth.

"There's a platoon moving well out there. Seems the Federation has a few men worth something after all."

Sergeant Walter Kohler spoke evenly, analyzing with the calm of a veteran. He knew full well it was not yet his time to act.

"Captain, we should support them. If we don't push the line—"

"Patience, Hans."

Norris's tone was cool as he studied his men's fight.

"We are the trump card of this operation. If we are lost, the plan collapses at once."

"But, Captain—"

“No. Leave it to Glen and the others.”

He cut him off more sharply this time, perhaps because he too felt the temptation to leap in, to shield his men.

But this mission was speed incarnate. Every delay in breaking through diminished the chance of success.

And yet, they faced an enemy ten times their number. By all rights, survival alone should have been impossible.

Even so, Norris believed.

His men had sworn to him: We’ll open the way without you, sir.

“Glen and his team will carve us a path. Trust them. Let them fight.”

He spoke the words as if to steady himself as much as his lieutenant.



Lieutenant Glen Stencil’s MS-07B-3 Gouf hefted a massive mega particle cannon as though cradling it, then unleashed its fury into the Federation line.

The beam seared through the air, a lance of light carving the atmosphere itself.

Its target: the GM team sweeping in from the right flank. The pilots tried desperately to scatter, but on the ground their evasive maneuvers lacked the freedom of space.

The leading GM was swallowed whole by the blast, the impact gouging a crater into the earth.

“See that, Freddie cowards? Sit there and quake in your boots!”

With that, Stencil discarded the weapon in one swift motion.

The unwieldy mega particle cannon was no ordinary armament; it was a salvaged main gun from a Zanzibar-class cruiser. But there was no way to carry along the massive reactor such a weapon demanded. At this stage, Zeon still lacked energy-CAP technology, the means to condense and store energy at the brink of degeneration.

Thus, the cannon was nothing more than a disposable, single-shot weapon. Still, the psychological effect alone made it worthwhile. Norris had insisted Stencil haul the cumbersome thing into battle for precisely this reason.

“More than worth the trouble,” Stencil muttered, narrowing his eyes at the impact site.

The GM unit that had tried to outflank them was cowering now, pinned behind shields, firing sporadically without advancing. They were clearly paralyzed by the thought of a second blast. The right flank would offer no serious threat for the time being.

“Right wing’s stalled. Magella Attack unit, advance! Smash the Freddie line in one stroke!”

Seizing the moment, Stencil gave the order, then locked his gatling shield into place and charged forward. There was no need to think of retreat. Their mission was to tear open the Federation front.



“Right wing’s stalled. Magella Attack unit, advance! Smash the Feddie line in one stroke!”

The transmission from Lieutenant Stencil came through. The cumbersome Zanzibar cannon had paid off.

“Just as the Lieutenant said, the Feddies are cowards at heart,” remarked Ensign Patrick Micheneau, driving the tank base of his Magella Attack.

“So it seems, sir,” replied Sergeant Heinz Sadler from the turret. “At least now we can focus everything on the forward assault.”

Forward...

Micheneau’s gaze hardened as he looked ahead. Amid the rabble of Federation units, one platoon stood firm. The number 07 emblazoned on their shields marked them, the 07th Team. If he could strike down their commander, the whole line would unravel.

“Alright! I’ll take point. Günther, Alf, form up in A-formation. Concentrate fire on the enemy’s lead machine!”

His order went out on directed comms to the other two Magella crews. He stomped down hard on the pedal; his tank roared forward.

“Drop that commander, and the rest will fold. Ignore the grunts!”

He barked the words as he squeezed the trigger. The Magella Base’s 35mm cannon lacked the punch to down a GM, but even a glancing hit might slow the target. Meanwhile, Sadler had the 175mm recoilless main gun locked on the same machine.

But the shots missed.

That Federation commander danced away with uncanny skill, weaving through fire even on ground where mobility should have been poor.

Impressive... wasted on the Earthnoids.

Half admiration, half grim recognition, their very skill made the man all the more dangerous to Zeon.

“Sergeant, we’re charging in. Pop smoke!”

Micheneau jammed the pedal harder. Around them, white smoke billowed out as Sadler fired the dischargers, cloaking their approach.

Lances of fire streaked in from the left, but through the haze the enemy’s aim was wild.

The Magella Attack barreled forward in a reckless charge. Against mobile suits, a tank rush was suicide, but Micheneau had no illusions. If he fell in close quarters, the opening would let Günther or Alf strike the killing blow. Survival was not required. His duty was to break the line.

“Let them taste Zeon’s spirit, the pride of the Spacenoids!”

Threading through the withering fire, his Magella surged on.

The audacity of the charge threw the Federation into confusion. Their volleys faltered.

But fate twisted cruelly, the stray round of a panicked GM caught the Magella Base squarely.

"Damn!"

Even as the impact shook him, Micheneau's hand yanked the emergency lever. With a thunderous crack, the Magella Top split from its base.



The Zeon Forces standard main battle tank, the Magella Attack, possessed a unique system: its turret could detach from the base and take flight.

The design had been conceived by the brass as a means to strike at the thin top armor of enemy tanks. In reality, the Magella Top's endurance was a meager five minutes, and its accuracy in flight was abysmal. Thus, in practice, it was almost always used like any other tank. The turret separating to fly was a rarity.

And yet, that turret suddenly lifted into the air.

Sergeant Heinz Sadler felt the strange floating sensation at once and understood. He hadn't touched a thing. It was Ensign Micheneau. From the base, the officer had pulled the emergency separation lever himself.

Through the viewport, Sadler saw the Magella Base erupt in flame. The Ensign had sacrificed himself, splitting off the turret to save his subordinate. "Ensign Micheneau!"

Sadler shouted, knowing there could be no survival. He couldn't help but cry out the name of the officer who, at the moment of death, had ensured his escape.

"Damn you, Feddies... damn you!"

He fixed his eyes forward.

The Magella Top could sustain VTOL flight for no more than five minutes, and its maneuverability was poor. The instant it broke through the smoke, it would be a sitting target. Any rational soldier would retreat to the main force.

But Sadler did not.

He charged.

The turret burst out of the smoke, arrowing straight toward the Federation commander's machine.

"Captain Norris... the rest is in your hands."

Federation fire converged on him.

The GM teams' 100mm machine guns stitched across the Magella Top; several rounds punched straight into its VTOL engines. At once, the craft went up in flames.

The turret began to plummet.

But Sadler clung to the controls with all his strength. His target was the enemy commander's GM.

With the engines aflame, the Magella Top was now a warhead, a missile in all but name.

Wreathed in crimson fire, it screamed downward.

“SIEG ZEON!”

Sadler’s last cry was drowned in the roar of his own explosion.



“Ensign Rob of the 07th Team has been killed in action!”

The grim report reached Lieutenant Sheldon Jacobs, who was observing the battle from a plateau some distance from the front.

“Fool. This is what comes of ignoring my orders.”

Jacobs rubbed his bulging stomach, his face twisted in a scowl. Not a trace of grief for his fallen subordinate showed.

“Quite so, Lieutenant. Ensign Rob had a history of disregarding your directives. One might say his death was his own doing.”

Lieutenant JG John Milford, his adjutant, nodded with smug satisfaction. To him, it was obvious where loyalty should lie: with the living superior, not the dead junior officer.

“Lieutenant, the left flank has been breached. Zeon forces are breaking through!”

The communications officer delivered yet more unwelcome news.

“Damn it all. Always held back by useless men.”

“No need to worry, sir. Look here.”

Milford spread out a map, marked with the terrain and both sides’ deployments.

“Lieutenant Canter’s company is stationed in the rear. If we coordinate with him, we can encircle the Zeon units that broke through.”

Jacobs frowned, unconvinced. It was a sound enough plan, but it would not erase the fact that his line had been breached. Worse, Canter might end up stealing the glory for the counterattack.

Reading his commander’s hesitation, Milford added smoothly, “Lieutenant Jacobs, it isn’t that our line was broken. We allowed them through. By design. To encircle and annihilate them.”

“Ah... I see.”

Jacobs’s face brightened at once.

“So it’s a trap we’ve sprung on them.”

“Exactly. The enemy has blundered straight into your scheme, sir, right into our jaws.”

“Yes, yes! This too is part of the plan. Nothing at all to worry about. Signal Lieutenant Canter, we’ll crush the fools in a pincer!”

Jacobs’s mood had turned radiant as he gave the order.

But the communications officer did not relay it. He pressed his headphones tight, listening intently to the field.

“Is that confirmed? You’re certain enough to report it to the Lieutenant?”

“What are you doing, man? Send my orders at once!” Jacobs roared. He loathed subordinates who disobeyed.

The young operator turned with visible dread. He knew the next words would bring him only fury, yet he spoke them anyway.

“Sir... the report is... mobile suits. They’re flying. Through the air.”



Mobile suits were the strongest weapons ever built.

That had become accepted wisdom, at least among those at the front, ever since Zeon’s Zakus had handed the Federation fleet its overwhelming defeats. In the upper echelons of the Federation there had been skeptics, men who doubted the worth of mobile suits. But Zeon’s relentless string of battlefield triumphs forced even them to acknowledge the truth.

In speed, in power, in hand-to-hand combat, in armor, in versatility, on every measure, the mobile suit eclipsed conventional weapons. Their superiority was such that no amount of numerical advantage could make up the difference.

At least, in space.

On Earth, their weakness had been exposed.

Mobility.

Compared to aircraft, mobile suits were woefully slow. Even against conventional ground forces, their movement was no better than the old machines they had replaced.

Thus both sides began seeking ways to extend their reach. The Dodai YS support craft, experimental mobile armors, the Federation’s G-Fighters and Guntank carriers, even the grand designs of the G-Project, all of them, at root, were attempts to overcome the mobility gap.

From this lineage came Zeon’s bid for the ultimate answer: a mobile suit capable of flight under its own power.

The program used the land-combat Gouf as its testbed. But mounting nuclear jet engines in its legs proved unstable, and the problem of fuel storage loomed even larger. In the end, the design was never formally adopted, dismissed as an experimental dead end.

Yet through iteration, MS-07H, then the H-2, the H-4, and finally the H-8, the engineers pressed on. And at last they had a machine that could fly under its own power. The MS-07H-8: the Gouf Flight Type.

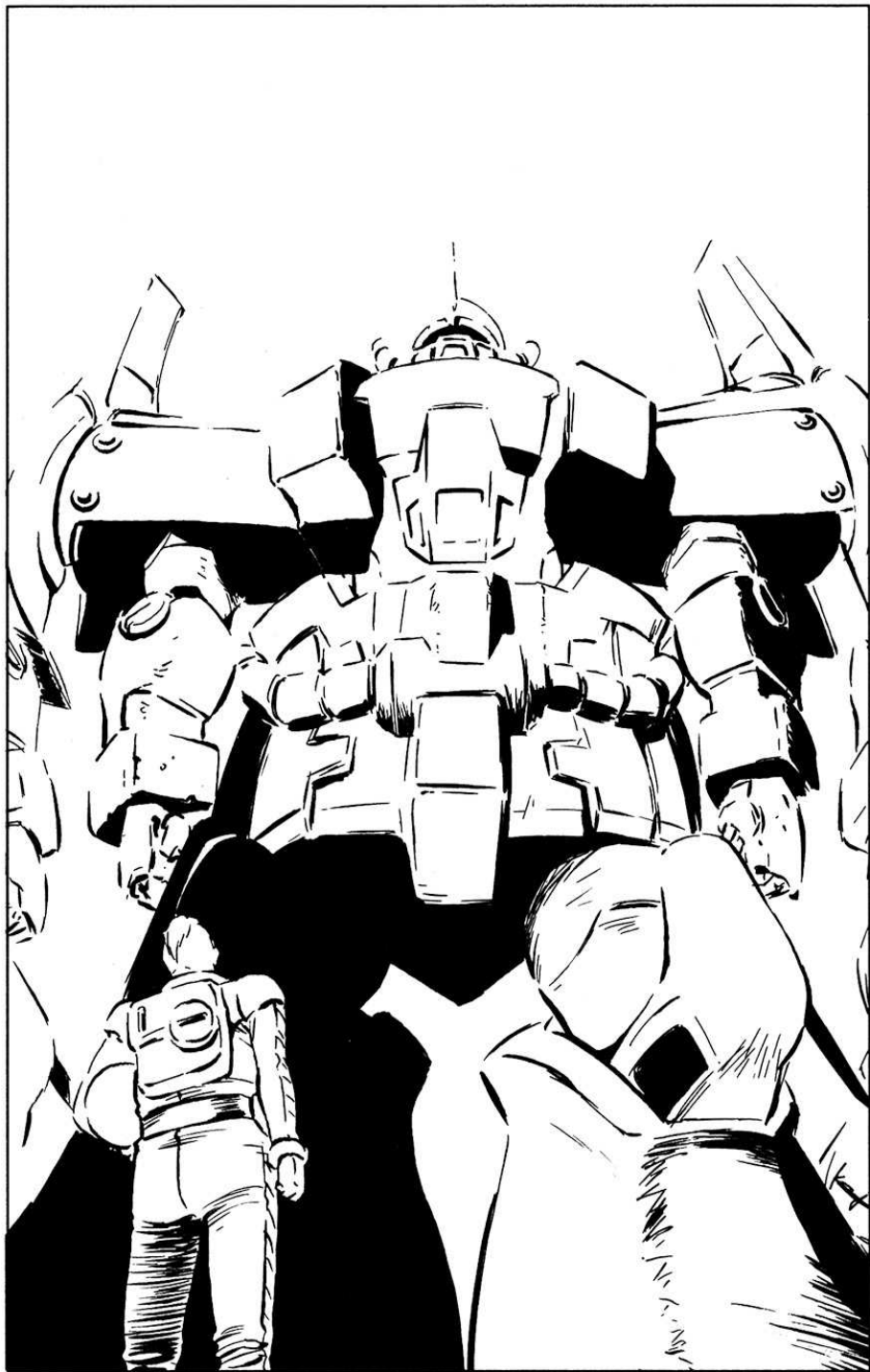
This was the “trump card” Norris spoke of.

To advance along the ground meant being stopped by the Federation’s defenses layered ten deep. To come in from the air meant running the gauntlet of their fighters and the bristling hedgehog of their anti-air batteries.

But...

“Hold formation. Full speed. Make for the dry canyon ahead.”

The three Flight Types, piloted by Norris, Hans, and Walter, punched through the Federation’s lines, driving toward the canyon.



For tanks or artillery, the sheer cliffs were impassable. Aircraft would struggle in the narrow space, perhaps only helicopters daring to enter, and only with great skill.

But the Gouf could.

"Captain, we've done it! Once we reach the canyon, nothing can touch us!"

Hans's voice came through, breathless with exhilaration.

Within the canyon walls the Goufs could fly, weaving where no other weapon could follow. Once inside, the Federation would be powerless against them. Bombers were too slow to catch them. Ground fire would only skim uselessly over the ridgeline. The canyon was a natural tunnel, perfect cover for the Flight Types.

And at the end of that tunnel lay the Federation command post: the Big Tray.

"Listen well. The target is their commander. Cut off the head and the whole beast dies. That will buy us a week, enough time to see the Kerguelen safely away."

Norris repeated the mission once more.

In the bureaucratic machine that was the Federation, the loss of a commander meant paralysis. Better to hold still than risk error. It could take a week or more for the next officer to be installed, appointments greased by bribes and strangled in rivalries. One kill could buy them the time they needed.

"Captain Norris, we're counting on you."

"Captain, we'll guard you with our lives."

"Just as you taught us, sir, I won't fail."

As the three Goufs surged ahead, voices poured in from the comrades who had torn open the way for them. Magella Bases without turrets. Cui carriers stalled in the mud. An old Zaku missing its head, still spraying fire.

All fighting, all sacrificing, to clear a path for the Goufs.

Just a little farther. Just a little more.

Their unspoken prayers reached Norris without need of radios. He could feel them as if whispered straight into his heart.

He saw Lieutenant Lyle Bettger's Zaku go down, torn apart before his eyes.

"Forgive me, Lyle..."

The man had plastered his cockpit with photos of his wife and children, proof of his devotion to them.

And it was not only Lyle. Every man here had family back in Side 3. Each of them decent, honorable, good-hearted. And each of them had joined this operation knowing there was no return.

"Forgive me... all of you."

How many times had Norris apologized to them already, even before the mission began? He had asked them to lay down their lives so that others might live. And not one had hesitated. Every one of them had chosen to fight, though surely each longed to go home.

"Captain, the canyon ahead!"

Hans's cry snapped him back.

They had broken through.

The gaping maw of the dry canyon yawned before Norris. And beyond it, the Big Tray.

"Hans, Walter, into the canyon. Now!"

Norris's hand closed over the paper medal tucked in his breast pocket as he spoke.

And without slowing, the three Goufs plunged into the canyon's shadow.

Chapter.03

Deadly Struggle

“Did you just say mobile suits?!”

On the bridge of the Big Tray, Major General Ethan, commander of the Far Eastern Army, had been sitting in ease until the report came in. His brow knotted, and at that expression the communications officer faltered, voice tightening as he forced himself to continue.

“Yes, sir. Three Zeon mobile suits are said to be advancing this way.”

“What the hell has the front line been doing? Where are Jacobs and Canter?”

Between the frontlines and the Big Tray lay layer after layer of defensive formations, regiments strung across not only the forward line but the flanks as well. By any reasonable measure, no enemy strike force should ever break through to this fortress on treads. After all, the cornerstone of Far Eastern Army operations was always the same: safeguard headquarters first, then build everything else around it.

“The enemy suits have broken through Lieutenant Jacobs’ line, sir. They’re moving straight toward us through the dry valley.”

“The dry valley?”

Ethan swiveled his chair, eyes snapping to the tactical display projected across the rear wall. The map was unmistakable: a natural trench cut straight from the rear of Jacobs’ position all the way up near the Big Tray itself.

And yet...

“You expect me to believe they’re marching along the bottom of the ravine? Then we’d simply pick them off as they tried to climb—”

“That’s just it, sir. Reports say these mobile suits... they’re flying.”

Even the comms officer’s face was a mask of doubt, as if he couldn’t quite believe the words leaving his mouth.

A mobile suit that could fly. Engineers may have sketched such theories on drawing boards, but to the rank and file it was no more than a fantasy. Only recently had the Federation even come to terms with giant iron men fighting wars at all, until then, the very notion had been laughed off as a joke.

“What’s your assessment, Chief of Staff?” Ethan turned toward the man at his side, Peter Camlin.

“In Europe, sir, there have been sightings of suits transported by bombers. But aircraft would never survive that narrow ravine. I suggest we verify with the front once more, and forward this to Technical Development—”

His cautious answer was drowned by the comms officer’s next outburst.

“They’re here! Visual confirmation, three mobile suits!”

“They’re flying, sir. They really are flying!”

"Lieutenant Clark is requesting immediate deployment of the air corps. Your orders?"

The bridge, which had never tasted the chaos of live combat, instantly dissolved into bedlam.

Most of the men assigned to the Big Tray had never seen real fighting. They were the ones who had dodged the frontlines with connections or bribes, soldiers of the lowest caliber.

So when battle arrived at last, panic spread like fire through the fortress. Even here, at the very nerve center, the bridge, it was no different.

Staff officers, Camlin foremost among them, shrieked contradictory orders. Comms officers bellowed unverified reports. From the front came nothing but pleas for reinforcement that the command could never possibly satisfy. In all this uproar, headquarters had ceased to function.

And through it all, Ethan remained seated, unnervingly calm.

"Three," he murmured. "Just three."

Then, with deliberate slowness, he rose from his chair.



"Level one battle stations! Level one battle stations! This is not a drill, repeat, this is not a drill! All combat-capable personnel to your posts immediately, this is not a drill!"

The shrill, unceasing blare of the shipwide broadcast echoed through the Big Tray.

To hear such words on the eve of battle was one thing. To hear this is not a drill in the midst of real combat was absurd.

"As if anyone could mistake this for training..."

Michel ran, despair pressing down on his chest like a stone.

He had no idea of the enemy's true strength, but judging by the pandemonium in the ship, there was no chance of victory.

"Report to battle stations, they say... but where?"

With their commander Shiro under arrest, the O8th MS Team was paralyzed. Kojima Battalion was already committed to the front; no one remained to issue orders in Shiro's place. Under such conditions, what post could they possibly man?

As he sprinted, enduring the piercing whine of the broadcast, Michel finally felt what the Federation's string of defeats to Zeon really meant.

But he had no luxury to reflect.

If he wanted to see BB again, he could not afford to die here. At the very least, he refused to die without fighting back, without struggling to the bitter end.

With that desperate resolve, Michel pushed himself harder. His destination, the brig, where Shiro was locked away. However dire the situation, Shiro would find a way, Michel was sure of it.

For whatever else Shiro was, he was their commander. Even imprisoned, he was the only leader the 08th could recognize. Dying on Jaburo's orders was out of the question.

Michel barreled down a staircase, then tore along a wide corridor. At the end he had only to turn right, the brig was just there.

"C'mon, open up already! I told you, it's an emergency!"

He froze. That voice from around the corner, familiar, unmistakable.

"Quit stalling and turn the key. It's not that hard!"

"I told you, I need authorization from above—"

"Use your head, dammit! Look around you, does it sound like command is in any state to give permission? Even the broadcast says it, 'Any man who can fight, to battle stations!'"

Eledore.

Sure enough, Michel found him squaring off against the guard at the brig doors, insisting Shiro be released.

"Eledore!"

"Hey, Michel! Back me up here, will ya? This blockhead refuses to budge!"

The guard's face darkened at the insult.

"A soldier's foremost duty is obedience to regulations."

"And fighting the enemy isn't?" Eledore shot back.

"I did not enlist to fight. The observance of military law, that is our highest calling."

At that, Eledore ripped off his bandanna and slammed it to the deck.

"It's bastards like you that—!"

"Enough, Eledore."

A steady voice cut him short as he grabbed the guard's collar. It was Karen. She wedged herself between them, holding him back.

"You'll win nothing by shouting."

And then, behind Michel, a rumble.

"There's a right way to make a request like this."

Sanders.

The whole 08th Team had come.

"So it isn't just me..."

Seeing Karen and Sanders there, Michel's heart swelled. He wasn't alone. They had all gathered here, for their captain.

The 08th was still alive. He was still one of them. And they would fight together.

Sanders stepped toward the guard, slow and deliberate.

The man recoiled instinctively, Sanders was larger than Eledore, with a face far more intimidating.

But just as he reached him, Sanders smiled.

The guard, too, allowed himself a nervous smile of relief.

A fatal mistake.

Sanders' fist cracked across his jaw, sending him sprawling against the wall and down to the floor.

Shaking his hand once, Sanders glanced back over his shoulder with a wolfish grin.

“That’s how you ask nicely.”



The dry valley spat them out into open ground, and directly ahead lay the Federation’s defenses.

Not trenches, barbed wire, or fortifications in the classical sense, only concentric rings of troops arrayed around the Big Tray like ripples around a stone.

The instant the three flight-type Goufs surged out of the gorge, the Federation soldiers opened fire in unison. Forewarned from the front, they had been waiting.

And yet...

“Sloppy fire...”

From the first volley, Norris had their measure.

The Federation’s shots were nothing but wild bursts, scattered and frantic. Not suppressive fire with intent, but the blind flailing of men too unskilled to aim. Their marksmanship was poor.

Worse still, the commands behind those volleys were incoherent. Some seemed to shoot to ward them off, others to bring them down, but all without coordination. It was chaos born from muddled leadership.

“They’ve got numbers, but at this level... we’ll break through easily.”

His certainty hardened. In a force so raw, numbers worked against them. Information crossed and tangled. Situational awareness vanished. No one stood firm, for no one trusted the man beside him to hold the line. Three layers of defense or thirty, such troops would never stop them.

“Our target is the Big Tray,” Norris barked. “Don’t waste time with the rabble.”

From behind him came the crisp, immediate replies.

“Understood, Captain!”

“We’ll punch straight through their bridge!”

The three Goufs swept low across the ground, skimming like blades of steel against the earth.

The Federation’s storm of gunfire found nothing. Not a single shot struck home.



“No.”

The single word rasped out of Shiro as if torn from his throat.

Around him stood Karen, Sanders, Eledore, and Michel, every member of the 08th Team gathered together.

The brig's door now hung open. Michel had stolen the key from the guard and forced it himself.

But Shiro refused to leave. He sat with his knees drawn tight to his chest, eyes fixed on the wall, unwilling to move.

"Commander... isn't it time you let this go?" Sanders ventured cautiously.

"What happened at Baruk Village was beyond your control. No commander could have arrived faster than we did."

"The truth is, the villagers never meant to blame you," Karen added, siding with Sanders.

"They only needed somewhere to direct their anger for losing friends and kin, and we happened to be the ones who arrived. Give it time, eventually, they'll understand."

Their words burned with earnestness. But Shiro gave no reply.

Karen glanced at Sanders, what do we do? If Shiro would not move, should they sortie without him?

Sanders turned toward Eledore and Michel, silently asking for their thoughts. Both only shifted their eyes, uneasy and evasive.

None of them wanted to fight without their commander.

The silence was shattered by a voice not their own.

"Still the same as ever, eh, Newbie?"

The man who stepped into the brig with a teasing grin was Lieutenant Jidan Nickard. An old rogue who had once dealt narcotics with Baruk Village, but who had also, in his own crooked way, helped Shiro.

He should have been at the front, overseeing Kojima Battalion's supply lines. And yet here he was.

"Old man, what are you doing here?"

"Been a while, Eledore. Still no girlfriend, eh?" Jidan cackled, a high, rickety laugh.

"I only came to fetch supplies. Luck's a fickle thing, of all the places to get caught, it had to be here!"

"How many enemy suits are there?" Michel asked, unable to mask his worry.

"Only three mobile suits," Jidan admitted. "But not a soul in this rabble can bring them down. The difference in skill is night and day."

"That can't be. Just three, surely—"

"Mob rule," Jidan cut him off. "Zeon struck and the whole lot fell to pieces. They've no idea where the enemy is, so they fire blindly at shadows. They'll never bring down those flying suits."

At the words flying mobile suits, the room fell silent.

But the truth was, they had seen it already. The Apsaras had flown. It was hardly unthinkable that Zeon had found a way to make Goufs fly as well.

"Zeon's target seems to be this Big Tray," Jidan went on. "Most likely they mean to snuff out the commander. Which brings me to you, Newbie..."

He strode past the others, halting just at Shiro's side.

"Listen. If your O8th Team fights, you could hold those bastards off. That way, this Big Tray won't get blown to bits by them."

Jidan bent at the waist, peering into Shiro's stony profile.

But Shiro did not so much as twitch. He stared at the wall as though the old man were made of air.

"Ah, so this is how seventy-two years of my life end." Jidan sighed theatrically.

"Well... seventy-two. Perhaps I've lived enough. Still, there's plenty left I'd have liked to do. But compared to these youngsters, I've already had my share. You there, how long have you lived?"

He swung abruptly toward Michel.

"E-eighteen years."

"Hyah-hyah-hyah! Pitiful. Just a quarter of mine! Tell me, are you even a man yet? What a waste."

"I, I'm not..." Michel stammered.

"Well, no matter. If your commander refuses to fight, then the Big Tray's finished. Big as she looks, she's got no speed. Against flying suits, she won't escape."

At those words, Shiro's arms tightened around his knees.

"He's provoking me..."

"He's trying to make me angry on purpose..."

"But I won't take the bait. I won't fight anymore."

"I won't go to war."

"Never again."

Then Jidan's face slipped suddenly into view, filling Shiro's vision, his eyes gleaming like knives.

The pressure in them made Shiro flinch. This was not the old man's usual levity.

"You," Jidan began, voice low and deliberate, "You're going to let this war kill the ones dearest to you all over again."

Shiro remained silent, stunned.

"If you fight, they might live. But if you don't..." Jidan let the words hang.

Shiro's breath caught. His chest convulsed, heart pounding until it hurt.

And then, Kiki's face. Laughing, mischievous, vivid in his mind.

Not just Kiki. Mati's face. Lily's. Even Baresto's. One after another, the ones he had lost.

Precious faces. Precious lives.

Gone.

When had he started crying? He thought his tears had long since run dry.

"Commander..." Karen's voice reached him, gentle.

He looked up. His comrades were all there.

Karen's eyes softened with compassion.

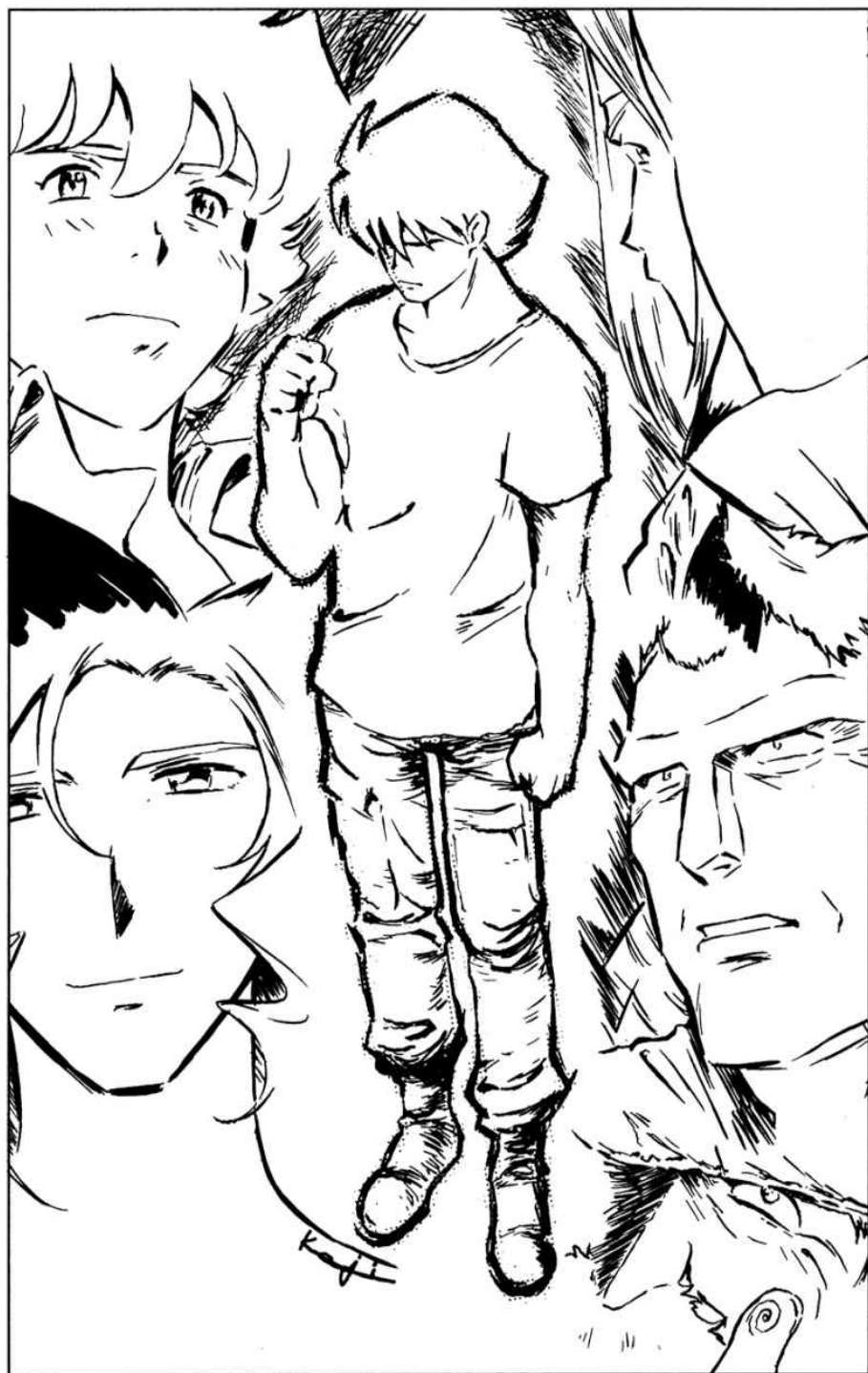
Sanders, usually expressionless, looked worried.

Eledore glanced aside, lips pursed, embarrassed, not knowing how to wear his concern.

Michel's eyes brimmed with tears, mirroring Shiro's own.

Karen, Sanders, Eledore, Michel, his comrades. His family.

And they might die.



The thought wracked him. His body trembled.
War would rip away his loved ones again. The pain crushed his heart.
“Commander.”
“Commander.”
Their voices called him back.
“/... /...”
Shiro’s fists clenched tight. So tight his nails bit deep into his palms.



“I cannot afford to lose.”
Inside the cockpit of his Gouf Flight Type, Ensign Difflipp muttered the words to himself like a prayer.
He could not afford to lose.
Because this was not a squabble over vested interests, it was a war for the independence of the Spacenoids. At least, Hans believed with all his heart that was what this war was about.
No, he did not think the poison gas attacks were right. But with Zeon’s limited resources, how else could they ever hope to overcome the Earth Federation? Without such ruthless measures, Spacenoids would remain forever shackled, bled dry by Earth’s elites.
And besides, he wanted to live up to the Captain’s expectations. Out of all the veterans, all the men with higher ranks and longer service, the Captain had chosen him to pilot a Gouf. He had to prove worthy of that trust.
“I will see this mission through. I owe it to the veterans who trained me, who tempered me with both harshness and warmth when I was still green.”
Faces of those mentors rose before his eyes, and Hans tightened his grip on the controls.
“That’s why, I cannot lose. Not against this rotten Federation.”
Already, they had broken through two of the three lines encircling the Big Tray. Only one remained, the Federation’s final defensive line.
Hans’ Gouf strafed left, gatling guns roaring, while the thermonuclear jet engines in its legs lifted the massive frame meters above the ground, skimming it like a predator over the earth.
The Federation’s fire was laughably inaccurate.
They shot from a distance only, unwilling to stand and block his path. Wherever the Gouf swept forward, the enemy scattered like the ebbing tide. Hans found himself wondering if that lumbering land battleship ahead, surely that had to be their command center. Why else would their troops retreat so spinelessly?
“Pathetic cowards. Are they so terrified of death?”
Deliberately, he drove straight through the enemy’s midst. Yes, there was a chance a stray round might hit him, but he knew they’d hold their fire for fear of striking their own.

A GM lurched forward, beam saber drawn with obvious reluctance. Hans smashed it aside with a body-check, toppling it like paper.

So fragile.

Even Zeon's rookies had more grit than this.

And yet, perhaps he should be grateful for such weakness. Because of these craven troops, three mobile suits alone were about to break into the enemy's very nerve center.

"Just a little further... a little further, and I'll climb that Big Tray's hull and drive my heat saber into its bridge!"

The great land battleship was beginning to retreat, but it was too late. From Hans' perspective in the Gouf, its lumbering withdrawal was glacial, almost comical.

Then suddenly, the field opened wide.

Nothing stood between him and the Big Tray. The last line of defense had fallen.

No, there were two.

From the belly of the Big Tray emerged a pair of mobile suits.

Gundam-types. Their chests bore a painted number: 08.

"08?"

Something tugged at Hans' memory, but he dismissed it. Whatever they were, they were still Federation. Brave, perhaps, to stand in his way, but nothing more.

"This ends here!"

Hans slammed his foot down on the pedal and surged forward.



"What the hell?"

Sanders was struck dumb for an instant.

The thing before him wasn't leaping, it was flying. A mobile suit, soaring under its own power. Jidan's words had been no bluff after all.

But Sanders mastered his shock almost immediately. It was only three suits. To overreact would be to hand them the advantage.

"I need a sit-rep..."

He swept his eyes across their allies. And fury seared through him.

Federation suits were firing wildly from afar, with no aim worth the name, not under Minovsky interference. The whole point of mobile suits was their close combat ability, and yet not one dared to close.

Not only the suits, tanks, infantry, even aircraft all stayed at range, taking potshots, half-hearted, terrified. The sight that enraged Sanders most of all, command suits and control tanks covering in the far rear, issuing orders from safety. What soldier would ever follow such leadership?

The Zeon machines showed no hesitation, no slackening of speed. One of them, Hans', came barreling straight for him.

"I'm not like the others," Sanders growled.

He planted his feet, bracing the long 180mm cannon. He did not fire yet. Closer. Let it come closer.

The enemy raised its heat saber high.

It entered striking distance. Any second now.

“Not today!”

Sanders pulled the trigger, unleashing the shot at point-blank range.



“Hans!”

Norris couldn't stop himself from shouting as he saw Hans' Gouf take a hit.

He swept the offending mobile suit with suppressive fire from his gatling gun, forcing it back as he closed in on his downed comrade. At the same time, Walter's unit swung around to cover them, without a word of instruction. The coordination was flawless, instinctive.

“You all right, Hans?”

Norris caught the fallen Gouf's arm and hauled it upright.

One leg was gone. With the flight-type's thermonuclear jet engines built directly into the legs, the risk of detonation was high. That the suit still stood at all was a miracle.

“I'll manage. I'm sorry, Captain.”

“Can you still fly?”

The flight-type's lift depended not only on the leg engines, but also on the backpack and waist thrusters. With just one leg lost, flight should still be possible.

“No, sir. I'll stay here and cover you. Go on ahead without me.”

“Hans...”

Remaining behind meant painting himself as a target. With his mobility crippled, evasive maneuvers were impossible. To “cover” was, in truth, to die.

But Norris could not forbid it.

Every step they'd taken to reach this point had been paid for with comrades' lives. To single out Hans for mercy would dishonor both the fallen and Hans himself, who had thrown his life into this mission with the rest of them.

“Very well, Hans.”

It was the right choice. Once, Hans would have insisted on striking the Big Tray himself. Now, he had chosen the course with the greatest chance of success.

“Well said, Hans. You've become a soldier in full.”

Hans was the newest among them, but his gift for piloting was undeniable. Flying suits demanded not experience but talent and adaptability, that was why Norris had handpicked Hans for this role.

He was proud to have brought him this far. And guilty, too. To reach manhood as a soldier only to meet death here...

"Go, Captain!" Hans shouted, voice fierce.

There was no time to linger. This operation was speed incarnate, words Norris himself had used in the briefing.

"Very well. I'm counting on you, Hans."

"Yes, sir! Leave it to me!"

Those were the last words Norris ever heard from Hans.



"Looks like... a Gouf," Michel muttered, eyes wide as the flying suit darted overhead.

"Where the hell do you see a Gouf in that? It's completely different!" Eledore snapped, raising his voice over the thunder of Michel's 20mm Vulcan.

"The engine noise is nothing like it. I've never heard anything like this before."

"No! The head design, the pipe arrangement, the cockpit config, there's no mistake, it is a Gouf!" Michel barked back, fingers still working the Bloodhound's Vulcan controls.

"They probably modified it extensively to make it fly. Engines would've been the first thing they overhauled."

"Doesn't matter what it is!" Karen cut them both off, her shout cracking like a whip.

"Keep your heads on straight. The next one's coming!"



"So there are capable ones after all..."

Sergeant Walter Kohler narrowed his eyes at the two Federation suits that blocked his path.

He raked them with his gatling gun, but they split instantly, scattering with practiced precision.

Quick. Skilled. Dangerous.

Why had such a capable team been left here of all places? Perhaps the Federation commander had hoarded his aces for personal protection.

"Ridiculous. Such a waste of resources..." Walter muttered.

Then again, if it was the Federation, it made perfect sense. Of course they'd squander talent.

"Captain, Hans and I will pin down these two. Use the opening to break through!"

"Understood. The Big Tray is mine."

Norris' Gouf slipped into Walter's shadow.

"Not all of us need to make it through. If even one does, if the Captain does, the mission is won."

Walter drew his heat saber, charging forward without slackening speed.

The enemy reacted instantly, tossing aside its firearm and drawing a beam saber. It met his downward stroke head-on, sparks shearing between the blades.

"Now, Captain!"

But even as Walter cried out, Norris was already airborne.

The Gouf vaulted clear over his head in a magnificent arc.

"As expected of the Captain..."

Above, Norris' machine dipped in salute, to him.

Walter knew it, felt it. A salute not from commander to subordinate, but the other way around, from leader to soldier.

For a heartbeat, Walter's chest swelled with pride. Then he threw himself back into the fight, smashing his heat saber against the enemy's guard.

He would not let them pursue. The Captain would reach the Big Tray's bridge. He would tear down that relic of a land warship in close combat.

Walter was certain of victory.



"Damn it!"

Karen's eyes snapped upward, panic rising as the Gouf vaulted over her. Behind her, looming close, was the Big Tray.

"Sanders?"

She swung her gaze toward him with desperate hope. But Sanders' unit was already locked blade-to-blade with another Gouf, heat saber against beam saber. He couldn't break off to give chase.

And neither could she.

"Too strong..."

The Gouf before her pressed the attack with terrifying skill, every strike showing hard-won familiarity with mobile suit close combat. At least it wasn't equipped with that cursed heat rod, but...

"What do I do? How?"

Clashing saber against saber, Karen fought to hold her ground, her thoughts spiraling.

She couldn't move. Sanders couldn't move. Which meant...

"Where's the Commander?!" she cried.



The Big Tray, the massive land battleship of the Earth Federation, flagship and fortress, bristling with triple-barreled mega particle cannons, a relic of big-gun doctrine reborn for land warfare. But though it looked the part of an armored colossus, it had never been meant to fight on the frontlines. Its anti-air defenses were thin, its close-range counters nearly nonexistent.

And now, it filled Norris' vision.

The Far Eastern Army's commander had to be aboard. The bridge rose high above the hull, but with his flight-type Gouf, Norris could leap straight onto the forward deck.

The Big Tray's main batteries spat fire, mega particle beams scorching the air.

But they would never touch him.

Norris weaved past the blasts, then vaulted high, heat saber flashing into his grip.

"Victory is mine!"

He arced toward the bridge, blade poised to plunge, and found a mobile suit standing in his path.

Not one he recognized. But it was Gundam-type.

Its beam saber ignited.

Too late to stop. Too late to veer away.

Norris roared, bringing his heat saber down.



The strike never landed.

Shiro Amada's customized Gundam, the Ez-8, caught the descending blade in a shower of sparks.

He had made it by a hair's breadth. A moment slower wresting the Ez-8 from the stubborn mechanics, and the Big Tray would already be a burning carcass.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Shiro grunted, locking swords.

"Took your time, Commander."

"Careful, this one's a veteran," Sanders warned through the comm.

"Looks like a modified Gouf," Michel cut in.

"But it's not carrying the heat rod," Eledore added. "That's your edge, Commander."

The voices of his comrades crackled back, fast and sharp, yet tinged with something like exhilaration. Even here, in the crucible of combat, they sounded alive.

"Understood. Leave him to me."

Shiro forced back against the Gouf's weight.

The clash blazed, heat saber against beam saber, molten plasma shrieking as power slammed into power.

The Ez-8 held the greater raw strength. But the Gouf had the advantage of position, pressing down from above, forcing Shiro's suit back, inch by inch.

Could he disengage?

No. If he gave ground, the Big Tray's bridge would lie defenseless. He had to hold, had to drive the enemy back here.

"Federation pilot, can you hear me?"

The voice was new, unfamiliar. Close-range comms, the Gouf's pilot himself.

"My name is Captain Norris Packard. And yours?"

"Sh-Shiro Amada."

He did not give rank. He still recoiled from naming himself a soldier.

"Tell me," Norris' voice came again, steady, almost grave. "Do you know a woman named Aina Sahalin?"

"Aina?!"

Of course he did. Even now, in the Ez-8's cockpit, the elegant pocket watch she had given him swayed gently with every jolt.

"How do you know that name?" Shiro gasped.

"So it is you. The one with her in the snow..."

The snow.

In an instant, it all came flooding back.

Aina's face.

Her voice.

Her warmth.

"You heard from her," Shiro breathed.

It was obvious, of course. That Zeon soldiers would know Aina, Aina was Zeon. It was far stranger that Shiro, a Federation pilot, had come to know her at all.

"She lives," Norris said, "and she worried for you."

"Aina... worried for me?"

"On that mountain, she asked it of me. To spare the Federation pilot. To leave your machine intact, so you could return alive."

Heat surged back into Shiro's veins.

Since returning from the snow, he had felt it always, that fever, that fire. It had driven him ceaselessly, until Baruk Village. Until grief had blotted out everything, even Aina's memory.

"But that's not it. That's not the end. I still have people I must protect. People I cannot lose. Jidan reminded me, my comrades of the 08th. My friends back home. And yes... Aina most of all. If I lose her too... I'll never forgive myself. God, what a fool I've been. Sulking in a cell, wasting myself... that's not me. I could never accept that man as myself."

Shiro stamped the pedal, the Ez-8's frame thrumming with power. His voice erupted like a battle cry.

"Where is Aina?!"



"Where is Aina?!"

The enemy pilot, Shiro Amada, his cry rang in Norris' ears.

Norris pressed his heat saber harder against the Gundam's beam blade, driving forward inch by inch. Victory lay just beyond this clash. If he could break through here, the mission was won.

And yet... he did not stop speaking.

"What will you do, if you know?"

"I'll take Aina back. I'll find her again."

At those words, Norris' mouth curved into a faint smile.

"So young. So unyielding. Is this the man who changed Miss Aina? I believe it. I never could have been this reckless, this pure. But this boy's sheer, stubborn honesty... perhaps that's what opened the heart she had long kept closed."

Norris' hand brushed the small medal of folded paper tucked in his uniform, a child's craft, an origami decoration Aina had once given him.

Back then, Norris had been an empty husk. He had left the army, lost his wife, drifted until Aina's father offered him a place.

And it had been little Aina who soothed his hollowed heart.

The origami medal, his treasure, his talisman, had been hers.

"Thank you, Shiro Amada. But a battle is a battle. I too have something I must protect."

He drove the heat saber harder.

But alarms flared across his monitor. Bitter truth, the Federation's beam saber outclassed Zeon's heat blade. If he continued, his own weapon would give way first.

"Then I'll finish this... before that happens!"

Resolve hardened. Norris made his choice.



The Gouf sprang back in a sudden leap.

Deprived of its pressure, Shiro's Ez-8 stumbled forward, off-balance.

"Damn!"

He caught himself on his left foot, snapping his eyes upward, just as the Gouf lunged.

No time. Could he meet it?

With every ounce of strength, Shiro swung his beam saber up from low to high, a blazing arc.

The stroke connected.

The blade carved into the Gouf's torso, molten light devouring armor, cleaving the machine apart.

"Victory is mine!"

The Ez-8's saber burned through, slicing the Gouf in two.

At that same instant, as his mobile suit split from the waist, Norris roared, "Victory is mine!"

His mouth twisted into a grin.

The ruined Gouf arched back, and in that motion, Norris hurled his heat saber like a spear.

It flew straight, unerring, aimed directly at the Big Tray's bridge.

And as he cast it, his hand went once more to the origami medal resting against his chest.

The precious charm Aina had once given him.

Her greatest gift.

His final protection.



“Oh, shit!”

Only then did Shiro grasp the enemy’s true aim.

From the very beginning, the target had been the Big Tray. That was why the Gouf had hurled itself forward, heedless of being cut down.

But by the time Shiro realized it, it was too late.

The Big Tray’s bridge was already skewered, a heat saber driven deep into its heart.

“Shiro Amada...”

The enemy pilot’s voice reached him through the comm.

“About Miss Aina...”

But the words never finished. They were drowned out by the thunder of the explosion.

The bisected Gouf erupted in flames.

The blast hurled the Ez-8 aside, tossing it down beneath the Big Tray like a broken toy. Shiro couldn’t even manage a controlled landing, he had been completely spent.

“I’ve lost...”

Inside the cockpit, he stared blankly upward at the sky.

“Utter defeat.”

On paper, the Ez-8 had the superior combat capability. The circumstances had favored him. And yet the enemy had achieved his objective. Shiro lived, and the other man died, but victory had belonged to him.

Shiro found himself thinking of the pilot he had never met. What kind of man had he been? Surely a noble warrior. He hadn’t wanted to kill him. In another world, outside of war, they might have spoken as friends, through Aina.

“About Miss Aina...”

The man’s unfinished words still echoed in his ears.

What had he wanted to say? What had he wished for Shiro to do?

The answer was lost forever. Above, only smoke and scattered wreckage remained.

“All he could do was fight to the end... but now I see clearly. I’ll go to Aina. I’ll find her, and save her. No more killing. Not one more of the people I love will be taken from me. Kiki, the villagers, the comrades beside me now, they all fought for that. How could I be the only one to run from it?”

Shiro clenched his resolve.

He would fight again. Fight to bring Aina back.

And fight to protect the ones he loved.

“Excellent work, Ensign Amada, and the 08th Team as well.”



The sudden transmission jarred him.

"Who's that? Sounds full of himself..."

"I am Major General Ethan, commander of the Far Eastern Army."

The voice named itself.

Impossible.

Shiro's gaze shot to the Big Tray's bridge. It was shattered. And yet...

"I am no fool to linger on the bridge," Ethan explained, as if reading his silence. "The moment the first reports reached me, I had already withdrawn to the rear."

"Withdrew? While his soldiers fought and died, without even issuing orders, he fled?"

A black tide of disgust rose in Shiro's chest.

And he pitied the enemy pilot all the more. That man had given his life, for this. For a commander who scurried away while others bled.

"In light of today's achievement, I shall rescind your confinement. Be grateful. Normally, striking a superior is a grave crime. Consider this your reprieve."

Shiro listened to the pompous voice, numbed. He couldn't even summon anger. Only bitterness.



"Have you seen Captain Norris?"

It was Aina who spoke, approaching Lieutenant Colonel Falkenberg. She wore the garb of a medic now, the role long since second nature.

"Do you... have business with the Captain?" Falkenberg asked, blinking in surprise.

No wonder. It was the first time Aina herself had addressed him.

Until now, she had been mocked as "the faceless doll," speaking only to her brother and to Norris. Though Falkenberg had served at Norris' side for more than half a year, she had hardly ever exchanged words with him.

But that wasn't the only reason for his unease.

"If it's a message, I can deliver it."

"No, nothing urgent. Only... I haven't seen him lately."

Aina lied. It was true she hadn't seen Norris. But the reason she searched for him was different.

Moments ago, when she had gone to the storeroom for blood supplies, she had felt him call to her.

Not a voice. Not sound. Something else. Like... telepathy.

"They say this 'Newtype' race can do such things..."

She looked around once more. No one. It must have been her imagination. Surely just exhaustion.

And yet the unease lingered. A shadow she could not shake.

So when she encountered Falkenberg, the words had slipped out before she thought. If anyone knew where Norris was, it would be his adjutant.

"The Federation's attacks have grown harsher by the day. The Captain is very busy," Falkenberg replied with a gentle smile. At over fifty, his smile was mild, fatherly.

"Yes... I'm overthinking it..."

Norris was here. He was simply too busy to appear. That was all. Coincidence, nothing more.

She forced the foreboding from her mind.

"Then please tell him this: when he has a moment, I'd like to share tea together."

"I'll deliver your message, without fail," Falkenberg said with a salute.

To Aina, his voice sounded like it trembled with tears.

But of course, that had to be her imagination as well.

Chapter.04

The Fatal Shot

Under Major General Ethan's command, the Far Eastern Army steadily drove Zeon's remaining forces into retreat.

There were setbacks, tactical losses here and there, but sheer numbers smothered them. No matter how hard a single Zeon unit fought, victory elsewhere by the Federation would nullify their efforts. Even units that won had little choice but to fall back, lest their retreat be cut off.

"It was like trying to hold back the tide with bare hands," Sergeant Dee Pollack of Zeon later lamented of that withdrawal battle.

And yet, to call it a strategic defeat for Zeon was unfair. The disparity was simply too vast. By this point, even in mobile suits alone, the Federation outnumbered Zeon five to one; counting conventional forces, the ratio swelled to more than ten to one. That the Zeon remnants could even maintain an organized retreat under such odds was, in its way, praiseworthy.

But reality was merciless.

The Federation owned the skies. The location of Zeon's Lhasa Base had been pinpointed. Now the advancing army was only half a day's march away.

Zeon's retreating troops had no resupply. They scrounged, patched together weapons barely fit for use. Meanwhile, the Federation, even as it advanced, was fed by a constant stream of reinforcements from the rear.

For men like Jidan Nickard, in charge of supply, it meant ceaseless labor. Three full resupply runs a day, each one massive.

"Damn it all, suddenly they're working me to the bone," he grumbled, knocking back a small bottle of whisky with a practiced flick. Even in such times, Jidan would never forgo his drink.

"At Kojima Base I was practically left to rot, too much time on my hands. But shit, now that the war's swinging our way, those big shots in Jaburo turn awfully demanding, eh?"

"Then?" Shiro pressed, impatience breaking through. "What about it? Were you able to find what I asked for?"

"You're as bad as those brass hats," Jidan shot back, eyes twinkling. "Do you really think, in the middle of this advance, in this chaos, I can just conjure up something like that?"

Shiro faltered.

"I... know it's asking the impossible."

It was true, he knew it was a selfish request. But he had no other plan. If there was even a chance, he had to pin his hopes on Jidan.

"Listen, Newbie," Jidan said, mischief lighting his expression. "When you asked me, I said I wouldn't pry. But tell me now, why? Why've you decided to fight again? You hate the army, don't you? I heard you even threw away those Captain Joe videos."

"I didn't throw them away. I buried them."

Shiro's correction was firm.

The first thing he had done after being freed from the brig, his reward for destroying three Goufs, was to lay those discs in the ground.

He had long told himself Captain Joe was just fantasy. That it was only an ideal, far removed from the harsher truth of real war.

But he'd realized he was wrong.

Captain Joe had not been an ideal at all. Once the "enemy" had been renamed the "Principality of Zeon," the show had turned into nothing more than propaganda, an empty call to arms. It had been a well-crafted drama, yes, and Shiro had no wish to disparage the skill of those who made it. But the boy who had once watched, eyes shining, thinking it all so glorious... he hated that boy. That boy had let himself be swept up, had become a soldier because of it. And for that, Shiro pitied him.

Burying the discs was his way of severing ties, with anger, with regret, but also with respect. A funeral for his old self.

"A funeral, eh? You're young, but you talk like an old man," Jidan chuckled, downing the last of his whisky.

"But enough of that. Answer me. Why the hell are you back in the cockpit? Money? Glory? A woman?"

Shiro lowered his head, fists clenching. "I... want to save Aina."

"A woman, then."

"You disapprove?"

"Disapprove? Hell no. That's as good a reason as any man ever had," Jidan said with sudden gravity. His sincerity caught Shiro off guard, he had braced for ridicule.

"Well then..." Jidan stood abruptly.

"Been a good talk, but I've got rookies to look after. Toss this for me, will you?" He lobbed the empty bottle to Shiro, then turned away.

And as he strode off, he added in a low murmur, so quiet it barely carried.

"Tonight. Midnight. Bring Michel to my quarters. I'll show you how to use it."

Shiro blinked.

"Eh?"

"Keep it quiet. Don't get caught," Jidan whispered, voice uncharacteristically hushed.

At last Shiro understood. Jidan had managed it. He had found the thing Shiro had asked for.

"Thank you, Lieutenant!" Shiro snapped a salute to the man's retreating back.



Meanwhile, Vice Admiral Yuri Kellerne, commander of the remaining Zeon forces, had arrived at Lhasa Base. He came ahead of his troops, bringing only his adjutant-secretary, Cynthia.

"No need for stiff formality, Lieutenant Colonel Falkenberg."

When Falkenberg moved to salute, Yuri stayed his hand. The admiral had always loathed needless ceremony.

"Let's keep it to the facts. The Federation's advance shows no sign of slowing."

His face was grave. It could mean only one thing, Norris' operation had ended in failure.

"Captain..."

Falkenberg closed his eyes a moment, silently recalling the commander he revered. This time, Yuri did not rush him.

Falkenberg and Norris had been comrades-in-arms since the days of the Side 3 Defense Forces. It was Norris' recommendation that had seen Falkenberg chosen as escort for the Apsaras Project. They had toasted their reunion with drink, promising each other they would see the final battle through together.

But...

"So you've gone on ahead, have you, Norris? And left me behind."

He spoke the words only in his heart to the absent friend.

"Well... I'll be a little longer. At least long enough to see the younger ones safely back to space."

Falkenberg opened his eyes again. The softness was gone. What remained was not a grieving man, but a soldier shouldering his duty.

"My apologies, sir."

"No need," Yuri replied gently. His eyes held kindness, he, too, had lost many comrades in this war.

"The Federation is within half a day's march. We've laid our traps, but I give them two days at most before they arrive."

"Launch preparations will be ready in seven hours. However..."

"I have the authorization. A rough draft, but official."

From the satchel she carried, Cynthia produced a single sheet with swift precision. It was the letter of authority transferring command of the Kerguelen and Lhasa Base. In the lower right corner gleamed the signature of Supreme Commander Gihren Zabi himself.

"Where is Ginias?"

"In the Fourth Laboratory, sir. Shall I escort you?"

"No. Continue with the launch preparations. If the two of us arrived together, it would only sour him further."

True enough. If Ginias learned his own subordinates were already in concert with his rival Yuri, he would seethe. The cancellation of the Apsaras Project was galling enough on its own.

"Come, Cynthia."

Yuri did not wait for Falkenberg's answer. He was already striding down the corridor.

“That spoiled boy,” he muttered under his breath. “Getting him to listen will be the real battle.”



The Fourth Laboratory.

Here rested the mock prototype frame of the Apsaras III, where the last programming checks were underway. Ginias, with Yanowitz and his cadre of researchers, oversaw the final calibrations.

The machine itself was complete. Even the engine tests, once the greatest hurdle of the Apsaras I, were finished. The plan was to skip acclimation flights altogether; all that remained were software adjustments, the final tweaks to bring the program in line.

But the researchers were at their limit. Every one of them worked on stimulants, their gaunt faces hollow-eyed, pupils burning unnaturally bright with chemical fire.

It was madness.

Madness that men should drug themselves just to keep working. Madness that they labored to bring to life such a weapon. Yet war itself was the greater madness, one that made all others invisible. And so, for the sake of Spacenoid independence, for the Principality of Zeon, they pressed on.

The lab doors slid open.

In the threshold stood Vice Admiral Yuri Kellene, flanked only by a striking woman. The researchers squinted as though the sudden light had burned their eyes, as though their darkness could not abide the intrusion.

“Hey. Long time, Ginias.”

Yuri raised a hand in greeting, a half-smile on his lips.

Ginias did not smile. His glare was sharp, his voice like a blade.

“What are you doing here, Yuri?”

“Is that any way to greet an old classmate from the academy, come all this way to see you?”

“The Apsaras III is entering its final stage. If you want to chat, wait until it’s finished.”

“Ginias... it’s no longer needed.”

Yuri’s tone carried a strange pity.

From his side, Cynthia stepped forward and laid a single sheet upon Ginias’ desk, the document of authority, signed by Supreme Commander Gihren Zabi himself.

“It’s an authorization from Supreme Commander Gihren. This order places both this base and the Kerguelen under my command.”

“What?!”

Ginias snatched up the paper. The words were clear: command of Lhasa Base transferred from him to Yuri. And in the lower corner, the unmistakable signature of Gihren.

"Sorry, Ginias. The Apsaras Project is terminated. We're abandoning Lhasa. Our orders are to return to space."

"Don't be absurd. The Apsaras III is nearly complete. To stop now—"

"This is a formal order," Yuri cut him off. "Even Sovereign Degwin himself has consented, and he authorized the Apsaras Project."

"Ridiculous..."

"Face it. Pack up your research, bring your data, and continue in space if you must. Build your monster again later, when circumstances allow."

Yuri spoke as though soothing a child. And that stoked Ginias' fury.

"What guarantee is there?" Ginias spat.

Zeon was faltering. Under such strain, who would waste resources on this colossal, gluttonous project? The Principality was fracturing, Degwin overshadowed, his children clawing at one another for power. The Apsaras had already lost its patronage. He could see its future written: abandoned.

"Guarantee? Tell me, Ginias, do you have any guarantee your toy will ever be finished? In war, nothing is guaranteed. Not a damn thing."

Yuri turned his back on him, walking for the exit with deliberate calm.

"Twelve hours from now, we depart aboard the Kerguelen. Have your materials ready. Officially, nothing may be carried, but I'll permit it, as a courtesy. For you and me—"

Bang.

The sound cracked like a whip.

Yuri's words froze, his body pitching forward in slow, inevitable collapse.

No one moved. No one spoke. They simply stared, paralyzed, as if time itself had fractured.

"The Apsaras belongs to me."

Ginias' words rang out as Yuri's body struck the floor. The pistol gleamed in his hand.

"Admiral!"

Cynthia flung herself to the fallen man's side, voice breaking into sobs. The bullet had torn through the back of his skull. There was no life left in him.

"Admiral... Yuri... Yuri!"

Her cries shook with grief. The researchers turned away, unable to look. Soldiers might be inured to corpses, but they were not. And her weeping, raw and unguarded, was too much to bear.

Only Ginias kept his eyes fixed. Slowly, almost languidly, he rose, raising the pistol again, this time at Cynthia.

"Join him, secretary."

With a smile curling his lips, Ginias pulled the trigger.



"I'm sorry... Émile."

Aina murmured the words to the khaki-colored body bag before her.

Corporal Émile Genest, her own age, only twenty. He had once spoken to her of his dream: to return to Side 3 and take over his mother's bakery. He had laughed about wanting a girlfriend.

But Émile was dead.

His end had been abrupt, unceremonious.

Aina guided the body bag onto a cart, pushing it toward the morgue.

A "morgue," a dignified name, but in truth it was only an emptied warehouse, filled with the dead. The bodies of soldiers she had failed to save were stacked there, nameless and unattended. At first, they had cremated each one. But soon there had been too many. Now, when a storehouse overflowed, they sealed the doors and abandoned it. It seemed cruel, but the living had no strength left to care for the dead.

She rode the elevator down and stopped before the morgue.

No one else was there.

The base teemed with returning soldiers, yet this place was always deserted. Soldiers were superstitious, avoiding such spaces as ill-omened. So Aina had taken it upon herself to bring the bodies down. It was the only atonement she could offer.

She reached the door marked crudely with a painted "6." This was the sixth such chamber, five others already crammed to bursting. With a heavy heart, she opened it.

She had been inside many times before. The scene never changed: mounds of body bags piled upon one another, the stench so thick it taught her what death truly smelled like.

But this time...

"Researcher Harlow?"

Inside, she found Bill Harlow, one of the scientists. Beside him, a cart bearing a body bag.

"M-Miss A-Aina," he stammered.

"Has one of the researchers died?" she asked.

Surely a scientist would not be moving the remains of common soldiers. It could only be a colleague, perhaps killed in an accident during testing.

"Eh? N-no, that's..."

Harlow's reply faltered.

Say it was, say it was a researcher. But the lie stuck in his throat. An easy falsehood would unravel at once.

Harlow's hesitation aroused Aina's suspicion. He was too young to lie convincingly with a straight face.

"Not a researcher? Then who lies in that bag?"

A chill pricked her. Whoever it was, it could not be "just" another corpse. This was something hidden, something dangerous.

Quickly, she strode to the cart. Brushing aside Harlow's feeble attempt to stop her, she yanked the zipper open.

"What—!"

Inside was no researcher at all. Bloodied beyond recognition, but unmistakable, Vice Admiral Yuri Kellerne. The wound was clear, a single shot to the back of the head. Executed.

Aina raised her eyes.

Harlow flinched, unable to meet her gaze.

He had not pulled the trigger. No, he had only been ordered to dispose of the body. And Aina knew immediately who had given that order.

"Tell me, Harlow," she said softly, taking his trembling hand.

The poor man shook, caught in fear and guilt. Forced to play accomplice to murder.

"It was... my brother, wasn't it?"

Her voice was gentle, almost merciful.

Harlow quivered still, and then, slowly, nodded.



Ginias was alone in the Fourth Laboratory.

He had sent Harlow away with the bodies, but the floor still bore Yuri and Cynthia's bloodstains. The copper tang of it lingered faintly in the air.

It did not trouble him. Compared to the Apsaras III, the deaths of two people were trivial, no more important than idle talk about the weather.

The Apsaras, that was everything.

The Federation was closing in, and still the program remained incomplete. Combat algorithms contained stubborn bugs. In the worst case, he could always issue commands manually, but...

"Brother. May I come in?"

It was Aina's voice.

Ginias glanced once at the dark stains on the floor, then answered.

"Come. I'm alone."

The door slid open, and Aina entered.

At once she noticed the blood. She did not gasp, did not recoil, she only stared at it with cool, hard eyes.

"Brother, there is something I must ask you."

Her gaze lifted from the stains to him. Her eyes, sharp as blades, fixed on his.

"You've changed, Aina."

"What?"

"That you would speak first. That you would confront me."

A faint smile curved his lips, whether cold amusement or mockery, it was impossible to tell, but it was no smile of warmth.

"I hear you've been tending the wounded as well. Such a waste."

"A waste? To save lives?"

There was anger in her face now, true, open anger.

Yes, she had changed. Since returning from the mountains, she had become merely a woman, tending others, showing compassion, even raising

her voice. Once, she would never have done such things. She had become dull. Ordinary.

"Worthless," Ginias said, knowing it would sting.

"Compared to the Apsaras, all else is worthless."



"Compared to the Apsaras, all else is worthless."

He spoke with conviction. No audience, no soldiers to impress, no researchers to deceive. It was truth, laid bare.

And knowing it, Aina shuddered. Had she been wrong all along?

"Be my hands and feet."

Those words had bound her since the day he lost his body's strength. Since then she had flown for him, acted in his stead. But now,

"You shot Vice Admiral Kellerne, didn't you?"

"Word travels fast," Ginias replied, not even bothering with denial.

Aina's heart sank. She had still, somewhere, hoped for a denial.

"So it was true..."

"You saw his body. The bloodstains here. What use is hiding it?"

"Why? Why did you have to kill him?"

"He wanted to end the Apsaras Project."

Ginias' smile was thin, self-evident.

"What good would it do, for a few hundred soldiers to flee back to space? Up there, he claimed, we could fight as equals. Absurd. Such was the thinking of a career soldier like Yuri. But tell me, Aina, why do you think we fight?"

"For Spacenoid independence?"

"Many believe that. But it is not the only reason."

"...?"

"Some fight because it is their duty as soldiers. Some because the government decreed it. Some for family. For revenge. For pride. To look heroic. To keep their research alive."

Aina bit her lip.

"That last part is about you, isn't it, brother?"

"All of them different reasons. Yet one thing unites them. They fight to win."

It was true. No one went to war in order to lose.

"If we don't win, all is lost. No independence. No careers. No families saved. No pride, no glory, no research. To win, that is the purpose of war. The only thing that matters."

It was the same speech he had once given in front of the other researchers, after Yuri's murder. Aina had heard the story from Harlow, but not the words themselves.

Now she heard them, and she could not refute them.

We must win.

Yes. It was true.

Ginias' eyes bored into hers. Aina could not look away. His words spun in her head, looping endlessly. We must win. We must win.

"If the Apsaras is completed, the war will end. Zeon, we, will win."

He pressed on, merciless.

"What saves lives most of all? Ending the war. Can any other path deliver victory faster than the Apsaras? Would dragging this conflict into space, letting it burn on and on, truly spare more lives?"

"...I..."

He was right. Even if Yuri's plan had worked, even if they escaped to space, the war would not end. In that case, casualties would continue to mount. The killing happening on Earth now would simply continue in space. Perhaps... perhaps finishing it here would be kinder.

"Aina..."

Her name, spoken softly. With tenderness, almost.

"Be my hands and feet."

Fifteen years ago, he had said the same. And now he said it again.

The words wrapped around her soul like a spell.

To surrender to him, to become his hands and feet, seemed suddenly warm, safe, easy. If she obeyed, she would not need to think. Not need to suffer.

"Help me, Aina. Join me."

His face swam close. Red-black blotches marbled his skin. It was the face from fifteen years ago, that terrible night.

His eyes shifted, from cool azure to fevered hazel.

Blue blood trickled from his nose.

Impossible! Aina screamed inwardly. But her eyes told her the truth: her brother was changing, becoming something no longer human.

Help me.

Help me.

Help me.

Her silent cry went nowhere. It only echoed back, pressing in on her until it crushed her chest.

Terror and despair closed over her world.

"Aina..."

The voice came again, falling from above like a divine command.

Shaken to the core, she clung to it.

It was salvation. A revelation.

"Take my place. Pilot the Apsaras."

Chapter.05

Dark Clouds

Over the Lhasa Base, the sky was buried beneath a vast shroud of black. Clouds so dark they might have belonged to night itself.

They swallowed everything, the sun, the heavens, the light. The world below lay in a dim half-light, like a solar eclipse. Or, to a Spacenoid's eye, as if the colony's lighting system had failed altogether.

"That's one ominous sky."

Staring upward at the black expanse, Major General Ethan, commander of the Federation's Far Eastern Forces, murmured the words to no one in particular.

Those clouds looked ready to burst at any moment, no gentle drizzle, but a torrential downpour. Should the rain come, it would blunt the Federation's beloved excess of air support and preparatory bombardment. And with visibility cut, the advantage would fall to the defenders.

"Don't you think so too, Commander Kojima?"

Ethan turned.

Kojima gave a neutral nod.

"Yes, sir. I suppose it is."

The Federation had finally cornered Zeon's remaining forces within Lhasa Base. Surrounding them now were twenty-three battalions, nearly two full divisions, poised to strike. At Ethan's order, they could launch a four-pronged assault at once. The enemy base, carved into the heart of the mountain, would no doubt be tough to crack, but with this difference in strength, it should all be over within half a day.

"We'll begin the all-out attack in fifteen minutes. Commander Kojima, you'll be reassigned as staff aide to my headquarters."

"Sir, I—"

"You can command your battalion from this Big Tray. That's an order, Commander."

Ethan's voice was gentle but immovable. Kojima's protest died on his lips. When an officer of his rank was told it was an order, there was nothing more to say.

"No need to be nervous," Ethan continued, smiling faintly. "As my aide, you'll mostly be observing. Though I may call on you for your thoughts... should the need arise."

"You mean... regarding the mobile armor?"

"You catch on quickly, Commander. Precisely."

Ethan nodded, clearly pleased.

"Our victory here is all but certain. The enemy is sealed off on the ground, and even if they try to flee into orbit, our artillery will bring them down the

instant they rise. But that mobile armor, that's the problem. The problem, Kojima."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll be frank: I hold you in high regard. Since the Earth Drop Operation, you've managed to halt Zeon's momentum with limited forces. Without your command, we might have lost Madras altogether."

"You flatter me, sir."

Kojima dipped his head slightly.

"And yet," Ethan went on, "a man of your caliber lost an entire base to a single mobile armor. How are we to interpret that? Two possibilities. Either you are catastrophically incompetent... or that Zeon mobile armor is an exceptional machine. For the Federation's sake, I'd prefer to bet on the latter."

"Ah... of course, sir."

Kojima forced a thin smile at the joke, though both men knew Ethan meant every word. The general's true concern lay with the mobile armor's power.

"Your men reported that the unit was destroyed. But who's to say there isn't a second one out there? That's why I summoned you, Commander. You escaped its assault alive. I expect your insights will be... instructive."

"You overestimate me, sir," Kojima said, managing a wry smile.

But Ethan wasn't jesting. In his eyes, the most vital rule of warfare was simple: survival above all.

"So that's why you placed the 08th Team on the midline?"

For the first time, Kojima took the initiative to speak.

The position of the 08th Mobile Suit Team, under Ensign Shiro Amada, had been personally designated by Ethan the day before, ordered to fall back to the middle line. For a general to dictate the placement of a single squad was highly irregular.

"They're the only ones who've fought that mobile armor twice," Ethan said, smiling like a man proud of his cleverness. "And they even managed to shoot it down once. That makes them our little secret weapon."

He gave a sly grin. Ethan's rise had been built on that very kind of cold pragmatism, using whatever, and whomever, he could.

"A secret weapon, sir?"

Kojima's answering smile was polite but strained. Having his own men appropriated behind his back didn't sit well, but there was no point letting it show.

After all, Ethan was his commanding officer.



The "secret weapon" Ethan spoke of, the 08th Team, sat fidgeting in the Federation midline, waiting out the hours.

They already knew the mountain ahead was Zeon's hidden base. They knew, too, that it was the last Zeon stronghold in this stretch of Central Asia.

But the order to charge had not come. Nor had any attack come from Zeon.

Is it still not time? No one voiced the thought, but everyone felt it.

It wasn't that they wanted to fight. It was that being held on the verge of action was almost unbearable. The black blanket of cloud above only fed that impatience.

"Maybe it's just not here," Eledore said, as if to break the silence.

"You mean that mobile armor Aina pilots?"

"It's the Apsaras, Eledore."

"Names don't matter. Whatever, that Apsa-thing. If it hasn't shown itself even with the Federation pushed this close, maybe it never got finished."

"If that's true... then fine by me."

Karen watched the forward slope with care.

"Sanders, what do you make of the enemy? To me, they don't look like a force preparing for a last-ditch stand."

"I feel the same. It's like they're holding something back... that's the impression I get."

Sanders, who had the longest service among the 08th, could read the atmosphere of war. Call it an instinct for enemy presences learned from experience. Vague as it was, that sense was why he had survived when other squads had been wiped out. Karen outranked him, but when it came to war-hardened instincts, she trusted Sanders more.

"Holding something back... you mean a counterattack, or an escape route. What do you think, Commander?"

"If it's the Apsaras, they can counterattack." Shiro said with conviction.

With the destructive power of that Apsaras, even two divisions of Federation troops could be shattered, just as had happened at Kojima Base.

"And look at the sky, perfectly cloaked in that black cloud. If it were to slip up in there, our air force and AA batteries couldn't get a lock. The Apsaras would only need to point that mega particle gun toward the ground. Once it clears the Zeon base, any shot it fires will find Federation ranks."

Shiro cast his gaze upward. The dark cloud would hide the Apsaras without trouble. In modern warfare, where Minovsky particles made visual combat the rule, not being able to see the enemy was fatal.

"Nasty sky," Karen muttered. She, too, understood what the black canopy meant.

"Precisely why I think Zeon is trying to get away. If the Apsaras is here, there's no reason not to sortie. Once the sky clears, it's nothing more than a huge aircraft."

"That would be the sensible assumption. But I—"

Shiro began, and then a broadcast from Major General Ethan came over the Federation lines.

“This is Major General Ethan, Commander of the Far Eastern Forces. Though the enemy is small in number, they are cornered. Even the cornered rat will bite. Remain vigilant and perform your duties without complacency.”

Ethan’s voice was flat.

Michel thought it sounded like a school principal at morning assembly.

The black cloud overhead did not lift. It hung heavy and dismal, as if portending the fate of this war.



“Colonel Falkenberg, our sortie prep is finished.”

Lieutenant Alida Valli, changed into a normal suit, snapped a salute.

“Good. Then push out from Tunnel 304, shoot down the enemy attacking Tunnel 208, then fall back to 304. After that, we’ll demolish Tunnel 304 with the Federation Forces that pursue us.”

Lhasa Base had been hollowed out of a mountain that had once been mined; the tunnels ran like an anthill. Some served as base corridors, but many were redundant shafts. The Federation had been flooding those tunnels one by one with mobile suit units, rushing in, checking whether each tunnel connected to headquarters. Zeon, in turn, garrisoned decoy shafts to hide the real arteries. Tunnels 304 and 208 were such decoys.

“Understood, Colonel.”

“Tunnel 208 is held by Lieutenant Eisley under Rear Admiral Kellerne’s command. Coordinate with him and time your moves.”

“Eisley, is it? Very well. We’ll give the Federation a shock.”

Alida Valli answered with a bright smile. It was a good smile. Seeing it, Falkenberg felt an urge to tell her the truth.

Yuri’s returning unit had been placed under Falkenberg’s command. Some were of equal rank to him, but command at Lhasa rested with Falkenberg. Their leader, Yuri, was not present. Yet the men made no fuss, because the man had come to Lhasa without telling them anything. When he had contacted Norris, he had done so alone, with only a single aide. It was not like him.

“Perhaps Admiral Kellerne lacked the nerve to secure authorization from His Excellency Gihren to hand Lhasa’s control over, so Yuri didn’t tell the men, to avoid false hopes...” Falkenberg had thought.

It was likely Yuri had withheld news to keep his troops from getting their hopes up. And for the moment, that concealment worked to their advantage. The men believed Yuri had gone off and been cut down by the Federation on the way; none supposed he had fled. And none imagined their comrade from the academy had been killed by a friend in uniform.

“I’m counting on you, Lieutenant Valli. Buy us a little more time.”

“Leave it to me. This will be Admiral Kellerne’s revenge fight. We’ll show the Federation how fierce we are.”

Valli's boldness was genuine, she knew nothing. Falkenberg turned away with a hollow ache. There, waiting quietly for its moment, was the Apsaras III, the machine Ginias had protected, killing Kellerne to do so.



Inside the Apsaras III cockpit, buried among the tangle of exposed machinery, Ginias continued his work.

The input console balanced across his knees was lashed to the surrounding systems by dozens of cables. The headphones and visor clamped to his head were likewise bound into the web of color-coded wires, so that at a glance, it looked as though Ginias himself had become part of the Apsaras III's nervous system, wired directly into its core.

The reprogramming wasn't finished. Depending on which path a process branched into, the system would often lapse into thought-stasis, a complete cognitive freeze. If that happened in combat, the machine could simply stop dead.

The tremors shaking through the hull were growing stronger now, sign that the Federation bombardment was closing in on the command center. There was no time left to clear every error.

"Two divisions, he said..."

Ginias recalled Colonel Falkenberg's report. Two full divisions of the Federation Forces, twenty battalions. Twenty times the size of the base he had destroyed days before. With the Apsaras III running at full power, they wouldn't last long.

"If the system halts, I'll make the judgment myself. No matter. Two divisions of the Federation, ten minutes, at most."

A thin smile crept across his face.

His cheeks had sunken sharply; his eyes lay deep in shadow. The grin that twisted across his gaunt face was ghastly. His skin was dry and pale like an old man's, his body frighteningly wasted.

Yet in those hollow eyes burned a feral brilliance, wild, feverish, alive with a light that seemed too much for his dying frame.

Suddenly, a cough tore through him.

"No more time..."

He pressed a trembling hand to his mouth. The smear of blood on his palm confirmed what his body already knew, his life was nearly spent.

To finish the Apsaras III, he had pushed his body far past its limits, propped up by chemicals and stimulants. Without them, he'd never have brought it this far, but they'd cost him his strength, his sleep, his life.

"No regrets. I am one with the Apsaras now. And soon..."

He lifted his head toward the forward seat beyond the console.

The back of it faced him, he couldn't see the pilot's expression, but he knew she was there, waiting for his word.

"We're launching, Aina."

The words left him with a rasping cough.



“We’re launching, Aina.”

Her brother’s voice reached her from behind the seat.

It wasn’t a suggestion, it was an order.

Aina doubted the reprogramming was truly complete, but she didn’t argue.

“Understood, Brother.”

She began the twenty-seven startup procedures, her fingers moving methodically through each switch and key.

Behind her came the dry, hacking sound of Ginias’s cough. Like the researchers, he had driven himself mercilessly for this project, but his health had always been fragile. It must have been agony for him.

“Aina... when the thought-stasis warning appears, I’ll take over manually. Do nothing. Leave the decision to me.”

“Understood, Brother.”

She completed Phase Seventeen.

The Apsaras III shuddered, small, rhythmic tremors through its frame.

Out of the viewport, soldiers were pointing in her direction, shouting to one another. The noise spread quickly through the hangar until individual voices rose above the din.

“Master Ginias, we’re counting on you!”

“Long live the Apsaras! Glory to Zeon!”

“Be safe, Miss Aina!”

“Independence for the Spacenoids!”

No conventional force could hope to stand against the Federation army’s vast numbers. Many of the defenders were wounded; their fighting strength was nearly gone. The Apsaras III was their final hope.

“Sieg Zeon!”

Someone cried it aloud.

At once, the others joined in chorus.

“Sieg Zeon! Sieg Zeon!”

Arms lifted. Voices rang through the hangar.

Even the bedridden soldiers raised trembling hands in salute.

Even the researchers, men who had once sneered at such rituals, shouted until their throats broke.

“Sieg Zeon!”

“Sieg Zeon!”

“Sieg Zeon!”

Every gaze fixed upon the towering machine, the Apsaras III, and upon the siblings within it.

They couldn’t lose.

Not now.

Not for these soldiers who still believed.

Not for the dead who had bought them time.

Otherwise...

“Launching now, Brother.”

Having completed the twenty-seventh step, Aina spoke softly.

“I leave it to you,” came her brother’s faint reply, his voice so thin it was almost swallowed by the hum of the machine.



Inside the communications truck, Eledore’s expression changed.

A moment ago he’d been swearing into his headset with his usual lazy grin, but now his mouth had snapped shut. His hands flew over the console, matching sound patterns with rapid precision.

“Looks like... our girl Aina just clocked in.”

The waveform wasn’t an exact match to the Apsaras they’d faced before. Still, there was something in the sound, an unmistakable resemblance.

It wasn’t about numbers or data points; it was instinct. Eledore had a musician’s ear. Just as every song carries the artist’s touch, every machine had its own voice, and this one wasn’t the voice of a mobile suit or an aircraft. It was deeper. Larger. Something unique, and terrifying.

Shiro had already guessed it. Even before Eledore spoke, he’d felt sure the Apsaras would come. He trusted Eledore’s ear completely, and reacted without hesitation.

“Michel, get it ready.”

“You’re really going through with it, sir?”

“Why else did we bring it?”

“Yeah, I know, but still...”

Michel fumbled for words, but none came that could stop Shiro.

He understood the logic behind the plan. That’s why Jidan had gone along with it, and why he himself had agreed in the first place.

“But it’s insane... completely insane...”

Now that the moment had arrived, fear gripped him.

“Let him do it, Michel.”

Karen had sensed his hesitation immediately.

“He won’t rest until he tries. Just let him.”

Her tone was edged with irony, half teasing, half resigned.

“You can’t stop him anyway,”

Eledore added, cutting in.

“You think our commander’s the kind of man who’d quit just because we told him to?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Then what’s the problem? He said he’s doing it. He’s not asking you to do it.”

“That’s... not really the point, is it?”

“Sure it is. Besides, the commander’s not dying today. He’s got that charm, right?”

“Yeah.”

Shiro nodded firmly. Hanging from the cockpit frame, the silver pocket watch Aina had given him swung gently with the vibration of the engine.

“I’ll come back alive. No question. So do it, Michel. If I back out now, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life. Even if I survived... I don’t want to live with that regret.”

“I understand, but...”

“Listen, Michel. When I bring Aina back, I’m leaving the army.”

“What?!”

“I’m done fighting for anyone but myself. Not for victory. Not for Spacenoid independence, or money, or honor. And not for someone else’s idea of justice. I’ve made up my mind.”

“Commander...”

“Don’t call me that. I’m asking you as a man, let me go save the woman I love, even if it costs me my life. Please, Michel.”

“I...”

If it were BB in Aina’s place, what would he do?

Michel asked himself.

He liked BB, sure. But he also valued his own life. In the end, he’d hesitate, he knew he could never speak with the certainty Shiro did.

“But this man...”

He looked up at Shiro on the monitor.

This man was about to do something Michel never could.

He didn’t know whether it was brilliance or madness, but he envied him for being able to act without hesitation.

“...All right.”

After a long silence, Michel answered. His face, unexpectedly, had cleared.

“Thank you, Michel.”

“No... thank you.”

If he couldn’t do it himself, the least he could do was help someone who could.

Michel steadied himself and looked ahead.

From the mountaintop before them, a vast shadow began to rise through the fog.



The Federation Forces had formed a ring around Lhasa Base. From above, they looked like swarming ants clinging to the flanks of a giant elephant.

“Can you see them, Aina?”

Ginias’s voice came from behind her.

The sky above was heavy with black cloud, plunging the ground below into darkness.

"The Federation apes are crawling over the earth. Show them the Apsaras' Fire of Megiddo. Let them burn in divine flame."

"Yes, Brother."

Aina's reply was flat, mechanical, devoid of emotion.

A good answer, Ginias thought, nodding faintly as his eyes fixed on the monitor.

The time had come.

At last, the rain of light would descend upon the earth, and this time, he would witness it from the best seat in the house. In real time.

"Ghh—!"

A clot of blood rose in his throat. He coughed violently, splattering crimson across the monitor.

"Tch."

He clicked his tongue, wiping it away irritably. The blood itself didn't bother him, what infuriated him was that it had marred the screen that was about to display the most glorious sight of his life.

"Firing."

Aina's voice was quiet, almost serene.

Ginias stared at the blood-smeared display, feeling his heart thunder in his chest.



Above the ridgeline, the shadow hanging in the clouds began to glow. Light was born within the Apsaras.

But it was no ordinary light, this was matter on the verge of collapse, a seething knot of unstable, violent energy. The radiance swelled, growing until it seemed too vast, too furious to be contained by the machine's frame.

Eledore stared, transfixed.

He couldn't look away. The light was terrifying... yet beautiful. Even destruction, when absolute enough, held a kind of beauty that dragged the heart toward it.

Then the light erupted.

A flash like the tearing of the world, Eledore's eyes clamped shut, his whole body recoiling as the blast swallowed sight and sound. A moment later came the roar, a detonation so brutal it stabbed through his headset and into his skull. He ripped the headphones off before his eardrums burst.

When he finally forced his eyes open again, his vision was still white and buzzing, a ghost-image of the flash etched across his retinas. His hearing fared little better; a deep, ceaseless ringing filled his head.

"No way..."

Michel's voice trembled somewhere behind him.

Eledore turned toward the front monitor and froze.



The neighboring mountain was gone. Or rather, it had been carved into a vast, concave wound, a crater so clean and unnatural it looked like the work of some deranged sculptor. A shape both exquisite and grotesque, so precarious it seemed it might collapse under its own beauty.

“What the hell... is that...?”

It was all he could manage.

He had seen the Apsaras fire before, but this was something else entirely. The scale, the force, beyond comparison.

A god’s blow.

And in its shadow, Eledore trembled.

He was going to die.

The thought came unbidden, dragging him back to the first battlefield he’d ever seen.

That reckless infantry charge, machine gun in hand, when the man beside him had been cut down. A fellow new recruit. Someone he’d shared meals and jokes with.

He’d been terrified then, of the next bullet, of the thought that it might be his turn next.

He’d told himself he didn’t want to die.

Over and over, I don’t want to die.

After that, every dream had been a nightmare: the moment of death, again and again.

But time dulled even terror. The fear had numbed, frozen over. And one day, staring at the face of another dead soldier, he’d realized something sickening:

Thank God it wasn’t me.

That single thought.

He’d felt it with relief.

Everyone would, he told himself. Even this dead man, if our places were reversed, would look down at my corpse and think the same.

But now...

“I don’t wanna die.”

For the first time in years, the fear came rushing back.

The ice cracked.

His heart remembered how to shake.

“Damn it... why now...?”

This time there would be no lucky survivor. No one would be spared. Not this blast.

Terror.

Raw, childlike terror.

Eledore’s body began to quake. The mountain’s gouged silhouette had branded itself into his mind, and with it, the certainty of annihilation.

He wasn’t alone. Across the Federation lines, every movement had stilled. Soldiers who thought themselves hardened, who’d long since buried their fear, now stood frozen like new recruits.

Terror.

Terror.

Terror.

No one spoke the word, but it pulsed through the ranks like a shared heartbeat, silent, relentless, overwhelming.



The bridge of the Big Tray had fallen utterly silent.

No one spoke, not Major General Ethan, not any of his staff officers. The scene unfolding before them had stolen every voice on the command deck.

One shot. That was all it had taken to gouge the shape of a mountain into something unrecognizable. Even Ensign Shiro Amada's earlier reports hadn't hinted at such power. He'd compared it to the Big Tray's main cannon at most, but this... this was something else entirely.

"Intercept it..."

Someone managed to whisper, hoarse with disbelief.

But no concrete orders followed.

Would anti-air fire even reach a thing like that? Could aircraft possibly engage it? Or would every shot simply vanish into futility? The Apsaras' destructive force was so overwhelming that it made even the thought of resistance feel meaningless.

Then what could they do?

"We fall back..."

Ethan's voice came out as a groan, forced through clenched teeth.

"All units will concentrate their fire on that mobile armor. While they keep it busy, the Big Tray will withdraw."

"Withdraw? While our soldiers are still out there fighting?"

Commander Kojima's words struck the air like a slap.

"Of course. If headquarters is lost, the entire army collapses. Soldiers can always be replaced."

"That's insane..."

Kojima's voice trailed off.

He couldn't comprehend it. He had fought alongside those soldiers, seen their faces, their fear. They weren't machines, they were living men and women. And yet this man spoke as if they were parts on a spreadsheet.

"General Ethan, you—"

"Kojima, this is war. There are times when we must be utterly without sentiment."

"That isn't cold-blooded. It's cowardice."

Kojima's words came out sharp, final.

The bridge froze again. No one moved. It was the kind of outburst that could land a man in a cell, or end his career outright.

And then, unexpectedly, the silence broke, not from within, but from the enemy.

"This is Aina Sahalin, pilot of the mobile armor. I request a temporary ceasefire with the Federation Forces."

"A... ceasefire?!"

Ethan and Kojima turned simultaneously toward the massive shadow hanging in the storm clouds. The Apsaras loomed there, vast and terrible against the black sky.

"Do you hear me, soldiers of the Federation?" Aina's voice echoed through the comms. "I am requesting a temporary ceasefire."

"Confirmed," the comms officer reported quietly. "She's broadcasting on an open channel to all Federation units from the mobile armor itself."

Ethan gave a curt nod and took the microphone.

"This is Major General Ethan, commanding the Federation Forces."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, General," Aina replied, her tone level and clear. "The attack just now was a warning shot."

"A warning...?"

Ethan turned sharply toward his operator.

"Damage report?"

"None, sir. The mountain she struck held no Federation positions."

Data streamed onto the main screen, topographical readings, casualty reports, all confirming the same thing. Zero damage. Zero deaths.

"Our wounded personnel will begin evacuation from the base shortly," Aina continued. "Please... I ask that you hold your fire until they are safely clear."

Her words hung in the air, calm, steady, entirely out of place amid the wreckage and fear.

On the bridge of the Big Tray, every officer stared at the monitors, at the black sky, at the voice that had come out of it.

For the first time since the light had split the mountain, someone dared to breathe.



"Please, just for that short time, cease your fire."

Aina's voice carried across every Federation frequency, broadcast to every soldier on the field.

Her purpose was simple: to let the Kerguelen escape.

When she had chosen to board the Apsaras III, it hadn't been to destroy the enemy. She had decided to fight to save people. That was the only reason she was here.

She had taken this machine, her brother's monster, so she could send the wounded soldiers home to space.

"Foolishness..."

Ginias muttered behind her.

"If you simply strike the enemy's headquarters, the war ends here. No need for evacuations."

“No, Brother. That would only cause needless deaths on the Federation side.”

“So be it. This is war.”

“I refuse to accept that. With your Apsaras, Brother, I will save lives.”

Aina’s voice was resolute, crystalline.

Even a weapon could be used to save, not only to kill, that was what Shiro had taught her. The same flare that illuminated an enemy’s position could light the way for the lost. The same beam saber that could cut through armor could also shield a life.

Now it was her turn. Her turn to prove it, with this Apsaras III.

“Please, soldiers of the Federation,” she called again.

“Grant me a brief ceasefire. I have no wish to spill unnecessary blood.”

But...

“I’m afraid...”

The voice that came back was that of Major General Ethan.

“...that request cannot be granted.”

In that instant, Ginias burst out laughing, a sharp, mocking cackle, the sound of a man savoring his own prophecy fulfilled.

Aina spun around, glaring at him, her eyes sharper than he had ever seen them.

“Isn’t that so, Aina Sahalin?” Ethan’s voice came back, louder, stronger, too strong. “No one can accept a truce offered at gunpoint.”

He was posturing, she couldn’t know that, his voice raised not from conviction but because the entire army was listening.

“The Federation will not be cowed by threats. If you intend to fire, then fire. We will fight to the last man.”

“No...”

Aina’s voice faltered. Ginias’s laughter echoed again, shrill, grating, triumphant.

They didn’t trust her. Of course they didn’t. How could they?

After all they had done to one another, who could believe a sudden plea for peace?

Then what should she do?

Find another way?

Keep trying to convince them?

What could she do to make them believe her?

Aina stood.

“Very well. I understand that words alone are not enough.”

She opened the forward hatch of the cockpit. A gust of wind rushed in, clawing at her hair and clothes.

“Aina, what are you doing?”

“Watch, Brother. This is my fight.”

And with that, she stepped out into the roaring wind.

The Apsaras III floated so high it brushed the underbellies of the clouds. One slip, one misstep, and she would fall to her death. Yet she stayed there, clinging to the metal surface, utterly exposed.

She had no armor. No protection.
The Federation could snipe her down if they wished.
And standing there meant the Apsaras could not move, could not defend
itself.

“Now will you believe me?”

Aina’s voice, carried through the open channel, was clear and steady.

People can trust one another.

Please... trust me.

She prayed in silence as she waited for a response.

At last, Ethan’s voice returned.

“Very well.”

Relief flooded her.

Her whole body went weak, the tension draining away at once. Her
sincerity had reached them.

“Thank you...”

It wasn’t the battlefield word to say, but it was all that came out.



“It’s her... it really is Aina...”

Hearing her voice, Shiro felt a surge of joy.

He had been right.

Aina was exactly as he believed her to be, gentle, resolute, a woman who
would choose compassion over hatred, even here, in the middle of war.

“Unbelievable. That girl’s just as hopelessly softhearted as you are,” Karen
said, half in exasperation.

Shiro smiled, taking it as the highest praise.

“That’s what’s so wonderful about her.”

To plead with the enemy to rescue their wounded, Shiro himself had
never thought of such a thing. It was naïve, maybe. But Aina still believed in
the goodness within people.

Even enemies could understand each other.

To Shiro, this ceasefire wasn’t just a negotiation, it was a message meant
for him.

“That’s right... even enemies can understand each other. Even fall in
love...”

He had done the right thing by coming to the battlefield, by refusing to
hide any longer.

This time, he would not lose her again.

He would tell her what was in his heart, and then...

“Commander, looks like the rest of the units are falling back. What do we
do?”

Michel’s voice broke through his thoughts.

Shiro blinked, looking around. The Federation lines were retreating, even
though their own task wasn’t finished.

“Commander, if we stay here, we’ll stand out. We should suspend the operation and pull back too,” Karen said.

She was right. Staying behind would draw attention, and everything Shiro had planned, everything he’d procured, was already well beyond orders.

But... there had been no retreat command for his team. Why?

Just as he checked the comms log, a new signal flashed across his screen.

The sender: the Big Tray, their headquarters.

Encrypted channel.

Shiro hesitated, then opened the line.



“Ensign Shiro Amada, can you hear me?”

No sooner had the transmission with Aina ended than Major General Ethan opened a private channel to Shiro. The line was encrypted, camouflaged traffic audible only to headquarters and the O8th Team.

“Yes, sir. Loud and clear.”

The reply came crisp and immediate. The communications officer turned and flashed an OK gesture, the encryption was holding perfectly.

Ethan relaxed, his tone shifting to the almost congenial calm of command.

“So that’s the mobile armor you reported?”

“Yes, sir. It appears to have undergone some modifications, but it’s clearly of the same model.”

“Then tell me, how can we bring it down?”

“Bring it down?” Shiro’s voice hardened. “I thought we were under a ceasefire.”

Ethan answered with a patient, almost fatherly cadence.

“Quite right. A ceasefire, not a peace treaty. The war isn’t over, it’s merely paused. When it resumes, we must be prepared. That’s all I’m asking.”

“Understood. In that case, request permission to move our unit to the front line.”

“Granted. You may operate at your discretion. That’s acceptable, isn’t it, Commander Kojima?”

“Yes... sir.”

Kojima saluted stiffly, his expression bitter. The formality was meaningless, no one could refuse an order from a superior, however transparent its motives.

“There you have it, Ensign Amada. I expect great things from you.”

“I’ll do my best.”

That was all Shiro said before cutting the line himself.

It was curt, almost disrespectful for a subordinate addressing a major general, but Ethan seemed entirely unbothered.

“Bring in the GM Sniper team,” he said coolly. “I want that pilot eliminated.”

Kojima’s head snapped up.

"Sir! That would violate the ceasefire!"

"Kojima, I never agreed to a ceasefire. I merely gave an answer that might have sounded like one."

Ethan's lips curved into the smug, foxlike smile of a man proud of his own cleverness.

"Operation Star One is approaching. After lifting this many troops into orbit, I can't afford to have Revil laughing at my expense."

A promotion battle, Kojima thought bitterly.



"It's done..."

The moment her transmission with the Federation commander ended, Aina let out a long, trembling breath.

To use the Apsaras III's power as a threat, to buy time for the Zanzibar-class cruiser Kerguelen to escape, that had been her plan from the very moment she resolved to board this machine.

Bill Harlow had told her of Yuri's final words. Through him, she had learned that Falkenberg and the others were preparing the Kerguelen for launch. Most of the soldiers left at Lhasa were wounded or sick. Aina shared the same wish as the men below: to send them home, back to space, somehow.

But with Yuri dead and Gihren Zabi's signed commission lost to the shadows, the highest authority at Lhasa was now her brother. And nothing, no one, could act without Ginias's approval.

If she wanted to save them, the Apsaras III had to be completed.

Nothing less would move him.

So she had waited, motionless, while the Federation's noose drew tighter around the mountain base. And when the ring had finally closed, she had found her chance.

The Apsaras III itself was the key.

If its terrifying power could buy even a few minutes, the Kerguelen might make it clear.

That was why she'd called for the ceasefire.

The communicator chirped suddenly.

Aina glanced at the signal origin: Lhasa Base. She opened the line.

"Miss Aina, do you read me? This is Lieutenant Colonel Kurt Falkenberg."

The line was encrypted; the Federation couldn't hear.

"You handled the negotiations brilliantly."

"All thanks to the Apsaras. How is the Kerguelen?"

"Booster installation's complete. Fifteen minutes and we'll be ready. But, the troops scattered through the tunnels haven't all returned."

"I see. Then I'll buy you the time."

"And you, my lady?"

"We'll remain here. If the Apsaras moves, the truce will collapse."

"But that means—"

"Please, Colonel. Let me do this."

There was silence on the line.

Someone had to stay in the Apsaras III, to hold the Federation's attention.

Without that distraction, no one would escape.

If Aina fled on the Kerguelen, another would have to pilot this machine in her place. And there was no one left at Lhasa who could.

"Then may fortune favor you," Falkenberg said at last, his voice heavy with regret. The words of a man who had reached his decision with pain.

"Thank you, Colonel."

"No. It's I who should apologize. I hate that there's nothing more I can do. Is there... anything you'd ask of me before we go?"

"Just one thing."

"Of course."

"Captain Norris Packard, where is he now?"

There was a pause. Then Falkenberg answered quietly.

"He met his end... with honor."

"I see."

Aina lowered her gaze.

She had suspected as much. A commander like Norris would never abandon his post for nearly a week. And he would never run. If he hadn't returned, it could only mean one thing.

"Norris... it was you who called out to me that day, wasn't it?"

She let her thoughts linger on him.

She remembered when he'd first come to the Sahalin estate. She'd been four, terrified of the stern-faced stranger who had arrived at their door. She'd burst into tears. And when the fierce soldier had looked down at the sobbing child, his face had softened into something helpless, almost comically awkward. That had made her laugh through her tears. That was how they'd met.

"I used to tease him endlessly... just to see that face."

The memory made her smile faintly.

Norris, the soldier who had come as a bodyguard to the ruined Sahalin household, had been her favorite target for mischief.

Even after her parents died, after the family lost everything, he had stayed. It was Norris who took in the orphaned siblings, who made sure they went to school. To Aina and Ginias, he had been as much a father as a protector.

"Norris... I'm sorry. I never repaid you. Not once. I was a terrible daughter, wasn't I?"

Suddenly she realized she was crying.

It had been fifteen years since she'd shed tears.

Not once, since becoming her brother's right hand.

"So I can still cry... I can mourn the dead. I can still feel sorrow. I'm not a doll anymore. Thank you, Shiro... Because of you, I can cry for those I love."

She let the tears run down her face, warm, cleansing, proof that she had regained her humanity.

For the first time in years, Aina Sahalin felt alive.



While the Federation lines pulled back in retreat, the 08th Team pressed forward against the flow.

Karen's mobile suit led the way, followed by Shiro's Ez-8, then Sanders, the Bloodhound unit, and finally Michel in the rear, driving the transport truck. On that truck lay the trump card Shiro had obtained through Jidan, a desperate plan's final piece.

"Wait for me, Aina. I'll come to you... no matter what."

He looked skyward.

The Apsaras hung motionless above the clouds. Wider than the version he'd once faced, its silhouette still bore the same grim anatomy, a central mega particle cannon, and atop it, the unmistakable head of a Zaku.

Just beneath that head, at the cockpit hatch, something red flickered. Even at maximum zoom, it was no larger than a fingertip on his monitor, but he knew it was her.

"Captain, what about here?"

Karen's voice came over the comms. Her suit pointed to the open plain ahead.

A wide, flat clearing stretched before them, completely exposed from above, but perfect for their work.

"All right, this will do. Sanders, get the trailer ready. Karen, help me disassemble the Ez-8."

As he spoke, Shiro knelt the Ez-8 down on all fours. The movement jolted something loose, an old data disc slid out from under the seat.

"Captain Joe."

"So it's still here..."

He picked up the disc and turned it over in his hand.

"I thought I'd thrown them all away..."

Without thinking, he slipped it into his chest pocket.

Chapter.06

Siblings

“Do you remember, brother?”

Standing in the hatch of the Apsaras III, Aina asked, her gaze fixed on the earth spread below the ship, a land saturated with Federation Forces.

“Do you remember Wilhelmshaven, where Father and Mother took me? The lake, the mountains, the rivers, the forests... I ran about like a child, squealing that this must be what the Earth in books felt like.”

Wilhelmshaven.

A leisure colony built on Side 3. Not an arcade or a manufactured theme park, merely a careful recreation of lakes and woods and other pieces of terrestrial nature. Yet colonies that carried that kind of Earthlike nature were crowd-pleasers on any Side; the longing for Earth itself had likely spawned them.

“When I think about it now, I remember the airship we rode at Wilhelmshaven. Norris had held me when I tried to lean out the window. Mother was afraid of heights and kept her eyes fixed inward...”

It had been a long time since she had thought of her parents. After that incident, before a year had passed, her parents were gone. At the same time, the Sahalin family fell into ruin. Some said the Federation had seized the Sahalins’ off-Side assets as an example; others whispered of a power struggle with the Zabi clan. Aina, still a child then, had no understanding of what was true.

“What are you trying to say, Aina?”

Ginias’s voice held anger. From her position at the hatch, Aina could not see Ginias’s expression in the cockpit, but she felt his irritation clearly.

“Let us go back to those days, brother.”

“Nonsense. Are you asking me to play at that family charade again?”

“No, that’s not it.”

Aina shook her head slightly.

“Let us stop killing people, brother.”

“What did you say?”

“This time, let us save people with our own hands. We and the Apsaras can do that now.”

“Nonsense. The Apsaras—”

“We have killed too many. Enemy and ally alike.”

“You ask this as atonement? Absurd.”

“People can understand one another. War makes people mad now, but truly no one wants to kill.”

Aina’s fingers remembered the feel of a trigger: the trigger she had raised toward Shiro, but her finger had frozen, unable to move.

“It was thanks to someone that I realized the truth. That I, too, do not want to shoot.”



“Jalbert squad is in position.”

The voice of Ensign Pierre Jalbert, leading the GM Snipers, came over the comms.

At last, Ethan and his staff, who had been waiting anxiously for that report, relaxed with visible relief. The destructive power of the enemy mobile armor was astonishing. To meet it head-on would invite heavy losses; it was a scenario they wanted to avoid.

Under the Federation’s personnel evaluation system, the difference between enemy units destroyed and one’s own losses became the commander’s score. A positive balance marked a capable commander; a negative one branded him incompetent. This warped logic meant reinforcements rarely arrived where they were most needed, no one wanted to risk their rating. Conversely, where the tide turned in one’s favor, reinforcements swarmed, eager to rack up points. The situation in the Far East Army had become precisely that: units that had lurked in the rear descended like hyenas, and Ethan’s command had swelled to four times its size compared with before Operation Odessa.

“Ensign, can you pick off the pilot from there?” Ethan asked, watching an enlarged feed of the enemy mobile armor’s cockpit on the forward monitor.

“It’s quite high, but... with a long-range beam rifle, yes.”

“I see.”

A breath of relief swept through the Big Tray’s bridge. What had been an opportunity to earn points had nearly become the stain of a routed commander’s defeat; if the GM Sniper team could succeed in shooting the enemy pilot, that disaster might be averted.

“The timing of the shot is yours. Execute the operation when you’re ready.”

“Are you sure? You said just now there was a ceasefire—”

“That is not your concern, Ensign.”

Ethan snapped down on Jalbert’s protest. A commander’s score and a gentleman’s agreement with the enemy, the choice was obvious to Ethan and his staff.

“My apologies, sir.”

The ensign’s voice was flat.

“I’m counting on you. Don’t miss.”

“Yes, sir.”

The comms cut. At the same time, Commander Kojima, who stood at the edge of the wall, casually killed his open channel to the 08th Team.



“Heard that?”

Eledore spoke as though the comms had barely gone silent.

“They’re going to shoot the pilot... The higher-ups are going to break their promise.”

“They’ll say they never made one. The brass always answer like that,” Karen spat. That’s how they operate, it was the same before Shiro came and became leader of the 08th Team.

“Eledore, can you locate the sniper team?” Shiro asked.

“Wait a sec. Other units should have pulled back...”

Eledore fit his headphones. Given Kojima’s quiet leak of a comm channel, the sniper team’s movement was top secret. You couldn’t find it on a standard tactical map, but Eledore’s ear could.

“Found them, Commander. Two o’clock, eight hundred meters.”

Shiro angled the head of his Ez-8 toward two o’clock. Only trees stood that way; the GM Snipers must be hidden in the foliage.

“Commander, please don’t move the Ez-8, the mounting work isn’t finished,” Michel protested.

Shiro ignored him and moved the Ez-8 anyway. Its arm reached and picked up a 100-mm machine gun from the ground.

“You’re not going to turn that on our own men?”

Karen realized Shiro’s intent before the others. But it was too late.

Ez-8 leveled the 100-mm machine gun at the friendlies concealed in the trees, the GM Sniper squad.

“That’s aiding the enemy. Stop, Commander!” Karen shouted.

Shiro shouted back.

“I won’t let Aina be killed!”

He pulled the trigger, disregarding Karen’s plea.



“Fire!”

Ensign Pierre Jalbert gave the order.

The moment he spoke, a streak of gunfire tore across the air above the GM Sniper unit, from eight o’clock, the direction of Shiro’s Ez-8.

But it came a heartbeat too late.

The GM Snipers’ sights were already locked in.

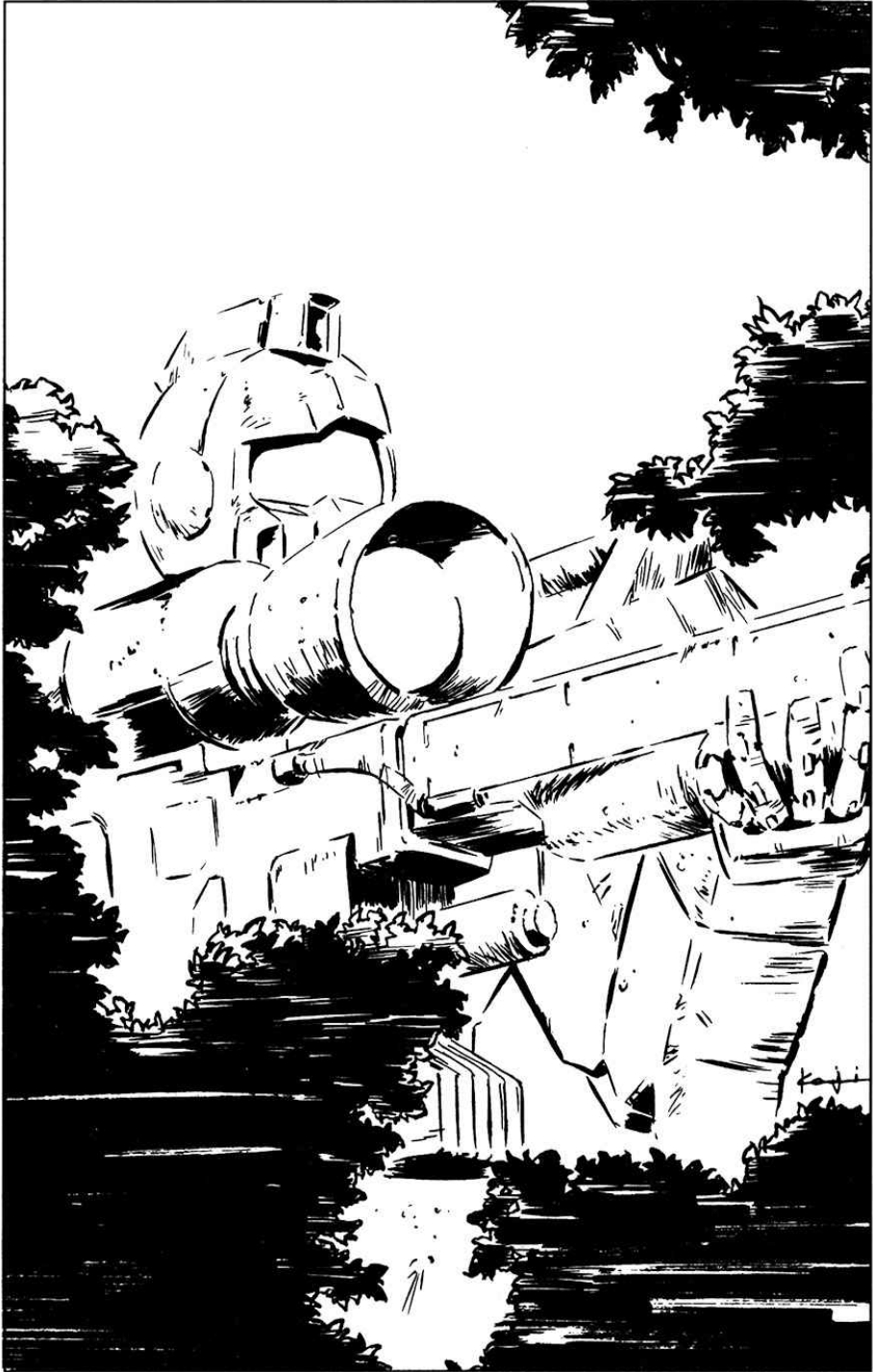
If they’d been human soldiers, that sudden burst of fire might have startled them, thrown off their aim.

But the GM Snipers were machines.

No matter how loud the report, no matter how unexpected the sight, their targeting calculations would not waver.

Their pilots squeezed their triggers.

The beam rifles discharged exactly as programmed, each shot straight, powerful, and precise.





“Let’s surrender, brother,” Aina said, eyes lifted toward the sky heavy with black clouds.

“Don’t be absurd.”

“I don’t want to kill anymore. And I don’t want you to kill, either.”

There was real feeling in her words, an intensity Aina hadn’t shown in fifteen years of speaking in flat, practiced tones. Yet even that warmth couldn’t melt the ice in Ginias’s heart.

“Even if we stop killing, others won’t. As long as war endures, the dead will keep piling up.”

“No. People can learn to understand one another.”

“If they could, there’d be no war to begin with.”

Ginias’s eyes flicked toward the monitor, toward the mobile suits lurking in the forest, aiming up at the Apsaras III.

Three machines, plus four support vehicles, artillery or power relays, perhaps.

“So much for a ceasefire…”

He set his sights on them.

Enemies were enemies; there was no trusting them.

“It’s not that people can’t understand each other,” Aina said quietly. “It’s that they refuse to try.”

“Human understanding is a fantasy.”

“That’s not true! Even if we’re divided by sides—”

“You’re naïve, Aina.”

The mobile suits on the monitor fired at the Apsaras III.

“There, you see?” Ginias’s lips curved into a bitter smile.

“Emergency retreat.”

His fingers slid across the console, and the Apsaras III lurched backward.

“Ah!”

Caught off guard, Aina nearly lost her balance. She grabbed a protrusion of the hatch just as three lances of beam fire streaked past her back.

“An attack? That can’t be—”

“You saw it yourself, Aina. That’s humanity for you.”

Ginias laughed, triumphant, and unleashed the mega particle cannon at his locked-on targets.



Light fell from the sky.

Seven beams speared downward, piercing the Jalbert unit with unerring precision.

All three GM Snipers were skewered and exploded in an instant, along with the four support vehicles that had been supplying their rifles with energy.

In the space of a breath, Jalbert's squad was annihilated.
There wasn't even time for a scream.



"Shoot! Shoot them down!"

Seeing the GM Snipers' beams miss, Ethan shouted hysterically.

"Throw every air asset we have at them. Don't give the enemy a chance to fire a second shot."

Ethan was not the only one losing his grip. The officers under his command were shouting a scatter of attack orders: aircraft, mobile suits, anti-air batteries, every available force told to destroy the enemy mobile armor.

Amid the chaos on the bridge, one man remained unnervingly calm. Or perhaps "cold" was the better word: Kojima.

"They break a ceasefire unilaterally and yet have no stomach for the consequences if it fails..." he thought.

"Stop!"

A reprimanding voice cut through the bedlam on the bridge.

"We fired first. Cease the firing!"

The officers fell silent, stunned, as the young man's face filled a monitor. The caption read, "Composite Mechanized Battalion, 08 MS Team Commander, Ensign Shiro Amada." For a mere ensign to rebuke the staff, unthinkable.

Realizing the audacity, the officers erupted in shouts against Shiro. Ethan raised a hand to quell them, and spoke.

"Silence, Ensign Shiro Amada. Your earlier firing constituted aiding the enemy and must be judged as murder in combat. Of course—"

Ethan flicked a glance at Kojima at the edge of the room.

"We will have to uncover the culprit who deliberately leaked intel."

The bridge fell deathly quiet. Only Ethan had recognized Kojima's betrayal.

"Is it permitted to attack an opponent who agreed to a ceasefire?" Shiro's words no longer carried the tone of junior officer to major general.

"We never agreed to a ceasefire."

"That's a specious argument—"

"This is a gambit, Ensign. War is about maneuvers like this."

Shiro found himself at a loss. In straight talk, Ethan had the upper hand. Prolong the argument and the ensign would lose; in the bureaucratic machine of the high command, a man like Ethan who had climbed to major general was a different league from an inexperienced idealist like Shiro.

"Move out, Ensign Amada."

Kojima's voice cut in unexpectedly angry, uncharacteristic of him. Before Shiro could reply, the officers protested.

"Don't issue orders on your own, Commander Kojima!"

"You're correct. Ensign Amada's offense is clear. He should be recalled immediately and thrown in the brig."

"You're being impertinent before the major general."

Kojima ignored them and continued.

"That's an order from your battalion commander. Don't think about the consequences."

"Copy that!"

This time Shiro answered without hesitation. Kojima let a small smile pass his lips, something between wry and rueful.

"Don't expect to go back to Jaburo, Commander Kojima," Ethan snarled. Kojima received the glare as if it amused him.

"I don't mind. I've never liked air-conditioning," Kojima replied, then turned on his heel and headed for the exit.

"Where are you going, Commander?"

"Back," Kojima said without looking over his shoulder. "To the battlefield."



The Apsaras that had wiped out the GM Sniper platoon vanished into the black cloud.

The Federation forces fired blindly at the unseen Apsaras, with a madness to it.

Then the black cloud answered with a rain of light.

The Apsaras had fired its mega particle cannon from within the cloud.

In a single strike, four battalions, including Crawford's, were wiped out, the earth itself gouged away. For a moment the Federation assault faltered at the sheer power, then resumed in a frenzy.

"Hurry, Michel!"

Inside the Ez-8, Shiro looked up at the sky with mounting frustration and called out.

"I know. I'm at the final coupling!" Michel shouted back, his voice raised because the attack noise was too loud to be heard otherwise.

Another rain of light fell, this time beyond the mountain.

"Is Aina doing this?!" Shiro could not believe it. The Big Tray's position should be known to them too. Yet the Apsaras was picking off forces from other sectors first, almost as if to tease the Big Tray, even seeming to take pleasure in it.

"Is it ready yet, Michel?"

It wasn't Aina's voice. Whoever was piloting the Apsaras now was not Aina. Shiro didn't know the full circumstances, but the machine was being run by someone else.

"Commander, it's done! I'm starting the countdown—"

"No countdown."

They had no luxury for it; the Apsaras was under attack.

"Just launch it. We don't have time."

“Do whatever you must. I won’t be responsible for what happens.”
Resistance was futile now. Michel closed his eyes and hit the booster ignition switch.



To escape the Federation’s barrage, the Apsaras III had climbed above the black clouds.

Where moments ago the world beneath had been sunless and dim, here above the cloud deck the sunlight poured down in dazzling brilliance. The sun blazed as if to celebrate the birth of the Apsaras III itself.

“Why...”

Clinging to a narrow ridge of the hatch, Aina whispered to herself.

“I said it was a cease-fire... I don’t want to fight anymore...”

Yet the Federation had fired on her.

True, if they killed the pilot, the Apsaras III would be nothing more than a drifting mass of metal. But the transmission had gone out to every unit. They must have heard, so why...

“Now you see, Aina,” Ginias said, triumphant.

“The surest way to end a war is for one side to win it. Come, Aina. Forget what just happened. Join me, and the Apsaras, and we’ll rain light down upon the Federation from the heavens.”

His fingers glided over the console like a concert pianist’s.

The deck beneath Aina’s feet began to vibrate. Beneath the cockpit lay the barrel of the mega particle cannon.

“Brother, stop this!”

“Too late!”

Ginias struck the final key.

Inside the Apsaras III, light swelled, then burst outward in a focused stream.

The mega particle cannon.

Bands of light cascaded downward, swallowing into the black cloud below.

The heat of the beam boiled the clouds away, opening a gaping wound through which hell was visible: soldiers struck by the rain of light, vanishing one after another.

“Ah...”

Aina squeezed her eyes shut. The sight was unbearable.

But Ginias, Ginias stared at it with rapt fascination. Joy gleamed in his eyes.

“Beautiful...”

He murmured the word in ecstasy.

Aina could not believe what she’d heard.

Beautiful?

That inferno on the ground, beautiful?

A tremor ran through her.

Fear.

She was afraid, of her own brother.

Had she been mistaken all along?

She had thought the Apsaras was merely Ginias's way of proving himself, a frail man trying to be acknowledged.

After losing their parents, their home, even his health, Ginias had risen to be called "Your Excellency" in the army thanks to his keen intellect. She'd believed his obsession with research came from that need to be recognized.

But maybe she'd been wrong.

Perhaps it had started that way... but the man before her now was just...

"Brother... what are you?"

Gripping the hatch rim, Aina pulled herself upright. She had to know. She was his only family left, the only one who could still ask.

"Brother, why did you build the Apsaras?"

Ginias smiled.

Why did he smile? Was it pity for the sister who'd finally seen the truth? Or an attempt to deflect her?

"It was a lie, wasn't it?" Aina said. "That talk about winning the war, it was just a pretext to satisfy everyone else."

She took a step toward him.

Even if he had recovered enough to stand, Ginias's strength was half that of an ordinary man. Aina intended to stop him by force if she had to.

"Brother, stop the Apsaras. If you don't—"

"And what will you do?"

Ginias's hands moved again over the controls.

The mega particle cannon fired once more, vaporizing the clouds and the Federation units beneath.

"So that's your answer, then," Aina said.

"It is."

Ginias drew his sidearm.

The muzzle pointed straight at Aina.

Her brother was aiming a gun at his sister.

"I won't let anyone interfere with me and the Apsaras. Not even you."

Two meters separated them.

Too far to reach him by hand, too near for a bullet to miss.

"Brother..."

A powerful sense of déjà vu seized her.

She'd been here before.

In space, a man had aimed a gun at her from about this distance.

But that man had not fired.

He had looked into her eyes and couldn't pull the trigger.

"...Shiro..."

Aina prayed, not to God, but to Shiro.

Ginias's finger tightened on the trigger.

Shiro had not been able to shoot.

Would Ginias?

"Please, brother, stop the Apsaras!"

Aina stepped forward. One more step and she would reach him.

"Stop right there, Aina! I've given no such command!"

"I'm no longer your hands and feet, brother."

She took the final step.

A gunshot rang out.

For an instant, brother and sister's eyes locked.

"Too... late..."

Aina collapsed forward, hand still outstretched toward Ginias.



The body lay before him.

Aina's body.

Her face was hidden, pressed down against the console as if she had fallen forward mid-motion.

Since that incident fifteen years ago, his sister had served him well, as his hands and feet, tending to his needs, even serving as the Apsaras' test pilot. Without Aina, the Apsaras could never have been completed.

In that sense, her corpse had earned the right to remain in its cockpit.

"Aina... I never hated you," Ginias murmured to the still form.

There was something faintly resembling pity in his voice.

But the sentiment didn't last.

A shrill alarm echoed through the Apsaras III's cockpit, an alert for incoming hostiles.

"Hmph. So, the fighter squadron's finally arrived."

Ginias shifted his gaze to the monitor.

But what appeared on-screen wasn't a TIN Cod. In fact, it wasn't even an aircraft.

It looked like a mobile suit, arms, a head, two eyes, and twin antennae. A Gundam, perhaps, if rumor were to be believed.

Yet this mobile suit had no legs.

Instead, it bore aircraft-like components beneath it, like a plane with the upper half of a mobile suit bolted onto its nose.

Ridiculous. Such a misshapen contraption couldn't possibly be a mobile suit. For that matter, a mobile suit shouldn't even be able to reach this altitude, above the clouds. No thruster, no matter how powerful, could sustain flight this high.

But whatever it was, mobile suit or not, the enemy was closing fast. The blaring alarm dragged Ginias back to reality.

"Damn it. Evasive maneuvers—"

He reached for the controls, only to find them blocked, Aina's body was draped over the essential switches.

"Damn it, you're in the way!"

He shoved her aside with a snarl. Aina's body rolled off the chair and thudded beneath the console.

Too late.

A jolt shook the cockpit.

Through the narrow gap her body had left, the approaching enemy craft slammed hard into the Apsaras III's flank, and locked on tight.



"Damn, it actually flew!"

On the ground below, Eledore squinted up at the black clouds that had swallowed Shiro's unit.

"That Ez-8 of his, with that jury-rigged pod stuck to it... unreal, Michel."

"Well, it should fly in theory, but..."

Even Michel, who had done the work himself, sounded stunned.

At Shiro's request, he had replaced the Ez-8's lower half with a Core Booster unit.

The Core Booster, originally designed as support equipment for the RX-78, was a flight module that attached to the RX-series Core Fighter, transforming it into a high-output fighter-bomber.

Shiro and Michel had forcibly grafted that very unit onto the Ez-8. Theoretically, it was possible, the Ez-8 reused RX-78 components, so the basic framework was compatible. Still, "possible" and "safe" were two very different things.

"To think he'd actually fly that thing after slapping it together like that... That's our commander, all right," Eledore said, grinning.

Feasibility was one thing. Climbing into the cockpit yourself was another.

The improvised unit hadn't even been test-run. Michel wasn't a certified mechanic, and who knew how Jidan had even gotten the Core Booster in the first place, it could be defective for all they knew. It might explode mid-flight.

And because of the crude attachment, the Ez-8 couldn't land; if Shiro failed to latch onto the Apsaras, he'd simply crash. The balance was atrocious, barely any control authority, no real means of evasion, and only a shield to defend himself.

Even so, Shiro had gone.

To save the woman he loved.

"Man... that's just like him," Eledore muttered, staring up at the dark sky.

In his mind's eye, he could almost see it, the Ez-8 clinging to the Apsaras somewhere beyond those clouds.



"Aina! Stop the attack, Aina!"

Clinging to the Apsaras' hull, Shiro shouted over the open channel.

There was no answer.

Impossible, the contact link should have worked.

“But I know she’s in there. I know it.”

Shiro lifted the small watch Aina had given him, hanging it around his neck. Then he opened the Ez-8’s cockpit hatch.

Wind roared in.

Sunlight flooded the cabin, dazzling him. Having just come from the shadow beneath the clouds, the brilliance was almost blinding.

“So this is above the clouds...”

Shiro squinted up at the sunlit giant before him, the Apsaras gleaming under the bright sky.

Beneath the crab-like armor shell, he could see the faint outline of a Zaku head. If this was the same configuration as the Apsaras model he knew, the cockpit would be right beneath it.

“Aina... I’m coming.”

Shiro braced against the wind and hauled himself out of the cockpit.



On the right flank of the Apsaras III, the strange, half-plane, half-suit machine clung fast.

But that was all it could do.

It had no weapons. If the pilot let go with even one hand, it would fall away instantly.

“If only it had legs...”

Genias smirked at his own dark humor.

That contraption couldn’t bring down the Apsaras.

He turned his attention instead to the approaching Federation air forces, fighters, attack craft, bombers, every air unit they could muster, converging on his position.

“So afraid of the Apsaras, are you?”

A cruel smile crossed his face as he set his sights on the enemy formation.

The Federation aircraft released their missiles in unison, still out of gun range.

Genias didn’t flinch. He fired the mega particle cannon, no evasive maneuvers needed.

Countless beams lanced out, vaporizing the incoming missiles midair. Every projectile meant for the Apsaras was obliterated.

But it didn’t end there.

The same beams that destroyed the missiles continued on, piercing the Federation formation.

The pilots tried to break away, but the Apsaras’ targeting was flawless. One after another, the aircraft were skewered by radiant lines of energy; explosions filled the sky, smoke and fire painting the heavens.

In a matter of seconds, the first wave of the Federation air force was annihilated.

“Magnificent... Apsaras, you're beautiful.”

Ginias's voice was a low, awed whisper.

Madness burned in his eyes.

“Foolish Federation dogs... I'll rain light upon you once more. The ground below is shrouded in cloud, the sun can't reach it. What a beautiful rain it will be.”



The wind howled around him as Shiro crawled across the surface of the Apsaras.

If he so much as raised his body a little higher, the gusts would snatch him off into the void. Crawling was his only option.

This Apsaras was massive, easily twice the size of the previous model.

Unfortunately, the Ez-8 had latched onto its far right edge. The cockpit looked nearly forty meters away. Crawling that distance through such fierce wind was grueling work; a single lapse in concentration and he'd be blown clean off. There'd be no surviving that fall.

Still...

“Almost there...”

Eyes fixed on the cockpit, Shiro dragged himself forward, inch by inch.

The cockpit lay between the Zaku-like head and the mega particle cannon's firing port. He remembered it clearly, that was where Aina had stood.

The hatch was open now. She was no longer there, but if he could reach it, he'd find her.

From beneath the cockpit, the cannon mouth, a beam flared, followed by a chain of explosions in the eastern sky. The Federation air units, most likely, being wiped out in an instant.

“Damn...”

Shiro turned his eyes away from the sight.

He had to stop it.

He didn't want to believe Aina had fired those shots, but he needed to know. If someone else was piloting, he'd stop them.

He crawled faster, buffeted and nearly thrown off several times, until at last he reached the open hatch below the cockpit. Gripping its edge, he hauled himself upward, muscles trembling with exhaustion.

If he could just climb inside, he'd see Aina again.

He gathered what little strength remained in his arms.

“Aina! It's me, stop the attack!”

He pulled himself up and peered inside the cockpit.

But...

“You're... not her.”

The pilot seated there was not Aina.
He was gaunt, ghostly pale, but Shiro recognized the face from the reflection in Aina's watch: Ginias Sahalin.
Ginias Sahalin, Aina's brother.
The man who had turned her into a puppet.
"Where is Aina?" Shiro's voice was edged with fury.
He knew Ginias was the Apsaras' designer; that much made sense. But where was Aina? She had been right here, only moments ago.
The cockpit had two seats. Ginias sat in the rear one; the forward seat was empty.
Empty, and wrong. Why was it empty?
On the console before Ginias, a slick red stain had splattered across the controls.
Shiro knew instantly, it was blood.
A sick dread twisted in his gut.
"Oh, my sister?"
Ginias's sunken cheek twitched faintly. Apparently he'd smiled.
"She's right here."
His hollow eyes shifted downward.
Shiro followed his gaze.
There, beside Ginias's feet, lay a red normal suit. Face down.
The silver hair that spilled from its helmet was unmistakable.
"Aina!"



"Aina!"
The shout came from the young man who had suddenly appeared before the cockpit.
He wore a Federation uniform. The pilot of that strange half-suit clinging to the Apsaras' side, so this was him.
"So that's how it is, then... The fool actually walked across the hull of the Apsaras in flight. A single misstep and he'd have fallen to his death."
Ginias studied him. The man's entire body trembled.
Anger, perhaps. But why was he angry?
"Why did you kill her?"
The young man's voice was low, strained.
"She was your own blood, your sister!"
Tears streamed down his face. His expression twisted with grief and rage, as though he might spring forward at any moment.
"Who is this man...?"
Ginias didn't recognize him.
Yet the stranger clearly knew Aina, and somehow knew him as her brother.
A Federation officer, familiar with his sister... Why?

And why did this man speak her name so familiarly, "Aina," without title or rank?

"Who are you?"

"Shiro Amada."

The young man, Shiro Amada, stepped closer.

"You... you're the one who broke her! You drove Aina insane!"

He kept moving forward.

Ginias reacted swiftly, drawing his pistol.

"Stop right there."

The muzzle leveled perfectly with Shiro's forehead. Too close to miss.

Shiro froze.

He carried a sidearm too, but if he reached for it, Ginias would shoot first.

Their eyes met, Ginias's bulging, fever-bright gaze locking onto Shiro's steady one.

No words passed between them.

Shiro's eyes burned with fury.

Ginias's, with contempt.

That was enough.

Then...

"Please... stop, brother."

A faint voice. From the floor at Ginias's feet.

Aina was moving.

Bracing herself against the inner wall, she tried to rise.

"Aina!"

"You're alive..." Shiro breathed, joy flooding his voice.

But Ginias only looked disappointed.

"They say women have higher survival odds in accidents. I envy you, such a sturdy body."

"That's why... I became your hands and feet," Aina said weakly, pushing herself upright.

"But that was a mistake."

She managed to stand, then leaned heavily back against the wall, her strength failing.

"I pitied you because you were frail, brother. But I was wrong."



She was alive.

The sound of Aina's voice filled Shiro with joy, then, almost instantly, with fear.

Until that moment, he'd wanted only vengeance. Nothing else mattered, not even his own life. But if Aina was alive, everything changed. He had to save her. He had to live, with her.

She was injured. The abdomen of her red normal suit was soaked in blackened stains. Blood was supposed to be bright red, but this... this was

dark, heavy, almost tar-like. The thought flickered unbidden through Shiro's mind.

Aina was alive, but barely. He had to treat her immediately, get her to a doctor. If he didn't,

"Aina, your wound—"

"Shiro... you actually came for me..."

"I told you, back on that snowy mountain, I'd protect you, even if the whole world turned against me."

A faint smile spread across Aina's face.

"Thank you, Shiro. You've always been the one saving me."

"That's not true. I—"

"But I'll be fine. More importantly..."

Her gaze shifted toward her brother.

"I see," Ginias said, his mouth twisting into a deranged grin. "So that's it, Aina. This man is the one who corrupted you."

"No, brother. It's the opposite."

"What?"

"Shiro saved me. He saved me from that incident fifteen years ago..."



Fifteen years ago.

The words hurled Ginias's mind back in time.

He remembered.

At twelve years old, Ginias had been trapped in an outer block of the spaceport. His sister was with him, sobbing uncontrollably. He'd kept her calm, reassuring her, telling himself he had to stay strong for her sake. If not for that sense of duty as her older brother, he would have cried too.

Eventually, rescue came, a soldier in a heavy space suit. Outside must have been catastrophic. The soldier carried a single normal suit for the survivors.

There was only one. After a moment's hesitation, the soldier handed it to Aina. It was the obvious choice. Had the suit been offered to Ginias, he would have given it to his sister anyway.

The soldier grabbed them both under his arms and began to run.

Ginias and Aina turned their heads to see each other's faces. Inside her helmet, Aina smiled. Ginias smiled back. They were going home, to their parents.

But as they ran through the ruined block, Aina's expression twisted with fear. She was crying, shouting something he couldn't hear. Her voice came muffled through the helmet, but it sounded like "I'm sorry." Sorry? For what?

Ginias turned his head, and saw it.

Rain.

A rain of light.

Normally, a colony's outer block was shielded by a protective field against cosmic rays. But the ship explosion had destroyed that barrier. Now, the radiation streamed in freely.

The "rain of light" was invisible to the others, to Aina, to the soldier, but Ginias saw it clearly. The radiation was frying his retinas, awakening a strange, raw vision of something no human eyes should see.

"Beautiful..."

He whispered the word, enraptured.

The shattered hull, Aina's tearful face, everything else disappeared from his awareness.

Later, once rescued, Ginias forgot that vision. As his body slowly recovered from radiation damage, the memory sank into the depths of his mind.

Fourteen years passed.

Then, in a laboratory inside Side 3, he saw it again.

During a mega particle cannon test for the Apsaras, the light filled a small experimental cube, shimmering, cascading particles falling like rain.

In an instant, the lost memory surged back.

That beautiful vision, his highest, most transcendent moment, the threshold between life and death, had returned.

But what he saw before him now was tiny, pitifully small.

The real thing had filled his entire world. A deluge of light raining down over everything.

He needed more.

More light.

More scale.

More glory.

From that moment on, Ginias's research consumed him. The Apsaras Project became his colossal projector, his attempt to recreate the light of that memory.

Yes.

To Ginias, the Apsaras was never a weapon.

It was...

"Do not interfere, Aina."

Still aiming his gun at Shiro, Ginias spoke in a trembling, fervent voice.

"Anyone who obstructs my art, even my own sister, will die without mercy."



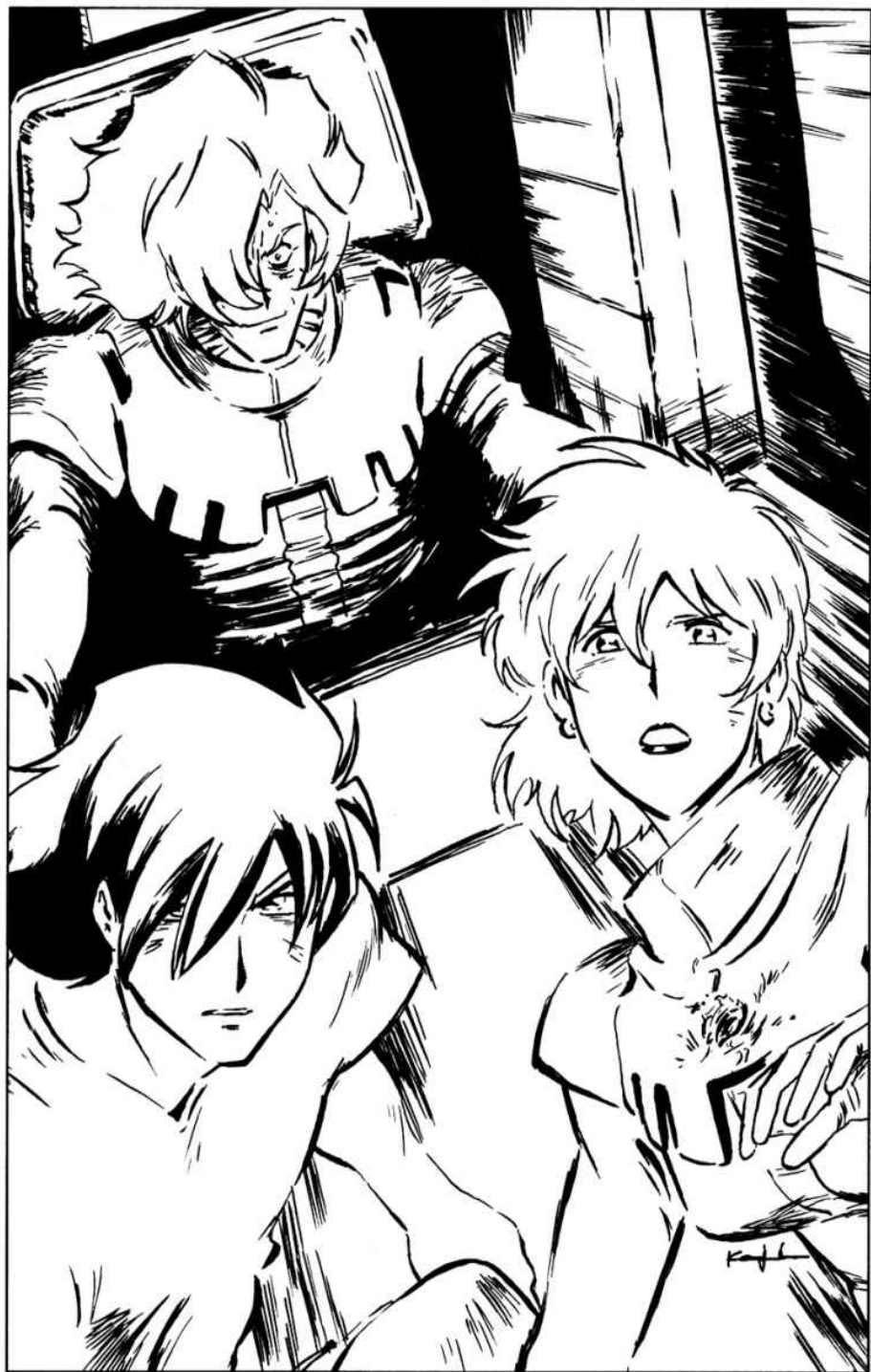
"Art?"

At that single word from Ginias, Aina understood.

Her brother was insane.

Someone had to stop him.

"Someone... that someone is me."



Aina drew her pistol.
And with trembling hands, aimed it at her brother's head.



"Well now... can you really shoot me, Aina?"

Ginias spoke with a twisted smile, watching her out of the corner of his eye, almost amused.

"Can you shoot your own brother?"

He looked entirely at ease.

Aina, by contrast, was barely standing. She was leaning against the wall, her outstretched arm shaking as she tried to keep the gun level.

"Aina can't do it..."

Shiro watched the trembling muzzle and knew.

The real Aina was gentle. She could never kill anyone. She hadn't even been able to shoot him, a Federation soldier, an enemy. There was no way she could shoot her own brother.

But Ginias could.

He had already shot his sister once. What reason would he have to hesitate with a stranger, an enemy?

"I have to do something..."

Shiro began to edge forward, slow and careful.

While Ginias's attention was on Aina, he would rush in and grab the gun. If he could disarm him, no one else had to die.

But...

"Don't move."

Ginias had seen it.

Even as he watched Aina, he hadn't missed the faintest shift in Shiro's stance.

"You first."

His bulging eyes turned on Shiro, gleaming with madness. They looked as if they might burst from their sockets.

"Watch closely, Aina. I'll show you what happens when the man who seduced you has his brains blown out. I'll hate soiling the Apsaras with his filth, but..."

His finger tightened on the trigger.

There was no chance of missing.

Shiro drew in a sharp breath.

And then...



A gunshot.



The instant he heard it, Shiro shut his eyes.

But... no pain came.

From that distance, he should already be dead, shot clean through the head.

Had it been a single instant kill? Was that why he felt nothing?

Slowly, uncertain if what he was seeing was reality or not, Shiro opened his eyes.

This was no heaven.

No afterlife.

The cockpit around him was cold, bare, mechanical. One seat stood empty.

In front of it, slumped over the control console, was Ginias, blood, thick and black, dripping from his temple.

Beside him stood Aina, leaning against the wall, a gun still in her hands. Faint smoke curled from its barrel.

"I'm sorry... brother."

Her hand went slack. The pistol slipped from her grasp and clattered against the floor with a hollow metallic ring.

Her eyes were vacant as she stared down at it, yet through the veil of tears, they looked almost painfully beautiful.

Still leaning against the wall, Aina slid down until she sat on the floor. A dark smear of blood trailed down the wall where her back had been.

"Aina!"

Shiro rushed to her.

Whatever had happened, he could think about it later.

Right now, he had to save her.

Chapter.07

Escape

"Where did it go?"

Ethan stared up at the thick black clouds overhead.

After unleashing two volleys from its mega particle cannon and annihilating roughly seven battalions, the enemy mobile armor had vanished. No further shots had come down since.

The first wave of the Federation Air Force, launched in emergency pursuit, had reported visual contact above the cloud layer, only to be wiped out moments later, likely by that same cascading shower of mega particle fire.

The second wave had followed soon after, but they too found nothing. Was the enemy hiding within the clouds, or had it already fled the area?

"Damn it! Still no sighting?"

Chief of Staff Peter Camlin's voice cracked hysterically. At any moment, the sky could once again rain down death; for Ethan's staff, who until now had commanded from the safety of the rear, it was an intolerable sort of dread.

"They must be inside the cloud bank, sir. Our sensors can't—"

"I didn't ask for excuses!"

The young communications officer flinched under the outburst. Camlin didn't care to hear explanations; the only report he wanted was of the enemy's destruction.

"If only we still had working radar..."

The nostalgic mutter came from Captain Robert Carricart, a forty-year veteran whose only decoration was longevity itself. He was remembering the days before Minovsky particles had made such systems useless.

Ethan scowled. None of his subordinates could offer a solution.

Kojima, the only officer with real combat experience, had already left. To call down for advice from field command now would only make headquarters look weak.

"What about the 08th Team?" Ethan asked suddenly. He'd heard that Ensign Shiro Amada had launched in some sort of modified mobile suit.

"No movement, sir. Shall I open a channel?"

"No. Leave it."

If there'd been any success, Amada would have reported in. His silence could mean only one thing: the mission had failed.

"Foolish of me to expect otherwise."

Ethan allowed himself a thin, bitter smile. That wasn't like him. War was, after all, a matter of numbers. One team commander's courage could never change the tide.

"Continue the air search. Ground forces are to concentrate on the Zeon base, don't let a single enemy escape."

He issued his orders once more. He couldn't afford to fall behind in the race for promotion, not while that insufferable Revil was racking up victories elsewhere.



"Colonel, has there still been no word from Miss Aina?"

Bill Harlow, one of the lead researchers, ran up as soon as he spotted Falkenberg. He had come as a representative of the remaining scientists to ask about the situation.

"No contact," Falkenberg answered after a short pause. He hesitated, too much information might only cause panic among the noncombatants. But then again, the researchers knew the Apsaras III better than anyone. They might think of a way to reestablish contact.

"Harlow, given your knowledge of the Apsaras, I need your opinion. What do you think its current status might be?"

"Has there been any response to your transmissions?"

"None. We tried even the general channels."

"And the ground-based trackers? Apsaras' indicator signal—"

"Destroyed in the Federation bombardment. We've exhausted every conventional option. Isn't there some way unique to the Apsaras to verify Miss Aina's position?"

Listening nearby, Lieutenant Valli noticed something odd. Neither of them had mentioned Ginias. Strange. For both this researcher and Falkenberg, Ginias was technically their superior, commander of the base itself, while that woman Aina had only ever been a test pilot.

And hadn't she been negotiating with the Federation, of all people?

Yuri had once told her that Aina Sahalin was nothing more than a lifeless doll of a woman. So why was everyone speaking of her as though she were irreplaceable?

"I'm sorry, Colonel," Harlow said at last. "The Apsaras III has almost no functions beyond flight and combat. There wasn't time to add anything else."

"I see..."

Falkenberg's shoulders slumped. But there was no time to wallow in despair. With Ginias, Norris, and Yuri all gone, Falkenberg now held the highest authority in the base. The lives of everyone left depended on him.

"Captain Vary, status of evacuation?"

"All personnel have boarded, including those from the outer tunnels. We can launch within two minutes on your order."

"Good. Prepare for immediate departure."

"Colonel, are you abandoning Miss Aina?" Harlow burst out.

"I have no choice."

Falkenberg understood the man's anguish. Were he not bound by duty and rank, he might have condemned the same decision himself.

"Miss Aina wanted above all to save the men left behind. Our greatest effort should be to fulfill that wish. That's the duty of those she trusted with her command."

"But..."

Harlow's protest faltered. He remembered the woman who had returned from the mountains, Aina, reborn with compassion and resolve. She would have wanted this. Even at the cost of her own life, she would have chosen to save others.

"Understood."

Seeing the grief carved into Falkenberg's face, Harlow nodded. The colonel's pain mirrored his own.



"Find and recover Ensign Amada!"

The order came from a familiar voice as the hatch of the Bloodhound opened, and in stepped Commander Kojima himself.

"Commander?!"

"Why are you here, sir?"

Ignoring Michel and Eledore's surprise, Kojima dropped heavily into the navigator's seat beside Michel. "Open a secure channel. To the 08th Team only."

"Chief Joshua, Sergeant Sanders, this is Kojima."

"Commander?"

"We thought you were still aboard the Big Tray!"

"Never mind that," Kojima cut them off. "Listen carefully. We have to secure Ensign Amada ourselves."

"Captain Shiro?"

"That's right. He's the only one who spoke directly with Major General Ethan about the ceasefire."

"Now that you mention it..."

Karen's memory flashed to the earlier exchange. 'Yes, a ceasefire. Not an end to the war.' Ethan's exact words.

"He's our witness," Kojima continued. "If it's proven that General Ethan broke the ceasefire unilaterally, we can save Ensign Amada."

"I get it now!" Michel clapped his hands. "If he was trying to uphold the truce, they can't charge him with aiding the enemy!"

"And if the ceasefire is recognized," Eledore added, grinning, "then Aina's in the clear too. She was tricked into that fight. Even the government would have to treat them fairly."

"Exactly." Kojima nodded gravely. "There are still rules in war. We are soldiers, not murderers."



“Thank you, Shiro. I’m all right now.”

Aina smiled weakly, bandages wound clumsily around her normal suit.

But the wound in her abdomen, where Ginias’s bullet had passed clean through, was severe. Even after sealing it with a field spray, she had no business smiling.

“Pass me that bag,” she said, pointing toward Ginias’s satchel. “There’s medicine inside.”

Her brother had been dependent on painkillers for years.

Shiro opened the bag and handed her the contents in a bundle. He couldn’t tell, but half of what he’d given her bordered on narcotics.

“Brother...”

Aina looked up at Ginias’s slumped body over the pilot’s chair. His condition must have been so far gone that he’d needed such poisons just to function.

She rolled up her sleeve and injected the pain suppressant.

A faint numbness spread through her limbs, dulling the agony in her gut.

The injury was serious, but not fatal.

The bullet meant for her heart had missed.

Ginias’s aim had always been precise. Even confined to a frail body, he had drilled endlessly with a pistol. She remembered how General Yuri’s corpse had been found, shot clean through the back of the skull.

“And yet... I’m alive.”

At that range, Ginias could not have missed. But he had.

Perhaps, Aina thought, he had missed by choice. Some last fragment of sanity, buried deep within his madness, had refused to kill his sister.

There was still, somewhere inside him, a shred of humanity.

She wanted to believe that. She had to believe that.

Otherwise, both Ginias, and she herself, would be too pitiful to bear.

“Goodbye, brother. My last family...”

Aina bowed her head and silently prayed.

When she closed her eyes, Shiro’s voice came to her, tight with worry.

“Aina, we have to get you to a hospital. If you can tell me how to pilot the Apsaras, I’ll try to fly us to the nearest town.”

“No, Shiro. We can’t abandon everyone else.”

Aina grasped his hand.

“Please. I want to save the people left at the base.”

“But... how? What can we do?”

Shiro’s brow furrowed in confusion.

He wasn’t wrong. They couldn’t force another ceasefire; the Apsaras III no longer commanded that kind of fear. To annihilate the Federation troops now would save the Zeon survivors, but at the cost of countless others. That wasn’t salvation.

So what then?

Aina didn’t know. But she couldn’t give up.

Faces filled her memory.

the veteran soldier who had shown her a photograph of his family;

the engineer who dreamed of building pleasure cruisers after the war;
the young female officer who believed in a free Spacenoid nation;
the boyish trooper who laughed that he'd find a lover when he got home;
the wounded man who wept when told he alone had survived.

She wanted to save them all.

She wanted to send them home, to space, alive.

If her brother's madness had damned them, then it was her duty as his sister to undo it.

"I understand, Aina."

Shiro took her hand and smiled.

"I've got an idea. I'll make sure your people get back to space safely."



"The mountain's opening!"

The strange report burst across the Big Tray's bridge.

For a moment, no one understood, until the operator patched in a live feed.

"What the—"

A murmur swept the bridge. On the forward monitor, the northern slope of the mountain the Federation had been shelling was splitting apart, like a giant pair of gates opening from within. From inside, a launch catapult slowly extended outward.

"So that's it, they're trying to launch a ship."

Ethan grasped the enemy's intention immediately. The pilot of the mobile armor, Aina Sahalin, had requested a ceasefire so that the wounded could evacuate.

"I see. So that's their escape route."

A smile crept across Ethan's face.

Of course they'd wanted a truce. Under these conditions, any launch attempt would be suicide. A single missile hitting their booster, and the craft would erupt in flames before leaving the atmosphere.

If they were preparing to flee, that meant the mobile armor was finished. If it were still operational, they'd never risk open flight.

"Victory."

Ethan felt certain of it. In the end, war was a matter of numbers.

"The enemy intends to escape to space. All units, target their launch boosters. Bring them down before they clear the mountain!"

He added, for morale's sake, "The enemy mobile armor is no longer a threat. Concentrate on the ships ahead!"



"The enemy mobile armor is no longer a threat. Concentrate on the ships ahead!"

Ethan's words reached the O8th Team as well.

"Wait, does that mean the Commander and Miss Aina were shot down?"

Michel looked helplessly at Kojima beside him.

But the commander said nothing. Even Eledore, usually quick with a comment, stayed silent, listening intently for the faint hum of the Apsaras through the static.

"Karen?" Michel finally asked.

"Shut it, Michel," she snapped.

"But—"

"That softhearted fool wouldn't go down that easy. He took that good-luck charm, didn't he?"

Her voice cracked with anger, but it wasn't anger at all, it was fear. Karen didn't want to believe it either.

"Have faith."

It was all Kojima said.

It was the only truth he'd learned in thirty years of soldiering.



"Entering final countdown. Mark thirty."

At the voice, Bill Harlow stiffened.

They were going home, no, not home. They were about to thrust themselves into the sky, right into the jaws of the enemy.

"Thirty seconds."

The steady cadence of the countdown echoed through the bridge.

"Twenty-nine."

His knees shook uncontrollably.

"Calm yourself."

Colonel Falkenberg placed a firm hand on Harlow's shoulder. The decision to launch had been so sudden that Harlow hadn't even returned to the research block; he had stayed here on the bridge.

"But Colonel... can we really make it through all that fire?"

"Twenty-eight."

"I'm no soldier, but it doesn't take one to see what happens if they concentrate their fire. One good hit and the boosters—"

"Twenty-seven."

"The Kerguelen will go up in flames. Less than one percent chance of avoiding chain detonation—"

"Quiet."

Falkenberg clapped a hand over the scientist's mouth.

"Twenty-six."

"Those calculations mean nothing now. There's only one thing left we can do."

"One thing?"

Harlow met his eyes, bewildered.

“Pray.”

Falkenberg’s face was deadly serious.

After a moment, Harlow bowed his head. He prayed, to the goddess of fortune.

And for some reason, that goddess wore Aina’s face.



“Don’t let the Zeek bastards get away!”

Lieutenant Jacobs barked the order, practically gleeful.

He had been shouting since the moment the attack orders came down. If one of his batteries scored the kill on the escaping enemy ship, his record would soar, and maybe, just maybe, so would his rank. Ambition burned bright in his voice.

“Make every shot count! Keep firing until the barrels melt! Don’t let a single one of them escape!”

“Lieutenant.”

His adjutant, Lieutenant JG John Milford, turned sharply, face tense. He pointed toward the northern slope of the mountain. A thick plume of smoke was rising there.

“They’ve ignited their boosters.”

“Then they’re coming out. Keep your sights locked!”

Jacobs’s voice dropped suddenly, almost a whisper. The hush that followed was contagious, the entire line of Federation soldiers fell silent, each man gripping his trigger, breath held tight in his chest.

The battlefield was eerily still.

From the enemy base, the deep rumble of the launch boosters began to build, a thunderous undulation that seemed to shake the mountain itself.

It was coming.

The enemy ship was about to break through.

Sweat ran down the men’s fingers where they clutched their triggers.

The air felt too thick to breathe.

And then...

Music.



“What the hell is that?”

“Where’s it coming from?”

“Turn it off, shut it off!”

The bridge of the Big Tray erupted into confusion.

The timing couldn’t have been worse. Just when every eye was fixed on the mountain, every nerve stretched taut, a melody suddenly filled the air. The chaos that followed was almost comical, a complete breakdown of discipline.

"Channels are normal, sir," reported the communications officer, the only one who hadn't lost his composure. "Signal origin appears to be Zeon frequencies."

"Zeon?"

"A jamming attempt?"

"Commander, we should cut the line immediately!"

"No, this could be a diversion. If we close the channel, we might miss a coded signal."

Arguments flared among the staff, each more baseless and self-serving than the last. Ethan stood at the center of it all, glowering, his patience wearing thin.

Meanwhile, two communications officers were whispering to each other.

"Hey... this music."

"Yeah. I recognize it."

"It's that theme song, isn't it? The one that plays at the start of the show."

"With the title credits scrolling across the screen."

"Right. But why now?"

The rank-and-file soldiers knew.

They recognized the melody. It was the theme of a popular television series, one that had inspired many of them to enlist in the first place.

"Commander! Look, out there!"

One of the staff officers shouted suddenly, his mouth hanging open as he pointed through the viewing glass.

"The clouds, look at the clouds!"

"The clouds?"

Ethan frowned and strode toward the window.



A Zeon artillery shell landed close, far too close.

The explosion sent a cloud of dust rolling across the field, swallowing sight and sound alike.

Joe broke from the trench the instant it hit, sprinting through the haze. Sergeant Vic Morrow and the medic, Stevens, followed close behind.

Gunfire cracked through the smoke, explosions pounding the churned-up ground beneath their boots.

Then, suddenly, the dust cleared.

Joe dove into a fresh shell crater, one gouged out by Zeon's own barrage. Morrow and the Doc tumbled in beside him just as a volley of bullets hissed overhead, close enough to part their hair.

"Hell of an overreaction for a little foxhole," Joe muttered, the stub of his cigarette clamped at a slant between his lips.

"Zeon always overdoes it," the Doc said darkly. "Gas attacks, colony drops... they don't know the meaning of restraint."

It was a scene from Captain Joe, the popular wartime drama now blazing across the sky.

Projected on the canopy of black cloud in inverted yellow light, it looked like a negative film print, but there was no mistaking it. The entire battlefield was bathed in the ghostly, upside-down glow of Captain Joe.

And the projector was none other than,

"We're using the mega particle cannon to paint the clouds," Aina said in awe, staring upward at the moving image in the sky.

"I once saw a show do something like this, draw figures in smoke with lasers," Shiro said, tapping the disk console. "Didn't think it'd come in handy here, though."

It was the Captain Joe video disc he had meant to throw away, then slipped absent-mindedly into his pocket instead.

"Shiro... you never cease to amaze me."

"I could say the same about you. That speech you gave, I didn't think you had it in you."

He grinned, but it wasn't a joke. He truly hadn't imagined Aina could rally the base like that.

Aina smiled faintly. "I didn't either. I'm still surprised at myself. It must be because of you, Shiro... ah—"

Her body folded forward, hand clutching her abdomen.

"Don't talk. I'll take it from here."

"I'm sorry, Shiro. This was my idea, and yet..."

"It's fine."

He squeezed her hand gently.

"From now on, it's the two of us. When one of us can't, the other steps up. That's how it'll be."

"Yes..."

She placed her other hand over his.

"From now on... the two of us."

Her cheeks flushed with shy warmth.



"That idiot... Captain Joe, to the very end," Eledore muttered, half exasperated, half laughing as he looked up at the sky.

"How the hell's he pulling that off?"

Sanders's voice came through the comm, perplexed, but with a trace of admiration.

"He's drawing pictures on the clouds with low-output mega particle fire," Michel explained. "Kind of like the old cathode-ray tubes."

"Cathode what?"

"CRT monitors. They drew images by firing electrons at a screen. Same principle."

It wasn't a perfect description, but close enough.

The Apsaras was firing dispersed, low-energy mega particles in thousandth-of-a-second bursts, tracing light across the clouds. Its cannon, designed for wide-field dispersion and high precision, made it possible.

"Of all things... a Captain Joe screening in the middle of a warzone. Hah! That's so like him," Michel said, laughing aloud.

"Hopeless. That softhearted fool."

In her cockpit, Karen threw up her hands.

All they could do was laugh, or surrender to it.

It was too absurd, too human, for anything else.



"Impossible!"

The fat Zeon officer shouted as he watched three human figures charge straight through the storm of bullets.

"How can they still be standing? Are they immortal?"

The trio were, of course, Joe, Doc, and Morrow, each carrying an anti-tank rocket, running headlong toward a Zeon mobile suit: a Zaku.

Federation infantry poured fire at their backs, the Zaku raked its machine gun downward in sweeping bursts, yet not a single shot found them.

"You'll have to do better than that, tin-cans!"

In the middle of the gunfire, Joe grinned, almost enjoying himself.

"You wanna know why?"

He slid feet-first beneath the Zaku's legs, raising his launcher from the dirt.

The rocket streaked up, straight into the mobile suit's backpack thrusters.

An explosion.

The Zaku pitched forward as the blast ripped its back apart.

Across the field, Doc raised a thumb in triumph.

"Because we're the good guys," Joe said, answering his own question.

We're the good guys.

On a real battlefield, the words sounded empty, almost cruel.

Because they were the good guys, bullets couldn't kill them?

Because they were the good guys, they'd win the war?

What was "good"?

Who decided?

The soldiers on the ground stared upward, watching Captain Joe play across the sky.

"This isn't how it was..."

An older soldier's voice trembled.

The Captain Joe he remembered had never talked about justice. It had been co-opted, twisted into government propaganda, a series to stir hearts for war.

"My kid used to say he wanted to be Captain Joe when he grew up," a middle-aged trooper murmured, eyes soft with nostalgia.

For boys, war had always looked brave, glamorous. It had for him too, once.

"We were just kids," said a younger soldier, about Shiro's age, smiling bitterly. "We thought it was cool. We didn't know what war really was. Guess we were lucky back then."

"Hah! Look at that, Zaku for bad guys now?"

One GM pilot laughed out loud at the absurdity. The Captain Joe he remembered hadn't even featured Zeon, let alone men charging enemy suits bare-handed.

"Man, that cigarette. I used to copy the way he flicked it during drills."

A mechanic puffed on his own smoke, a different brand entirely.

All across the lines, the Federation soldiers were looking skyward.

Two full divisions stood still, watching Captain Joe blazing across the heavens.

It was madness, no, worse than madness. It was an utterly absurd spectacle.

And confronted with that ridiculous sight, not one of them knew what to do.

They simply stared at the sky, spellbound.



"Hey... I've seen this before."

"Four."

"Yeah. Captain Something, right? They used to run it on our side too."

"No, not that..."

"Three."

"Right. It's just like Eagles of Space. The one with Ensign Heinrich."

"Two."

"So that's what this is..."

"One."

"Maybe the Feddies... are the same as us."

"Zero."

The countdown ended.

The Kerguelen lunged out at full power, straight toward Captain Joe blazing on the black-cloud screen.



At last, the enemy ship burst free.

Its massive boosters roared as it climbed, vanishing into the black canopy, into the image of Captain Joe itself.

On the Big Tray's bridge, the Federation staff stared, dumbstruck. It felt like a dream: the sky turned into a movie screen, a gigantic matinee idol

flickering across a nightmare. And yet however unreal it looked, it was real, and Ethan was the first to grasp it.

They had let the enemy escape.

By the time the realization hit, it was too late.

In any launch, the first seconds decide everything. Booster armor is next to nothing; a single hit is likely to trigger a chain detonation. But survive those brief moments and you're at the stratosphere, beyond the reach of most guns or flak.

The Federation had squandered those first seconds.

"Fire! Shoot them down!" Ethan shouted.

But the ship was gone, so the only target left was...

"Concentrate all fire on the enemy mobile armor. Don't let it leave in one piece!"

He jabbed a finger toward the Apsaras projecting images into the cloud deck from the mountain's shadow.



The 08th Team raced flat-out for the Apsaras hanging beneath the clouds. Shiro Amada was the sole living witness to Major General Ethan's unilateral breach of the ceasefire. If he testified, Ethan could be tried under military law.

They had to move fast.

Ethan would try to erase Shiro, "aiding the enemy," "disobeying orders," any charge would do. The 08th Team had to get there first.

"Step on it. We will secure Ensign Amada before anyone else,"

Commander Kojima barked at Michel.

Kojima liked the young lieutenant, that was why he'd let the first "deal with the guerrillas" slide. Such openhearted, dangerously earnest soldiers were rare. It reminded him of himself, a lifetime ago...

The enemy ship punched out from the northern slope, and the Federation didn't fire.

It slid into the black canopy and was gone. The escape had worked.

"They did it..." Kojima murmured.

A heartbeat later the Federation remembered to shoot, at the Apsaras, now drifting below the clouds.

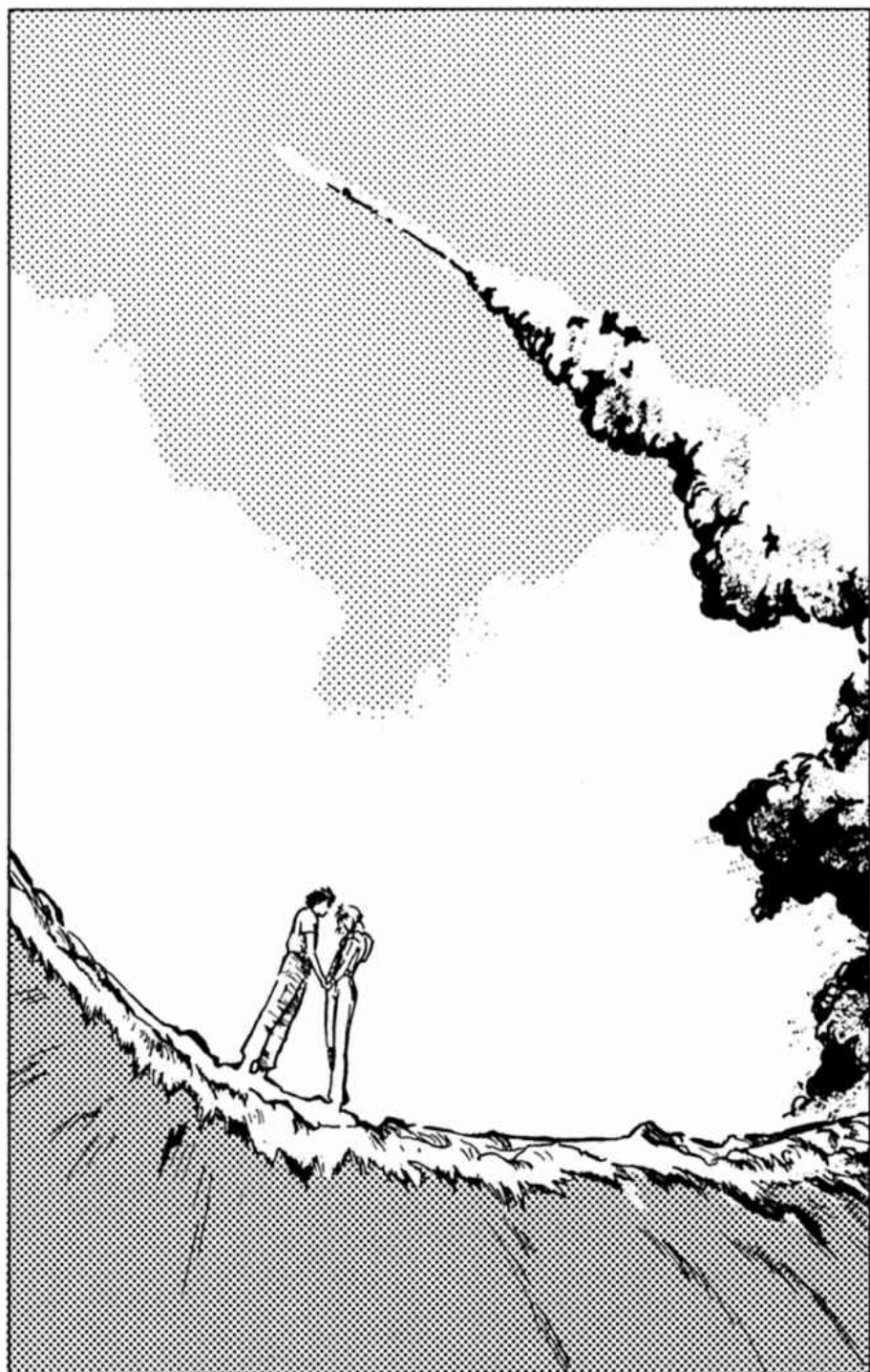
Two full divisions opened up at once, hundreds of guns vomiting fire skyward. Like rewinding the Apsaras' earlier rain of light, beams and shells now poured into it.

Shots from below were blunted by the Minovsky craft's repulsive field. But even thick armor and twin Minovsky craft could not shrug off millions of rounds.

In less than a second, the Apsaras bloomed into flame.

"Commander!"

Michel's cry tore out beside Kojima.



The fireball staggered, then began to fall. Federation guns kept raking it, concentrating fire on the tumbling, smoking mass.

Its trajectory carried it straight toward the northern slope, the same mouth the enemy ship had just flown from. The Apsaras slipped into that wound in the mountain and exploded.

Flame and black cloud geysered skyward.

It was over in an instant.

“No way...”

The Bloodhound lurched as Michel’s foot slipped off the pedal. He stared, hollow-eyed, at the plume of smoke. Words failed him.

“Michel. Drive,” Sanders snapped. “What did the Commander teach you, to give up? Is that it?”

Sanders didn’t ease off for a moment.

He had sworn to himself he would never surrender, because that was what Shiro had taught him.

“Yeah, Michel,” Eledore chimed in, trying to lift him. “He even took that good-luck charm, remember? The Commander’s not the dying type.”

Getting shot at by your own for saving the enemy... the Commander was the softest-hearted fool in the world.

Somehow, Eledore had come to love that fool.

“Eledore’s right. Dying for a girl? That romantic crap doesn’t suit him,” Karen said, thinking of the fragile woman they’d seen in Baruk Village. Whenever Shiro talked about Aina, something in her bristled. Was it... jealousy? Or was it just worry, like for a kid brother? There was only one way to know, see him again.

“...Understood.”

Michel nodded, small but firm. He remembered the first time Shiro launched to save Sanders. He’d thought, What an idiot. Heroes die young. But even then, he’d envied that reckless courage.

“Let’s go!”

He slammed the pedal down. The Bloodhound howled to life, kicking up a new storm of dust.

The 08th Team ran as if in prayer.

Every one of them believed Shiro was alive.

Not one of them doubted.



Forty thousand kilometers above Lhasa, outside the atmosphere, the Kerguelen had made it.

Unlike Earth, space superiority here wasn’t yet the Federation’s. From this altitude, they could slip away toward Side 3.

They were safe.

“Miss Aina...”



Unbuckling from his reentry seat, Falkenberg rose and faced the blue planet, raising his hand in salute.

It was the highest honor he could offer a single brave woman.

“Norris... your daughter was magnificent.”

At last, Falkenberg understood what his old comrade had felt for her. He’d never said it aloud out of respect for Norris, but truthfully, he’d seen her the way the soldiers did, as something distant, faceless. A doll.

When he lowered his hand, he realized Bill Harlow was saluting beside him.

Not just Harlow, everyone on the Kerguelen bridge stood at attention.

They saluted the woman once dismissed as a “faceless doll,” the one who, in the end, had saved them all.

The day’s battle log would record the following:

The Lhasa Base Offensive ended in a Federation victory. Though one Zeon ship escaped, the base carved into the mountains was seized under Major General Ethan’s command, and the enemy’s new-model mobile armor was destroyed.

There was no mention of Captain Joe blazing across the black clouds.

And on the casualty list, among the dead, was the name of Ensign Shiro Amada...

Epilogue

Universal Century 0080, January 1st.

The Earth Federation and the Principality of Zeon signed a peace accord.

Only the day before, both sides had been locked in a ferocious battle at Zeon's space fortress, A Baoa Qu. The sudden end came almost overnight.

The direct cause was the annihilation of the Zabi family, the ruling dynasty of the Principality of Zeon.

Degwin Zabi, founder of the Principality, was killed just before the battle when his son, Gihren, lured him into a trap that also took down Federation General Revil. Gihren himself was then shot by his sister, Kycilia, in the heat of the conflict. Claiming it as punishment for patricide, Kycilia scarcely had time to justify her act before she too was killed, by whom remains unknown: Gihren loyalists, reformists, or Federation spies.

Driven back to the edge of their home territory at Side 3, the remaining Zeon leadership sued for peace through neutral Side 6.

The Federation, exhausted by more than a year of warfare and wary of Zeon's still-unknown strength at Side 3 and Granada, accepted. Thus, the One Year War came to an abrupt end the very next day.

It was called an "armistice," but in truth, it was a Federation victory.

The Principality became the Republic of Zeon, its military gutted and its armaments restricted. Yet not everyone accepted defeat. Scattered Zeon remnants continued to fight, and although the scale of these conflicts was small, the war's embers smoldered on across the Earth and colonies.

Still, compared to what had come before, it was peace.

Enough peace for soldiers, more than half of them, to return home.

With the return of its workforce from the front lines, the world at last began to rebuild.

The vast energy that had once fueled destruction was now turned toward creation.

It was a miraculous, joyful transformation, one that reached everywhere: to the colonies, to the Earth, to the great cities and the smallest of villages.

Even to a place like Baruk Village.

The stuttering roar of an old sidecar motorcycle echoed along the rutted road leading into the village.

At the handlebars was Lily, now the village chief of Baruk.

After Baresto's death, the villagers had chosen her to lead. She'd protested that she was too young, but they'd insisted, a new era needed new hands.

Most of the men were gone, slaughtered in the Federation's massacre. Those who'd survived were maimed, missing arms, missing legs, or broken in mind. In such times, Lily had no choice but to accept the role.

"Kiki... if only you were still here."

Every time someone called her “chief,” Lily thought of her.

Kiki should have been the one.

She'd been cool-headed, fair, and a bright spark of humor amid the gloom. Only seventeen, fragile in some ways, but that fragility was part of why everyone loved her.

“The world never works out the way it should, does it...”

Lily sighed inwardly, a small, habitual exhale that had become second nature since becoming chief.

The leader couldn't show weakness. If she faltered, the people would too. At least not until the village was whole again.

She tightened her grip on the handlebars and straightened her back.

“Hey, can I open it yet?”

The voice came from the sidecar, Mati, fidgeting with excitement. She was talking about the mailbag sitting between them.

Postal service had returned to the cities, but remote villages like Baruk still received their letters through a drop station in the nearest town.

“Be patient, Mati. We're going to read them together.”

“Okay...”

Even as she answered, Mati was clearly itching to peek inside. She held one envelope up to the light, trying to glimpse the words within.

“It's been over a year now...”

Lily smiled faintly and opened the throttle. The sidecar's engine coughed and growled as it picked up speed, kicking dust into the wind.

She wanted to reach everyone as fast as she could, to bring the letters home.

And to finally read a message from a dear, old friend.



Axes struck rhythmically through the air as the sound of wood splitting echoed through the clearing.

Felled trees were already being sawed into smaller logs for easier transport back to the village. The remaining stumps were dug up with shovels and leveled flat into new fields.

The villagers were clearing the forest to expand their farmland.

During the war, this forest had been their natural fortress, shielding them from danger. Now, with peace returned, it had become their lifeline; they needed every patch of soil they could cultivate.

“Hey, Kurt! Bring over the digger, will you?”

The shout came from Ted, a short, wiry young man slapping the side of an old mechanical excavator. With his left arm useless since the war, he couldn't handle the two-handed controls.

Kurt, the man he called to, wasn't in much better shape. His arms were sound, but his right leg was gone, lost, like Ted's arm, to the same war. Balancing on his cane, Kurt dug at the roots with a hoe, sweat dripping

steadily from his brow. He didn't bother to wipe it away; he just kept swinging.

"Hey, Kurt! Give me a hand over here!"

Kurt finally looked up.

"Ah, sorry."

He wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

"Ever since the baby came, you've been working yourself half to death."

"Yeah... maybe."

A gentle smile crept across Kurt's face as he pictured his newborn daughter. He adored her, she'd been born just last month, and he hadn't stopped talking about her since.

"Lucky bastard. Some of us are still single, you know," Ted grumbled, though his heart wasn't in it. He hadn't let himself fall for anyone in the past year. He still couldn't forget Kiki.

"But maybe... it's time, isn't it?"

Watching the happiness on Kurt's face, Ted felt something stir.

The memory of Kiki's smile overlapped with the image of the tiny, sleeping baby he'd seen in Kurt's arms.

"I should... find someone new."

He glanced back at the group breaking down the cut logs.

The war had taken most of the men; now women outnumbered them in Baruk Village by far. If he truly wanted to, finding someone wouldn't be difficult.

Among the women was Kurt's wife, Jeanne, the baby nestled beside her as she worked. The first time Ted had met her, he couldn't imagine her handling this kind of heavy labor, but she'd proven stronger than she looked.

Jeanne suddenly lifted her head, eyes narrowing toward the hill beyond the clearing. The other women followed suit.

A moment later, Ted understood why.

From beyond the ridge came the growl of an engine, the familiar sputtering of a motorbike.

Lily, the village chief, was coming home.



"Everyone, come gather around!"

Lily swung herself off the sidecar, waving to the villagers at work. She hardly needed to call twice; tools were already dropping, laughter breaking out as people made their way toward her. The chief always came back from town with something worth looking forward to.

"Welcome back, Chief!"

"Did you find any of that good liquor?"

"You picked up the cigarettes I asked for, right?"

"What about candy? Please tell me you brought candy!"

"Later," Lily said, smiling as she shoed them toward the open space by the well. "Sit, all of you."

The villagers, barely forty souls in all, gathered in a loose circle. That was the entirety of Baruk Village now.

"Today," Lily began, "along with the usual goods, we've got something special."

A low rumble of excitement rolled through the crowd. People whispered guesses, liquor, a movie reel, new tools, even a working generator.

"None of that," Lily teased. "The real surprise is... this."

She held up an envelope.

"A letter?" someone said.

"That's right. And guess who it's from?"

She looked around, eyes twinkling, but no one spoke. Who could she possibly mean?

"Kurt," Lily said suddenly.

The young man with one leg rose awkwardly to his feet, steadying himself on his cane.

"Kurt, would you read this to everyone?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Still unsure, he stepped forward and accepted the envelope. When he turned it over, his eyes widened.

"Lily... is this for real?"

"Don't just keep it to yourself," she said, laughing. "Tell everyone."

"Come on, read it!" someone shouted from the back.

Kurt swallowed, then read aloud, "From... Michel Ninorich, Side 7."

A murmur swept the villagers.

The children's faces lit up, "It's from Mr. Michel!", while the adults fell silent, their smiles fading into something more complicated.

They'd liked the 08th Team, until that day. In their rage after the Federation's massacre, they'd driven those soldiers away with stones and curses. It had taken time, and pain, to realize that the 08th Team had been different. Good men, caught in a cruel uniform.

"Go on, read it," said Greg from his wheelchair. His voice trembled.

He still remembered the weight of the stone he'd thrown... and the look on their faces when it struck.

"Don't keep us hanging!" Ted called, forcing a laugh that loosened the tension.

"Yeah, come on, Kurt," Lily urged. "Let's hear it."

Kurt nodded, tore open the flap, and unfolded the letter. Five sheets, covered in neat handwriting. The crowd fell still, the rustle of paper the only sound.

It was the first letter they'd ever received from Michel Ninorich.

A year had passed since the war ended, fifteen months since the massacre at the village.

Taking a breath, Kurt began.

“To everyone in Baruk Village: It’s been a long time. This is Michel Ninorich. My name may bring back unpleasant memories, but I wanted to find the courage to write.

If you’d rather not see a letter from someone like me, you’re free to tear this up and throw it away.”

Kurt paused, looking up. No one moved. No one tore anything.

“I won’t make excuses for what happened. The soldiers who attacked you were Federation troops, and we were Federation soldiers. But lately I’ve come to realize that avoiding contact with you was its own kind of cowardice.”

“What’s ‘cowardice’ mean?” young Mati whispered to Lily. Lily pressed a finger gently to her lips.

“I thought I should at least tell you how we’ve been since the war ended.

And if, one day, you’re willing to forgive us, I hope the members of the O8th Team can finally return and properly thank you for all you did for us.”

Kurt smiled faintly. The phrasing was so Michel, earnest, fussy, apologetic to a fault.

“I’m studying on Side 7 to become a teacher. The children of Baruk Village showed me that I’m better at teaching than fighting. Mati, Dean, Reggie, Colt, Pamela, Cowley, Susan, thank you all.”

Each name set off a ripple of delighted laughter among the children.

Kurt thought, “He really was born for that job. Michel had always been too kind for war.”

“Karen is working at a hospital while studying to earn her medical license. She’s still technically a nurse, which you’ll understand when I tell you she yelled at me for asking to see a picture of her in uniform.”

The crowd burst out laughing. Everyone could picture it, the poor man flinching under one of Karen’s tirades.

“Sergeant Sanders is still in the army. He laughs and says it’s because he can’t do anything else, but I know it’s his way of taking responsibility. He told me once, after a few drinks, that someone has to stay behind and make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“That’s the Sergeant, all right,” someone murmured.

No one frowned at the thought of him still in uniform. They understood, it was his burden to carry.

“Eledore’s on Side 6, living off part-time gigs and backup band work. Says he’s “a late bloomer.” If you ever hear about a group called Frontier, that’s his band. Give it a listen, if you can.”

Chuckles and whispers spread through the crowd. Relief, amusement, even a little nostalgia. The O8th Team, still themselves, still alive.

Then Kurt read the next lines more quietly.

“As for our Commander... former Ensign Shiro Amada... he’s missing. He fought at Lhasa to help the wounded Zeon soldiers escape and was shot by our own side. The record says “killed in action,” but no body was ever found. So none of us believe he’s gone. Somewhere, he’s still alive.”

Kurt's throat caught. His vision blurred. The words swam on the page. He blinked, tried to keep reading.

"Eledore's convinced he's out there with that Zeon woman, Aina. Says they probably made it together and just don't want to be found. For once, I think he might be right."

Kurt swallowed hard. He's right, he thought. You're right, Michel.

"When I get my teacher's certificate, I'll go down to Earth. I want to teach the children whose schools were destroyed by the war..."

His voice broke. The paper trembled in his hands. He tried to wipe his eyes, but as he shifted, his balance went, and suddenly, a pair of arms caught him.

"Ah... thank you, Aina—"

The name slipped out before he could stop it.

His wife smiled softly. Jeanne, that was her name now, though once, long ago, she had been Aina Sahalin. After the war, she'd taken a dead villager's identity to escape the Federation's reach.

"I'll always catch you," she said. "We're husband and wife."

Her smile glowed with warmth and quiet strength, like sunlight.

A faint whimper rose from the bundle in her arms. Their baby squirmed, looking up at her father's tear-streaked face.

Shiro, now "Kurt", laughed through his tears.

"It's all right, Kiki," he said gently. "Daddy's not crying because he's sad. I'm crying because I'm happy."