

A D V A N C E O F Z

ティターンズの上

旗のもとに

今野敏

原案 矢立肇・富野由悠季

Zeonic|Scanlations

Copyright © 2008 by Bin Kanno.
Copyright © Sotsu and Sunrise

This book is a fan translation.

Support the official release if there ever is one.

Names, characters, organizations, places, events and incidents may differ slightly from official names at the time of translation. Updated versions of this will be made to reflect changes at a future date.

Kadokawa Bunko "ADVANCE OF Z: UNDER THE FLAG OF TITANS
(Vol.01)"
Released 2008.04.15

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

Novel Translation and Book Layout by Zeonic|Scanlations

This novel was originally published by Media Works but has since been re-released under the Kadokawa label.

First Edition: May 2023

CHAPTER.01

February 0088

Gryps War

"Shit the generator output is dropping." Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter said as he unconsciously gritted his teeth while looking at the monitor's gauges. His Gaplant Hrairoo was being attacked; the energy of the beam cannons of the active thruster unit attached to both arms had already run out. He was no longer in a position to continue fighting. Upon inspecting the monitor, he noticed that various portions of it were malfunctioning.

"What's the situation?"

With Minovsky particle dispersion reaching combat levels, communication with ally units ceased. He could only depend on his sight. A beam flared, exploded into a ball of fire, and then vanished. He didn't know whether it was an enemy or ally.

Twenty days prior, the AEUG had gained control of Gryps 2 Colony Laser. A three-way battle unfolded between Eliard and the others, the AEUG and Axis. The moon looked so close with the Earth shining blue in the distance.

Suddenly, a ball of light erupted from the rear. Eliard spun around. The monitor displayed the figure of a Salamis Kai-class space cruiser sinking. It was an explosion from their thermonuclear rocket engines. There was no mistaking it, it was the Izmir, the mothership of Eliard and the others Murphy platoon.

Eliard could not believe what he was witnessing. There was no place to return to. This was the biggest fear for mobile suit pilots. He wasn't sure how long the Gaplant Hrairoo's life support would hold out, calculating the damage was impossible, and on top of that, he only had a small amount of propellant remaining.

For the first time ever, Eliard felt despair. A mobile suit without a home is the same as a coffin. He was away from the frontlines, having retreated after being attacked. But there was no telling when the combat zone would move to him. It was then he noticed he was trembling.

The mobile suit shook from an impact. Something had come into contact with it. His rear monitor showed a close-up of another Gaplant Hrairoo. The unit belonged to team commander, Captain Wes Murphy.

"Eliard, are you alive?"

"Commander... the Izmir's been sunk."

"Don't worry about it, everything will be fine. The Aswan is at our rear to pick us up. Do you see the ship?"

"Yes, I see it, sir."

"We'll retreat to there."

"What about Carl and Audrey?" Eliard was worried about his teammates, Lieutenant JG Carl Matsubara and Lieutenant JG Audrey April.

"They're still fighting, or there's a possibility that they escaped. Don't worry. They're dyed-in-the-wool Titans. They won't go down without a fight. Besides, you can't fight with your unit anymore. Let's go."

Commander Murphy fired up his thrusters of his Gaplant Hrairoo and headed towards the Aswan. Eliard followed suit. *

Eliard heard Commander Murphy's voice once again, "Char Aznable may be in this area. Have you seen a gold colored mobile suit?"

"No sir. But about this Char...?"

"I just wanted to fight him once..." the Commander said, grumbling.

"Nice to see you made it back in one piece," said the Aswan's deck hand to Eliard as they manually opened the Gaplant Hrairoo's cockpit. "We're leaving the damaged Gaplant behind. It may explode if we keep it."

Eliard felt that couldn't be helped, "Where's Commander Murphy?"

"Over there," Eliard followed the deck hands direction. A blood-soaked Captain Murphy was being carried away; he was seriously injured.

"Commander!" As Eliard tried to get closer, Murphy smiled and gave him a thumbs up.

"Leave treatment off the Commander to the med team. You need to rest up too; we don't know when they'll order us to sortie again."

He had no choice but to do as instructed. For the first time, he felt exhausted.

May 0088

Postwar Period

Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter was summoned from his detention cell and taken to a dreary room. One section of the wall was covered by a large mirror; more than likely a one-way mirror. Seated across the table was a man in an Earth Federation Forces uniform; his cane leaning against the adjacent chair. He probably had a bad leg. His rank insignia was Lieutenant Commander.

"Leave us," The man ordered the military personnel who brought Eliard to the room, "And no surveillance from behind that mirror either."

Eliard was confused. The Commander ordered the two guards who brought him there to leave them alone.

"Please, have a seat. I need to slowly listen to your story."

Eliard sat down cautiously.

"You are being court-martialed for several charges. I am an attorney for the Earth Federation Forces, and I have undertaken your defense. My name is Conrad Morris. It is necessary for me to hear the details from you, so will you tell me?"

There was a spark of intellect in the Major's eyes, which looked soft and gentle.

Eliard answered, "Where should I begin?"

"From the beginning. From when you were assigned to the Titans until the final battle..."

Eliard nodded at the Commander's words, "I'll tell you. I fought proudly under the flag of the Titans. As a soldier, I take pride in believing that I did nothing wrong."

The Commander nodded, "Wonderful. That's exactly what I wanted to hear. All right then, let's begin."

December 0083

Assignment

"There's no way..." murmured the recently promoted lieutenant JG, Eliard Hunter, after receiving his orders.

He was in the middle of mobile suit training on a Salamis-class that was orbiting the Earth when the order came down. He would be joining the services of the Titans. At the time when Jamitov Hymen advocated the creation of the Titans, Eliard hoped to enlist in their forces and turned in his request. He heard that the Titans were a gathering of the elite who were given a one rank promotion over the regular Earth Federation Forces soldiers. The young men who had confidence in their skills and dreamt of a future as a soldier wanted to enlist with them.

Eliard Was one of them.

At the naval academy, he was thoroughly trained by his Sergeant and after graduation he was promoted to Ensign. Since then he's been polishing his skills as a mobile suit pilot. He was assigned to the Earth Orbital Fleet's patrol operations in their hunt for Zeon remnants during the "Delaz Conflict."

That was his very first battle.

The "Delaz Conflict" served as a strong advertisement that the Zeon remnants were a dangerous threat to the young soldiers and officers of the Federation Forces. Eliard had no doubts about the importance as well as justifiable suppression of remnant Zeon's; a sentimentality that was running strong amongst the Federation Forces.

Nonetheless, he didn't think that he would be able to enlist in the Titans because he understood his abilities, and understood that there were far superior pilots than him. After leaving the ship, he was ordered to immediately report to a base in North America. When he received his Titans uniform at the base, he felt the feelings for the first time.

"I am one of the chosen pilots." He felt the honor and glory in his hands. The Titans morale was high. The One Year War was over and the "Delaz Conflict" had ended. Now, that meant actual fighting against the remnant Zeon forces. Eliard Hunter was assigned to an experimental mobile suit team in the Titans.

"Now that the One Year War has ended, the Zeon remnants have become terrorists like those of the past. The Titans are the military for the future. I want you to take pride in bearing the future of the Earth," explained the team leader Lieutenant Wes Murphy to Eliard and the others attending the briefing.

Wes Murphy is a hard core soldier. It's said that he played an active role by winning his first campaign during the One Year War as well as the Delaz Conflict. Lieutenant Murphy introduced the members assigned to the experimental mobile suit team one by one. Lieutenant Junior Grade Carl Matsubara was a year older than Eliard. Audrey April was two years older. She was a female officer who could sport a short cut and still look good.

When the briefing was over, Carl spoke to the others, "This team seems a little dangerous. "

"What do you mean?"

"I thought it was lucky that a half-Oriental like me was able to enlist in the Titans. But I was convinced once I was assigned here. The main mission of this team is the testing of mobile suits. It's a dangerous job."

"Are you sure about that? I can test your skills," Eliard shot back.

Carl smiled and laughed, "It seems I'll be able to get along well with you. What do you think, Audrey?"

"I'm an operator. I collect test data. We're members of the same team, so I want us to get along."

"Well aren't you a beauty. But I agree with you, I want us all to get along."

Carl's GM Sniper III and Commander Murphy's unit were displayed on the monitor of the GM Kai that Eliard was piloting. The commanders unit was outfitted with a Gundam head. The unit was made to test psychological influence the Gundam form has on the Zeon remnants. The base of this particular unit is a GM Quel, and it was called the Gundam Hazel.

"Incoming. Two o'clock from planetary orbit," said Murphy's voice in the headset. Eliard confirmed it. Three Gelgoog units carrying Zaku machine guns, There was no mistaking it-they were Zeon remnants. Murphy's voice rang out again.

"Carl. Fire the long range rifle."

A beam shot out of the long range beam rifle of the GM Sniper III that Carl was piloting. In the next instant, they plunged into a dogfight.

"Test pilots?" Eliard cursed in his mind while handling the GM Kai, "So it's real combat just like that, huh?"

He felt his blood shake from the abrupt change in Gs, seemingly overturning his internal organs.

"On your six," came Murphy's voice.

Startled, Eliard reversed. The Gelgoog followed. He rapidly fired his rifle, but none hit. He was hit by the enemy's machine gun. In what felt like an instant, a beam pierced the Gelgoog. There was a soundless explosion followed by a billowing ball of fire. The sound of the scattering fragments striking the armor reverberated inside the cockpit.

"The rifle is definitely for taking out the enemy," said Eliard surveying the monitor, searching for the Gundam Hazel.

Found it. It was engaged in combat with two Gelgoogs.

"Cover him," said Carl, "Approach the commander and give him a hand."

"Understood," said Eliard, kicking in his thrusters, accelerating in one burst. He tried to lock on to one of the Gelgoog units through his target scope. The gauges intersect quickly on the monitor. However, Eliard's assistance wasn't necessary. Murphy's Hazel cornered the enemy without any danger and sunk it

with the rifle. One remained. Murphy drew the Hazel's beam saber. Eliard understood that it was to intimidate the enemy.

The final Gelgoog fired its rifle while closing in. Murphy skillfully handled the thrusters, avoiding the bullets. He brandished the beam saber and both units clashed. When the Hazel turned around, the Gelgoog was enveloped in a ball of flames.

"Amazing..." Eliard murmured without thinking.

"Watch your backs on the battlefield," he heard Murphy telling them, "Don't, and you're dead."

"Sir," Eliard answered in a panic.

Led by the Hazel, the Murphy team was invincible to all that comes before them. Eliard continued to fight with pride in his heart.

May 0088

Federation Forces JAG Bureau

Lieutenant Commander Conrad Morris was staring out at the Nevada desert outside the window. It was a colorless, inhuman world, but at least there was no sign of any organic matter to give off a foul stench. It was because of that he didn't hate the scenery. It resembled the lunar seas.

From there, the effects of the Delaz Fleet's colony drop were evident. Although the area around him avoided direct damage, large craters were created and ginormous rocks were blown away, drastically changing the terrain. This was clearly evident from far away.

"For this reason, we need you to take up defending someone..."

As Conrad gripped the can in his right hand, he stared straight back at the officer in front of him. He was stout and obese with considerably thin hair. He was Conrad's superior officer.

The rank insignia that he wore was that of a Commodore in the Earth Federation Forces, however, he had no respect for someone such as him. Commodore Eddie Southwell, one of the typical elite. Having no combat experience whatsoever, he sat behind a desk at headquarters as several wars passed. Moreover, he was the officer in charge of the Earth Federation Forces Legal Affairs Bureau, a position that exposed the unlawfulness within the Federation Forces and tried them in court.

Comodore Eddie Southwell was one of those who mistook the power of law as their own power. A danger if set loose. As a subordinate, Conrad always felt compelled to keep an eye on his superiors.

"I will accept any job."

The Commodore threw a stack of files on the top of his desk. Conrad picked it up and stared at it in his hand. Without even thinking, a smile grew across his face.

The Commodore wasn't pleased with the look on his face.

"And what exactly is so funny?" he asked, angrily.

"I've heard about this Lieutenant's story. I'm willing to bet that no one else wanted to take him on."

"That's not the problem. I question whether you're motivated enough to do it."

"Motivated?" Conrad asked, smiling again. "So think this one has no chance at all?"

"None whatsoever," replied the portly, thin-haired Commodore. "But, defending soldiers placed in front of a military tribunal is the role of those of

us here at the judge advocate. At the very least, we should try getting his sentence reduced."

"Reduced?"

"Look, I get what you're trying to say. There is no way to get his sentence reduced. As it stands, he'll probably end up in front of the firing squad. And if that happens, it'll be a blemish on your otherwise spotless record. As a lawyer, you're one of the best we've got. So, you can pass on this case if you choose."

Conrad quietly sighed. The man didn't understand anything.

"I'm not considering reducing his charges."

The Commodore nodded as if he knew what was going on.

"Well then, you're declining the job. Fair enough. I'll assign it to someone else. But, the result will be all the same."

"I don't want his charges reduced. If I can, I'd like to find him innocent."

"Innocent?" his superior officer scoffed, staring at him in wonder as though he had just told a lie. Although he was surprised, he soon smiled as he understood.

"What you're saying is next to impossible for him. Look at the charges. No one can save him."

The defendant's name: Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter, member of the Titans. A young man just twenty-seven years old. There were rumors about him within the Federation Forces. Several charges were listed. However, the most severe one involved his actions during the struggle for the Colony Laser between the AEUG, the Titans and Axis.

"So no one can save him?" asked Conrad, feeling angry, "So then why are we defending him?"

"It's our job. It's what we do."

"A young man's life hangs-in-the-balance!"

"And he very well could have died during the war. There's no need to worry about it."

Conrad's anger quickly grew at the Commodore's brief comment.

"That's why his life is so valuable. So valuable..." Conrad replied, biting back his tongue as he stared at the man.

"He came back alive from the war. I cannot possibly allow him to be placed in front of a firing squad for that."

Because he was desperately trying to hold back his anger, it made his tone all the more quieter.

"You too came back from the war." Southwell replied quietly, "I suppose your leg wound is your medal, huh?"

The man had a tendency to scoff at those with combat experience likely brought on by an inferiority complex. There is a unique empathy between those who served. War gnaws at a person's heart yet at the same time, strengthens the bond amongst fellow soldiers. It's something that especially isn't forgotten over one's lifetime for those who survived the same operation.

Southwell had no such experience and it was possible he harbored a jealousy towards those who did.

Conrad was a former mobile suit pilot. He piloted an early type GM and fought in the One Year War. Wounded at the Battle of Solomon, he was forced

out of the cockpit. The use of a cane for walking was a reminder of that; a future as a mobile suit pilot forever lost.

Nonetheless, he remained in the military, knowing that it was the only way he could make a living. He was a soldier through and through. He had to find a way to survive in the military, and had no time to pity himself. While still with the military, he enrolled in law school and after much hardship, he qualified himself as a lawyer with the hope of transferring to the Legal Affairs Bureau.

His request was immediately accepted. The Bureau was always short on superior personnel. With his courage and quick wittedness demonstrated in mobile suit battles, he would now show them from a seat at court-martials. He was in fact, a remarkable lawyer. He saved the lives of countless soldiers and officers.

"It is," Conrad replied to Commodore Southwell, "which is why I simply cannot let young soldiers who just came back from the front lines die so easily."

The Commodore stared back at Conrad for a moment, sensing a scornful expression in his eyes. Perhaps Conrad was enjoying all this. Perhaps he was no one else who would save the young man.

"Very well then," he said, "So then I'll assume you'll be taking up the case?"

"Do you consider me crazy for doing so?"

"No, not at all." The Commodore said laughing, "You sure like to volunteer for the hard ones."

With the files under his arm, Conrad gave a silent salute before quickly turning around and leaving the office.

May 0088

Charges

After returning to his office, Lieutenant Commander Conrad Morris began to closely examine the charges brought against Eliard Hunter.

First was the crime involving his participation in the Colony 30 Incident. It was true that the team Eliard Hunter was attached to was tasked with escorting a transport ship carrying poison gas to Side 1. The Colony 30 Incident struck terror in the Earth Federation Forces and resulted in a dramatic increase in the Titans influence.

The second charge was for dangerous conduct during a mobile suit test flight. During an Asshimar's atmospheric test flight, records indicate that he made an extremely dangerous flyby of a building with Earth Federation officers inside. In other words, it was likely that the officers were pissing their pants over the incident. Due to this, he was reprimanded and served one week in detention. This charge is being called into question again.

The third charge is desertion under enemy fire in the middle of the Gryps II colony laser battle. Unless this was an extreme circumstance, desertion means the death penalty.

The fourth charge was even more worrisome: when Eliard Hunter deserted, he was said to have been piloting new weaponry that was just developed. Furthermore, he personally destroyed the new weaponry, resulting in the fourth charge against him.

Conrad threw the file and leaned back in his chair.

"This is Titan hunting," he thought.

A series of court-martials was the Earth Federation Forces way of making the Titans into scapegoats, whose arrogance was viewed as a problem within their own Forces. However, no one defied the Titans.

Although the Titans were organized as a Zeon remnant suppression squad in U.C.0083 through the proposal of Jamitov Hymen, by U.C.0087, they gained enough influence to control the entire Earth Federation Forces. Around February of U.C.0088, the AEUG entered into a three-way battle with the Titans and Axis over Gryps II. With that battle, the Titans lost a majority of their influence. Relative to that, the influence of the general Earth Federation Forces increased.

Moreover, immediately following the three way fleet battle between the Titans, AEUG and Axis, young officers of the Federation Forces' instructor corps declare themselves the "New Desides" and revolted at the asteroid Pezun. In response to this, the Earth Federation Forces organized a suppression fleet

called Taskforce Alpha. Before long the "New Desides" were suppressed and the Gryps War came to a close. This uprising event was the decisive downfall for the Titans.

Following the end of the war, the officers of the Federation Forces who until now were suppressed, quickly regained authority. One by one, Titans' war criminals, those who exposed military secrets, and those who violated orders were exposed and court-martials took place.

Eliard Hunter was one of them.

"Still, desertion and destruction of a new weapon is worrisome, isn't it?" Conrad thought.

"What do they mean by new weapon? All of the new weapons introduced in the war should have already been publicized. In spite of that, there were no records of this 'new weapon.' At the very least, I need to meet with him once..."

Conrad decided to head to the detention center inside the Judicial Affairs Bureau facility. The young man who appeared before Conrad waiting in the dreary room with a one-way mirror had a resolute attitude. Looking directly at him, his face showed absolutely no sign of uncertainty nor regret. The moment he took one look at Eliard Hunter, Conrad started to believe he was innocent.

July 0085

An Orbital Path from Luna to Side 1

“Use your propellant as little as possible. Set your life-support systems to save mode too.” Commander Murphy’s voice echoed inside the cockpit.

The team was undergoing final checks before their launch. Eliard Hunter launched sarcastically without even realizing it. This wasn’t a child’s fieldtrip. Mobile suit propellant is limited. Though he was raised on Earth, Eliard was well aware of this. It was just like suckerfish clinging to a vessel. The commander was still treating Eliard and Carl like children.

He didn’t want the other crew to hear the conversation. Even if they didn’t, the rabbit emblem of the Murphy team is considered to be a funny story for the drunk crew.

At the moment, the mothership of the Murphy Team, the Aswan, was on an orbit near the moon, having left their post of Confeito. There, they’d rendezvous with a transport. Their mission this time would be to escort the transport towards Side 1. The transport was already in orbit near the moon with the Aswan. They would accelerate and closely follow the transport as it enters course for Side 1. Eliard remembered the words of Captain Otto Pedersen during the briefing.

“You might say that Side 1 is a location for anti-Federation government activity. We have intelligence that suggests the rebels are working together with Zeon remnants. Piracy and terrorism is expected. Tread warily.”

Captain Otto Pedersen is the commander of the Confeito Defense Forces centered on the Aswan. He is a powerful individual who supports the Titans along with Captain Bask. At least, that’s what Eliard thought.

“The transport will accelerate in ten minutes. Let’s move out.” he heard Commander Murphy order.

He looked at the monitor, which showed the Commander’s Hazel launching from the catapult. The whole body was equipped with an experimental armor. The Murphy Team is an experimental team so they we’re allowed to just head out into battle. They were assigned to conduct some kind of test. This time around they were going to conduct a mobility test of the Full Armor type Hazel.

Next to launch was Eliard’s GM High Mobility Type, followed by Carl’s GM Sniper III. Audrey would remain behind on the Aswan.

Once clear from the mothership, the three units fell into formation and headed towards the transport. The transport had already finished accelerating in order to break away from its orbit around the moon and was on course for

Side 1. Because of the constant velocity of the inertial navigation, it seemed as though the ship was standing still. So far, it is an extremely boring mission.

Eliard looked at the transport displayed on his monitor. It was a small ship and he had no idea what it was carrying. Neither he nor the team knew. Captain Pedersen didn't even mention the cargo during their briefing. Eliard felt it wasn't necessary to know. Whatever it's carrying is irrelevant. Their mission was to protect the transport.

"Planet side, 11 o'clock." came Carl's voice, cutting in suddenly.

Eliard focused his eyes at 11 o'clock but didn't see anything. As expected, the long-range weaponry of the sniper was no match for the other units. A small light appeared. In the next moment a beam shot past them.

"It's an enemy attack." Murphy said in a calm voice, "Move forward. Carl, you'll cover us."

A high temperature gas could be seen blowing out of the Hazel's main thrusters as it accelerated and moved in front of the transport. Eliard followed without delay. From behind them, Carl's GM Sniper III's long range beam rifle began firing. The enemy returned fire.

"They won't hit us that easily." Murphy said, "Don't be scared. Here they come."

"This sucks." came Carl's voice.

"I've been shooting with the intention of hitting them!"

"Hmph." replied Murphy. "Then guess!"

"Confirmed." Eliard said looking at the monitor.

"Two units incoming from just below planet side."

"Fire." responded Murphy, "Your rifle isn't a decoration."

Eliard tried to lock onto the enemy with his target scope but wasn't able to.

The enemy was too fast. It was a Zaku II FZ, likely from the Zeon remnants or perhaps part of the anti-Federation government movement. Captain Pedersen said they may have been working with one another. Either way, anti-society elements were an enemy of the Titans, the guardians of order.

Locked on.

Eliard repeatedly fired his beam rifle.

The beam struck the Zaku II FZ causing it to erupt into a ball of fire. A muted explosion of light only.

"Shit!" cursed Murphy.

"What's the matter?" Eliard asked.

"The armor is heavy."

As the mass was increased, a decrease in accelerating performance was likely. Eliard saw a unit he'd never seen before approaching the Commander's unit. It appeared to be a Rick Dom, but it also looked like a Gelgoog M. The machine quickly closed in on the Commander's machine, machine gun blazing. The tracer bullet arced across space, piercing the Hazel's left leg.

"Dammit!"

Eliard rapidly fired his beam rifle but was unable to make a direct hit. Still, he managed to blow away the enemy's shield and left arm. The enemy turned and retreated.

"You saved my hide, Eliard. Good shooting."

Eliard was truly delighted Murphy said that.

July 0085

Aswan to Confeito

Upon Eliard and the others return to the Aswan, they were greeted with a wink and a salute from Audrey and praise from the crew. They had routed the enemy and returned from their mission safely as expected. The Murphy team escorted the transport ship to Side 1.

"It's not actual combat by any standard. That thing's a tortoise. It's like that, thanks to you," the Commander of the Murphy team said handing over the Full Armor Hazel's combat data to Audrey as he pointed to the shot up left leg with his chin.

After reporting to the bridge and being debriefed on their mission, the Murphy team was about be briefed with merciless orders from Captain Pedersen.

"Bask is going to undertake some kind of operation. The Aswan is to provide rear support. You're to move out."

"The Hazel is damaged, sir. It won't be repaired in time," Commander Murphy said.

"There's a new unit that was sent out called the Hi-Zack. Take that out as a test."

"Understood, sir. We'll prepare on the double." Murphy replied, knowing there was no way to refuse.

Captain Pedersen nodded in response, "Doing a favor for Bask isn't a bad thing."

Murphy climbed aboard the Hi-Zack. Eliard wasn't fond of the designs resemblance to the Zaku of the former Principality of Zeon.

"Alright, let's move out." Murphy said, taking off without a complaint in typical soldier fashion. Eliard thought about adopting that attitude.

May 0088

Impression

Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter stood at attention in the doorway of the visiting room, his gaze forward and upwards. This is the typical and formal attitude when a superior officer summons a soldier. As they are at attention, they're awaiting further instruction. Seeing that, Lieutenant Conrad Morris smiled privately. His first impression of the lieutenant is that he did not turn traitor.

When he learned of the various charges, he wondered about the rashness involved. However, the young officer before him obviously seemed honest enough.

"Leave us," Conrad said to the soldier who led him there.

The soldier stood in shock, as if he were attacked when his guard was down.

"And no surveillance from behind that mirror either," He continued, emphasizing his tone a little. Even if he said it, he felt they wouldn't stop monitoring so easily. Some Earth Federation Forces officer quietly watches these exchanges from the other side of the one-way mirror. Still, it was necessary to clarify his attitude here.

Conrad took up Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter's defense. This was an official request from the Earth Federation Forces Judicial Affairs Bureau.

"Since I took this on, I'll do it my way." Conrad thought.

Although it was just done for form's sake, the soldier nervously left the room, leaving the two alone.

"Please, have a seat. I need to slowly listen to your story."

Eliard stepped forward in a wary manner and stood in front of the table. There were a few chairs. If it were an interrogation, they would make him sit in front. However, since Conrad was a lawyer meeting with his client, he made it a rule to let them choose where to sit. They were placed in a ninety degree angle. As he sat upright on the edge of the chair, he looked forward.

"Eliard Hunter."

"Yes, sir."

"You don't mind if I call you Eliard, do you?"

"No, sir."

"At ease, Eliard."

Eliard looked at Conrad with a wary gaze.

It was natural.

The arrest and confinement was sudden. Everything must be unbelievable now.

He glanced at Conrad's cane leaning against the chair for a moment.

"I was once a mobile suit pilot. I piloted an early type GM during the One Year War. That is thanks to an injury from the Battle of Solomon," he said as a color of faint familiarity finally appeared in Eliard's eyes.

"As expected, he is a fine soldier." Conrad thought to himself.

Respect for distinguished service in war was not forgot.

"Now then..." Conrad said, "You are being court-martialed for several charges. I am an attorney for the Earth Federation Forces, and I have undertaken your defense. My name is Conrad Morris. It is necessary for me to hear the details from you, so will you tell me?"

Eliard still appeared to be puzzled.

"Where should I begin?"

"From the beginning. From when you were assigned to the Titans until the final battle..."

Eliard nodded. He suddenly seemed to have courage.

"I'll tell you. I fought proudly under the flag of the Titans. As a soldier, I take pride in believing that I did nothing wrong."

"Wonderful," said Conrad, "That's exactly what I wanted to hear. All right then, let's begin."

May 0088

Background

Eliard's speaking style was very articulated and he never seemed to get swept up in his emotions. The way he tells a story shows his intelligence. It is one of the conditions of being an excellent officer.

Conrad looked into Eliard's background as much as he could beforehand, but it had more meaning hearing it from the person himself.

Eliard is a Spacenoid. He likely received visible and invisible discrimination while at the academy. Nonetheless, he endured this and became an officer of the Earth Federation Forces and what's more was he was permitted to enlist in the Titans which was said to be an elite unit.

Although not said very openly, but there was an idea of being part of a chosen people in the Titans. Earthnoids and Caucasians received favorable treatment. It was extremely rare that a race other than white join ranks with the Titans, as was also the case with Spacenoids.

Exceptions to this were assembled in the team that Eliard was assigned to. Eliard was a Spacenoid and his colleague Carl Matsubara was a mixed-blood Japanese.

Lieutenant Wes Murphy, their commander, was someone with a few problems as well. Murphy, having been decorated in his first campaign in the Battle of Solomon, made a name for himself during the Delaz Fleet uprising. But, the Delaz Fleet uprising was a problem.

As part of the postwar process, Captain Eiphar Synapse who led the crew of the Albion, was court-martialed. Synapse was held responsible for the colony drop as well as the use of a new weapon and was given the death penalty and a young ensign was sentenced to one year hard labor.

After that, the truth behind the colony drop and new weapons development was erased and the young ensign's crimes were said to have been expunged. As for Murphy, he seemed to have considerable discontent over the outcome of the court-martial having served under the direct control of Synapse.

Furthermore, he later heard about the Earth Federation Forces way of erasing records of the truth behind the colony drop and new weapons development and was considerably critical of it afterwards.

In fact, Murphy had fought along with the new weapons. The case clearly appeared in military records until the development program was deleted. Even that fact was erased.

The Titans picked up Murphy. Conrad felt at this stage it may have been on a whim by Bask Om.

Now, Eliard was discussing this in front of him.

How happy he felt when he was assigned to the Titans. How proud he felt when engaging in an operation as the Titans. How much he revered Murphy on the battlefield. And how much he loved the members of his team.

He talked about various operations. There was no letter of failure for the Murphy team's combat experience for it was a team that didn't allow for failure.

They were a test team.

First and foremost, they were to operate and test newly developed weaponry. A team always haunted by danger.

They assembled the trouble makers and assigned them the most dangerous missions. That was the Titans way of doing things. But, Eliard wasn't the least bit bothered by that. He felt pride and joy being in the Titans.

It was evident from his way of telling his story that he was being absolutely sincere just by his mental state. Plus, he had survived. While listening to his story, Conrad felt a lump in his throat.

Eliard reached a point in his story where he could pause.

The silence that followed showed how deeply moved Conrad was.

After a while, Conrad spoke.

"I have to ask you about your first charge."

"Sir."

Eliard's facial expression suddenly darkened.

"July of 0085. At the time, you were assigned to the battleship Aswan of the Confeito Defense Forces as a member of the Murphy Team, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Having rendezvous with a certain transport in satellite orbit above the moon, you were ordered to escort it to Side 1. Am I right?"

"Let me be clear, you're talking about the 30 Banchi Incident?"

"I would like to go step by step here."

"That transport was loaded with G3 poison gas. That G3 gas was used to massacre the inhabitants of Side 1's 30 Banchi."

Conrad took a deep breath and let it out sharply. Eliard was blaming himself. It's only natural to think about the seriousness of the "30 Banchi Incident", but he would fail by all means defending a defendant who blames himself.

"Eliard," Conrad spoke calmly, "I only want to know the facts from you."

"What do you mean? That is one of the facts. G3 which was used on 30 Banchi was most definitely loaded onto the transport which I guarded and sent along to Side 1."

Conrad shook his head.

"That's not what I mean. That is most definitely a fact. However, there is a different truth to you."

"I don't understand what you're trying to say."

"The most important thing, whether you knew the contents of the shipment."

"Whether I knew or not, all of the residents of 30 Banchi were killed. That is a fact."

"So was your story of carrying out your missions with pride just a lie then?"

Conrad made his tone just a little stern. Eliard was staring at Conrad as if caught off guard.

"No, sir," Eliard answered with a look of surprise. "It was not a lie whatsoever."

"No matter when, you carried out your mission with pride as a Titan?"

"That is correct. But, the Titans weren't the organization I thought they were."

"You're wrong," Conrad said, particularly firmly, "Jamitov Hymem and Bask Om's motives are irrelevant to you. When the Titans were first established it was to gather the very best officers and soldiers around. It was an elite unit by no exaggeration. Acts of terrorism sharply declined after the Titans were created and this is proven because postwar clean up progressed without stopping. That is the kind of Titans you probably took pride in."

Eliard looked straight at Conrad.

"That's right."

"So then, as for the Murphy Team, you were thinking how quickly and accurately you could complete your missions, am I right?"

"I agree with what you said."

The spark, typical of a soldier, returned to Eliard's eyes.

"Mind you, Eliard. I don't want to hear any sissy complaints. If you want to drown in your own sorrows, then save it for after the trial has ended. This is my battle. This is a rescue mission to save you from this predicament. If you stand in my way, then I'm giving up on you."

"A rescue mission...?"

"That's right. My weapon is the truth. Yes, it's true the transport was loaded with G3. But, facts such as that were given to the media. What I want is your own truth. The truth of what was going on and what you were thinking as you were carrying out your missions."

Eliard stared at Conrad in silence. Conrad felt there was determination slowly emerging in his eyes.

"So, how about it? You feel like fighting with me?" Conrad asked.

Eliard nodded slowly.

"Yes, sir," he replied. "The Murphy Team never gave up until the end. If you're calling this a fight, then it's impossible to lose."

Conrad smiled without even realizing it.

July 0085

Side 1, Confeito Perimeter

Confeito and Side 1 lay before them. Be that as it may, it wasn't a distance accessible with a mobile suit's payload. Eliard Hunter realized that it was just as Captain Otto Pederson said, the role of the dispatched Murphy team was one hundred percent rear support.

"Bask is going to undertake some kind of operation at Side 1's Colony 30," Captain Pedersen said.

What kind of operation that was, Eliard was not aware. But, there was no doubt that it was a vital operation for the Earth Federation. Eliard felt it was a vital mission because it was rear support.

"There's something on the radar," Carl Matsubara's voice could be heard, "It's a ship. It's acting independently. Bearing 045 of the North Star."

"Can you identify it?" came the commander, Lieutenant Wes Murphy's, voice.

"Looks like a Zanzibar. It's heading towards Side 1."

"Zeon remnants. They may have joined forces with the anti-Earth Federation government movement people,"

"No matter how you look at it, they're the enemy. Let's move. We'll attack from right under their nose," Murphy said.

Leaving a trail of hot gas, Murphy's Hi-Zack sped off towards the direction of the Zanzibar.

"Enemy sighted." Came Carl's voice, "I've got small signatures on the radar. They're probably mobile suits."

"I see them on my radar too." Murphy responded.

Even Eliard's unit caught sight of them on radar. There were two enemy mobile suits.

"We'll blow them away when they enter firing range." Murphy said, "Victory goes to the one who makes the first move."

July 0085

Aswan

"Move it. We won't know when they'll need to head out." Hendrick Ness' voice resounded in his helmet.

"Aren't we full of energy all of a sudden, old man?" Pete Shelton muttered in his head as a wry smile crept across his face. Hendrick Ness is the Aswan's chief mechanic. His age difference to Pete is like a parent to child. Or, if one wanted to make it worse, like a grandfather and grandkid.

"Ah man, the Gundam's precious leg..." Pete looked up at the Hazel and muttered.

Two Gundams stood in a row before him. It was more accurate to say the other form was provided for replacement parts for the Hazel.

"If you can stand there and gripe, you can lend a hand!" scolded old man Hendrick.

"Right, right!"

The mechanics had already removed the bottom from the knee of the damaged Hazel. The leg from the spare unit would soon be dismantled. The problem is after it was connected. The main computer has to be reset and minute adjustment were required.

"Hey, it looks like the Murphy team's fighting it out!" came someone's voice over the internal incomm. It looked like intel leaked from the bridge.

"What did I tell you!" old man Hendrick could be heard saying.

"Hey, Pete! Look sharp! Once we replace the leg, connect the circuits right away and finish the configuration."

"I told you I know!"

"Well then if you know, it'll be spot on!"

"Did they say battle?" Pete thought, "Christ, they really need to think about the mechanics..."

The physical joining of the Hazel's leg was complete.

"Well, I better get in there and finish it before he starts nagging..."

July 0085

Near Side 1

There was a blast of fire from Carl's long rifle, the beam swallowed up in the darkness of space. Two enemy units appeared from the direction of the shot.

"Enemy sighted," Eliard said, "One appears to be an F-type Zaku. The other unit is..."

Trailing off, Eliard was surprised. The unit was a mix of specs from a Rick Dom and a Gelgoog M. It's the one that blew off the right leg of the Commander's Hazel. Eliard was certain he shot off the bastard's left arm with his beam rifle. He didn't know whether it was the same type from a different machine or whether they swapped the parts of the arm and came out.

"So that's the guy who made swiss cheese out of the Hazel's leg, huh?" He heard the commander say.

"You think so?" asked Eliard.

"Most definitely. I never forget those who attack me. It's time to return the favor."

Carl fired his rifle again but he was not able to capture the enemy.

"Let's move!" They heard Murphy say.

"It'll be a dog fight. Carl, you'll cover us from the rear."

"Roger that," he heard Carl respond.

Their enemy returned fire.

Using his shoulder thrusters, he swung, dodging the shot. Suddenly, a voice he wasn't used to hearing resounded inside the cockpit.

"The Zaku is the pride of Zeon."

It appeared the enemy pilot was somehow using the same wireless frequency. The voice suddenly continued.

"And to disgrace that pride with such a form... I absolutely cannot allow it!"

They were referring to the Hi-Zack. Though similar to the appearance of the Zaku, it was painted in Titans colors. That's likely what angered them. Even they weren't fond of the Hi-Zack's design.

As he muttered to himself, the Zaku suddenly seemed to make a wild charge at the Hi-Zack. It's best to leave the Zaku to the commander. He searched for the Rick Dom, surveying his monitor. Just then, the unit appeared from below him.

Taken aback, he tried to put some distance between them. The Rick Dom thrust out its spiked shield, the shock coming through to the cockpit.

"Dammit!"

Eliard kicked in the verniers and distanced himself from the Rick Dom. Just then, a beam grazed the machine.

It was Carl's long rifle.

The Rick Dom quickly turned over and began to fire its machine gun towards Carl's GM Sniper III. It was a 90mm machine gun.

Eliard witnessed the 90mm rounds intermixed with tracer shells pierce the armor of the GM Sniper III.

"Carl!" Eliard shouted without even thinking.

If the engine block was hit, there was no saving him.

An explosion caused by the thermonuclear reactor would cause the unit to blow to pieces. A warning alarm echoed throughout the cockpit.

Eliard reflexively looked at the radar.

Mobile suits incoming from the direction of the enemy ship.

"Enemy reinforcements detected on radar. Three units inbound." Eliard said in a naturally loud voice.

"I'm reading them on my end too." came Commander Murphy's voice.

"Bastards. They're persistent..." Murphy was still sparring with the Zaku, whose pilot was also fairly skilled.

"They got my shoulder block connector," came Carl's voice, barging in suddenly. "Neither arm can move, so I can't fire my rifle."

"You're alive." Eliard said, "Your suit held up, huh?"

"Yeah. But three units for reinforcement? Things a looking rather hopeless now, aren't they?"

Eliard approached Carl's unit and prepped to use the beam rifle. The Rick Dom wouldn't attack irrationally as it was for backup. It kept its distance and fired its machine gun at them intermittently.

It was just as Carl said, it was hopeless.

There were three units and sooner or later one of their units would be hit. There were five units all together including their reinforcements.

Eliard was keenly aware of death for the first time on the battlefield.

July 0085

Aswan

"Are the repairs on the Hazel finished?"

Hearing the voice of the woman, Pete looked over his shoulder. Clad in a normal suit, Audrey April floated in the air drawing closer to him.

"She's still down..."

"What's the matter?"

"The main computer won't recognize the new leg device."

"Move," Lieutenant JG April said as she pushed Pete aside and dove into the cockpit.

"The previous driver is probably hindering that." she said as her fingers clacked with ferocity over the keyboard of the connected tuning computer.

Pete gazed at the display. A front view of the Hazel was brought up on the screen and the bottom from the left knee disappeared. Suddenly it reappeared. The Hazel's computer recognized the left leg's device.

"Leave it to you..." Pete said, "I'm no match for you, Lieutenant April."

"I'm heading out. The others are in danger."

Just then, old man Hendrick's voice could be heard, "Little Lady, since you're heading out, you should test the high mobility option of the Hazel."

"High mobility option?"

"We've attached a shield booster to the back. You should have the same propulsion power as a mobile armor."

"Move it!" Murphy could be heard saying, "Don't stop even for a second. If you do, they'll shoot you."

Having said nothing up to then, Eliard moved his machine rapidly. He felt like he was inside a shaker.

The radar captured an object approaching at high speed. It was sending out a allied ID code.

"The hell? A mobile armor?" Eliard spat out without thinking.

The object was captured on his monitor before long and as expected, it looked like a mobile armor. However, in the next instant, it changed shape. In reality, although only the shield parted, the transformation revealed the Hazel in a dramatic way.

"Sorry to keep you all waiting," came Audrey's voice.

Eliard felt as if he was thrust out the depths of despair in an instant. The Gundam's form had that effect. Even against the enemy, the effect was grand as they were evidently trembling at its appearance.

Commander Murphy wasn't about to overlook their chance. Eliard and Audrey followed him.

Audrey's Hazel exhibited full high mobility, and with its appearance, the situation changed completely. The emotional influence of its form alone proved its strength.

Eliard took the opportunity to fire away with the bean rifle.

The enemy was soon retreating.

Eliard felt his body suddenly grow weak. But, he managed to survive.

"Hey, Audrey." Commander Murphy could be heard saying, "That's my bunny. Treat it carefully."

Audrey had already merged the three shield boosters together tightly again and was maneuvering to return to the Aswan.

May 0088

Mission

"You were assigned to guard a transport heading for Side 1 from an orbit around the moon as a member of the Titans Test Team, otherwise known as the Murphy Team. Correct?"

Conrad Morris continued questioning. They were not simple questions. Based on the answers to the questions, they must turn so that it shifts Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter's attitude. It's likely he still couldn't shake the sense of guilt. The "Colony 30 Incident" that massacred the population of a colony with poison gas was far too much for one person to take responsibility for. By releasing him from that sense of guilt, he should naturally believe that he is innocent.

"Yes." Eliard responded. "Under the command of Commander Murphy, I was assigned to the mission along with Lieutenant JG Carl Matsubara."

"At the time, the Murphy Team was assigned to the Aswan, was it not?"

"That is correct. We were one of four other mobile suit teams."

"Who gave the order guard the transport ship?"

"Captain Otto Pedersen of operation command."

"And where did a briefing on the operation take place?"

"In a briefing room on board the Aswan."

"At the time, who was in the room?"

"Captain Otto Pedersen, Lieutenant Wes Murphy, Lieutenant JG Carl Matsubara, Lieutenant JG Audrey April and myself."

"You're certain of this?"

"Yes."

Conrad envisioned the scene in his head, harkening back to his time as a mobile suit pilot. Tension and excitement. Jokes to break that. Particular smells of a battleship came to mind; a unique smell of oil and paint mixed with burnt metal and sweat.

"Who gave the orders directly?"

"Captain Otto Pedersen."

"Can you remember what he said at the time?"

For the first time, a bewildered expression came over his face.

"I may not be able to recall exactly what he said."

"Remember as much as you can." Conrad explained. "This is a very important point."

Eliard pondered for a bit before starting to explain."

"He said that the mission involved escort for a transport. We were given a disk with data on coordinates and a time schedule to break away from orbit around the moon and head for Side 1. Then the Captain told us that Side 1 was a location of anti-Federation government activity and that there was intel that said the rebels were linked with Zeon remnants."

"And there was no explanation regarding the cargo of the transport?"

"No, there was not."

"Are you certain of this?"

"Absolutely."

"No one amongst the Murphy Team knew what the cargo was?"

"Nobody told me. If they did..."

"If they did, what would you have done?"

Looking down, Eliard was lost in thought for a while. It wasn't long before he raised his head and spoke.

"Even if I had known, I believe I would've headed out. When a soldier is given orders, they're duty bound to carry out that operation. Even if I had known about the poison gas, you must go if you're ordered to go."

"That is also a crucial point." Conrad said, "Soldiers must abide by orders. The greatest indiscretion for a soldier is not following orders. You followed orders. As a soldier, you did the right thing."

"But, because of that poison gas--"

"Eliard. Forget about the poison gas for the time being. Think back to during the operation; how you were feeling at the time. How you were feeling when you left the briefing room, climbed into your mobile suit and headed out. At the time, you were unaware of the cargo. Correct?"

"Yes..."

"I've said it many times, but that is a crucial point. That, and you followed orders. Listen, think only about those facts when you're at the court-martial."

"Yes, sir."

A slight glimmer of hope returned to Eliard's eyes. Conrad felt he was certain that he realized that this was a battle for two people.

"Now then, according to the record, immediately following the mission to guard the transport, the Murphy Team carried out operations as a team under the command of Captain Bask who caused the 'Colony 30 Incident'. This is true, correct?"

"Not at all." Eliard responded, "We were to give only rear support."

"You were ordered to head out again immediately following the transport mission? Who did these orders come down from?"

"Captain Otto Pedersen."

"And the exact contents of the orders were?"

"Because Captain Bask is carrying out an operation at Side 1, we're to head out to support from the rear... Because Commander Murphy's Hazen was heavily damaged during the guarding of the transport, he headed out in a Hi-Zack, a new and powerful unit. The sortie served as a test for the Hi-Zack."

"Did you handle the test in combat?"

"That was the mission of the Murphy Team."

A dangerous one at that. Conrad thought, shuddering at the thought of being ordered to do that himself.

"And just to confirm..." Conrad began, "Captain Otto Pedersen ordered rear support for Captain Bask's operation?"

"That is correct."

"And he did not say just what Bask was trying to do?"

"It seemed that even the Captain wasn't aware. He said something like 'Doing a favor for Bask isn't a bad thing.'"

"So you didn't participate in Bask's operation itself?"

"No, I did not."

"Then, you're saying there are errors with this record?"

"It is not correct."

"Excellent." Conrad said smiling. "That's the spirit. Visiting hours will be over soon, so let's leave off here today."

As Conrad was starting to get up, Eliard stood up much quicker. A custom of soldiers that is engrained within them. It was expected of someone solely chosen for the Titans. In their early stages, they were troops who seemed to have certain discipline.

Two guards appeared to take Eliard back to his cell. They placed him in handcuffs and lead him out of the room by both sides.

May 0088

Secrecy

When he returned back to the Legal Affairs office, Conrad stood and stared out the window for a while. Outside the window, the Nevada desert stretched out. Although the scenery never changes, he sees something different every day. Now, it appeared darkish gray.

"This is quite the nuisance." he thought.

One of the motives the Earth Federation Forces placed considerable guilt on Eliard was going to become apparent inside him. He was aware of a vital military secret. A certain new weapon. An as of yet unknown weapon that was gone without ever being put into actual combat. Information that is likely not wish to be known in general.

So, the Federation Forces was going to bury it with the Murphy Team.

The modus operandi of the military brass is always the same. Conrad gritted his teeth. They were trying to do the same exact thing during the Delaz Uprising.

Eliard bears no responsibility with the "Colony 30 Incident." He was merely following orders.

He was not aware what the cargo of the transport was.

However, it was problematic in proving that fact. Captain Otto Pederson who handed down the order went down with the Aswan, thus no longer among the world of the living. He didn't think there was a recording from inside the briefing room, but even if there had been one, that went down with the Aswan as well.

As it stood, there was no one to prove Eliard's testimony. It is extremely easy for the Earth Federation Forces to dispose of Eliard. If it weren't for the court-martial, that would've been the end of it.

He absolutely would not allow for a repeat of the Delaz Uprising. Conrad swore to that in his heart. Somehow, he had to hear the stories from the other members of the Murphy Team. Resolved in doing so, he set about locating their whereabouts.

Turning towards his desk, he first tried to confirm the whereabouts of Commander Murphy on his computer terminal. Conrad unconsciously furrowed his brow as he was typing. The records were cut off in the middle.

Just before the Aswan sunk, Murphy had returned to the ship injured, and in accordance with orders to abandon ship, he was carried out while tied to the bed. After escaping in a lifeboat, he was picked up by a cruiser and returned to

Earth. Following that, he was admitted to a military hospital. The records stopped there. What happened after that was unknown. Treated as missing.

Conrad searched for Carl Matsubara, who had survived the Gryps War. Afterwards, he was discharged. His whereabouts following his discharge was, of course, not recorded. He also made a search for Audrey April. The details surrounding her were the same as Carl's. Following the Gryps War, she returned to Earth and was discharged. After that, her whereabouts became unknown.

"Joanna," Conrad called out with a loud voice towards the open door. At once, Lieutenant JG Joanna Pavlova appeared wearing a Federation Forces administrative uniform. Although she was a beautiful woman of Russian lineage, Conrad always felt that her value lied in her skills rather than her beauty. She was Conrad's secretary.

"You called, sir?"

"I need you to find the whereabouts of three people for me. Wes Murphy, Carl Matsubara and Audrey April. According to the records, Murphy's whereabouts following his admission to a military hospital are unknown. Carl and Audrey were discharged from the military."

"Right away sir," she replied, immediately disappearing from the doorway.

He didn't just order Joanna to do it as he personally tried all possible means to locate the whereabouts of the three. However, in the end, as the days progressed, they didn't learn their whereabouts. The two hit every database on the net. They were even successful with driver's license and social security inquiries at public agencies, however the three could not be tracked down.

"Dammit!" Conrad exclaimed, slamming his fists down on the desk.

"We've been cut off."

The secretiveness of the Earth Federation Forces and the bureaucracy of the Federation government was hindering their progress.

Or so he felt.

Commodore Eddie Southwell of the Legal Affairs Bureau entrusted the case to Conrad fully aware of that.

Commodore Southwell had said that even if someone defended Eliard, there was no saving him. In other words, that meant that the Federation Forces wanted to make Eliard guilty.

It was possible, after all, that the other members of the Murphy Team aside from Eliard were being imprisoned in a military facility somewhere and that the fact of that was being concealed.

"Like that's going to stop me..." Conrad said, with a new sense of enthusiasm starting to burn inside of him.

July 0085

Aswan

"Whoa, I'm really piloting this?" murmured Carl Matsubara looking up at the new test model unit on the mobile suit deck.

Eliard was overwhelmed by the strange figure too. It must be a variation of the Hi-Zack. However, aside from the frame of the Hi-Zack, what stood out was the firearms mounted on it. It was a gigantic beam cannon. Enormous boosters were mounted on the legs in order to manage the ridiculously large weapon.

"This thing is more of a muzzle with a propeller than a mobile suit." Carl's voice could be heard on the comm device inside their helmets.

"Quit yer moaning" barked the voice of the young mechanic, Pete Shelton.

"You're a test team, aren't ya? It packs a punch. Its power is greater than a weaker battleship's main battery with the same range too."

"Still, watch yourself." came the voice of veteran mechanic Hendrick Ness, "The mass and length of the beam cannon can create unexpected inertia. You won't be able to freely move it around."

"So if we end up in a dogfight, then we're going to be sniped?" Carl declared with discontent.

"We've gotta hurry." Eliard said, "We've been ordered to launch. We'll cover you so you can maneuver more effectively."

July 0085

Side 1 Between Confeito & Colony 30

Eliard and the others of the Murphy Team continued their rear support for Captain Bask's operation. During the battle, Carl's GM Sniper III was heavily damaged. For that reason, he could pilot the experimental Hi-Zack, the TR-2 Big Wig. Word had reached the Aswan that a Zeon remnant battleship had broken through a blockade under Captain Bask's command and the Murphy Team was ordered to intercept them.

"North Star Coordinates, 090 on a direct line from planetary orbital plane," came Carl's voice as it reverberated in the cockpit of Eliard's GM Kai. He looked at the radar but was unable to confirm it yet. Carl's Big Wig was a weapon for long-distance use. It's radar and sensors cover a wide range as well.

Carl's voice could be heard again.

"The ship is acting on its own."

"You're able to tell?" followed Commander Murphy's voice.

"It's not sending out an allied ID code. It's a Zanzibar."

"It's probably that guy from last time. If it is, then you-know-who's Rick Dom and Zaku will be sent out."

Their movements showed that they were pilots with an extensive military record. They were likely named pilots in the former Zeon Forces.

"They're a worthy opponent for me." thought Eliard.

They're worth fighting only if they're formidable. Veterans were an appropriate enemy for the Titans.

"Show me the goods." Carl said.

"The hell?" Eliard asked without batting an eye.

"I've locked on. I'm gonna fire off a shot."

Eliard was surprised. The GM Kai's radar had yet to pick up on anything. It was probably the same for the Commander's Hazel too. Still, Carl's Big Wig had already locked on to the enemy.

Eliard used his shoulder thrusters and moved laterally in haste. The Commander's unit also appeared to move in the opposite direction from Eliard's unit. In the next instant, a blast was emitted from the Big Wig's massive long range beam cannon. A high output beam like one fired from a battleships main battery cut straight through the darkness of space, extending straight ahead.

"Whoa..." Carl could be heard saying.

"This thing's a beast!"

Eliard stared at the sea of stars where the beam had disappeared.

"Did you hit 'em?"

"Nope." responded Carl, "There's a slight offset with the sight."

"Hurry up and adjust it." Murphy said. "There's a medal for a team who sinks an enemy battleship."

"Roger that. I'll hit them for sure this time. Uh-oh..."

Carl had realized something.

"Two very small blips. They're probably mobile suits."

The distance with the enemy was rapidly shrinking.

The enemy battleship appeared on Eliard's radar too. Soon they'd probably be able to visually confirm.

"They sure sent out their mobile suits fast." Murphy uttered, "Looks like the threat of the beam cannon worked. That gives us a chance at winning."

Before long, they were able to confirm the shape of the Zanzibar with the naked eye. And, just as they suspected, the two mobile suits were a Rick Dom and Zaku.

Eliard advanced while firing his beam rifle. By making his opponent move about, it forced them to consume their propellant. The time to carry out an operation depended on the propellant. The longer the mobilization time, gives them the advantage.

"More enemy mobile suits are launching." It was Carl's voice.

"Three more units."

"Hit the ship." Came Murphy's voice, "Then it's checkmate."

"Understood. I just need a little more time for the charge."

"In the meantime, leave them to us."

Eliard saw the approaching Zaku. There were five enemy mobile suits. They had superiority in numbers. But, Eliard had the pride of being a chosen soldier. In the last battle, he struggled through an overwhelming and unfavorable situation. But this time...

"Huh?!"

Carl sounded bewildered.

"The three mobile suits that appeared from the rear are heading in the opposite direction."

"The opposite direction?" asked Murphy.

"Is there anything there?"

"Hand on a sec, there's something to the rear of the Zanzibar... It looks like a civilian shuttle."

"A civilian shuttle?!"

"I'm detecting another unit to its rear. It's an allied ID code. It's a GM."

What's going on? Eliard was perplexed.

But, the enemy Zaku was drawing in closer. There was no time to be at a loss.

He'd leave the thinking to the Commander. Eliard fired his beam rifle again and again. The Zaku went around. Eliard tried to lock onto the back of the Zaku coming around which took some strong G's.

"Don't shoot, Carl." Murphy could be heard saying. "Something's not right..."

The Zanzibar was approaching. Sure enough, the ship was accompanied by a civilian shuttle. It appeared as though they were escorting it.

"If I do it now, I can take out the Zanzibar." Carl said.

"No. Our opponent is accompanied by an unarmed shuttle."

"Do you think they're hostages?"

"Then that's all the more. Don't start a fight."

"But..."

"Don't forget a Titan's pride. We absolutely cannot get civilians involved. We don't want to end up terrorists like the Zeon remnants."

Immediately following that, the shuttle behind the Zanzibar exploded.

Eliard was in shock.

He forgot about fighting with the enemy mobile suits and was entranced by the light.

"What was that?" asked Murphy, "Who fired?"

"Could it have been...?" asked Carl, "I think it was from the GM who followed them."

The Zaku and Rick Dom turned around. It seemed as though they were returning. Still, Murphy said nothing and the Zanzibar passed before their very eyes.

What the hell happened? Why the hell did the allied GM and not the Zanzibar, destroy a civilian shuttle? Silence dominated the sea of stars. The battle was already over.

Having returned to the ship, Eliard and the others were told by Captain Otto Pedersen that Captain Bask's operation was a complete success.

"You were thanked by Bask. You did very well."

Captain Pedersen was in a good mood. However, Eliard was unable to shake off the uncomfortable feeling from when the shuttle exploded on the battlefield.

May 0088

Hope

Having been returned to his detention cell, Eliard sat down on the crude bed fastened to the wall. He nearly went crazy in the first three days he was taken here. He no longer had anything to believe in.

Eliard was born in the colonies, he enrolled in the Earth Federation Forces military academy and had to put forward much more effort than others for the elite were born and raised on Earth. The nightmare of the One Year War engulfed the entire Earth Federation Forces. A group of individuals within the Federation Forces seriously considered the colonies to be a danger that breeds rebellious elements.

The "Delaz Conflict" encouraged that thinking. The Titans were created immediately following the end of that uprising. Just to be a member: a one rank promotion. It was something young officers longed for. Everyone at the academy dreamed of enlisting in the Titans. Eliard was no exception.

However, being raised in the colonies, he resigned himself from the get go. There were strict requirements and reviews for joining the Titans. One of the conditions that were gossiped among cadets at the academy was that you had to be born and raised on Earth.

However, Eliard was allowed to enlist in the Titans.

It was like a dream.

When he received his transfer orders, he had no sense of reality. Assigned to an experimental team, he was charged with a highly dangerous mission. Though he was delighted to be able to quickly access weapons that were developed by the Federation Forces.

Eliard eagerly continued fighting with the pride of the Titans in his heart. His commander, Wes Murphy, was an ace pilot who played an active role in the Delaz Conflict and was decorated for his first battle during the One Year War at the Battle of Solomon.

Over time he came to feel pride in being able to fight along side him more than being a Titan. Carl Matsubara and Audrey April were also great members of the team. He actually felt like he was sharing his life with them.

It was after the end of the "Gryps War" that he was made aware that the Titans were intent on being a privatization of the Federation Forces for a very select few. Following the war, the media and informational websites that had been suppressed up til that point immediately bounced back and various facts became clear.

However, Eliard knew of the truth to the rumors behind the Colony 30 incident. Until then he had heard the rumors and he also heard the speech Char gave at Dakar. But, he believed that it was just misinformation that Zeon remnants and their terrorist sympathizers circulated and thought that the AEUG had just taken advantage of it.

He learned for the first time he was involved in the "Colony 30 Incident" when he was arrested by the military police and read his charges following investigation.

Everything that supported him until that point crumbled beneath him.

He tortured himself in solitary confinement.

He seemed to have completely lost sight of himself.

The only way to defend himself was to forget about everything.

For what he tried to forget, there were things he couldn't forget.

Still, he tried to forget, otherwise his mind would not last.

That is when Conrad showed up.

Eliard was suspicious of the man, he didn't trust anyone. However, Conrad's enthusiasm became clear during their talks. Now, that which Eliard had forgotten became a desperate attempt to remember.

That's right. He had to remember everything in order to fight with Conrad.

He wasn't bothered by solitary confinement anymore; he had found a sliver of hope.

A hope that gave him courage.

His isolation gave him time to slowly recall things, or so he came to believe.

May 0088

Manhunt

Conrad again ordered Lieutenant JG Joanna Pavlova to widen the search range for Wes Murphy, Carl Matsubara and Audrey April. Joanna had given this job top priority and devoted herself to it.

However, it was all the same: the whereabouts of the three was unavailable.

"I'm terribly sorry, sir," Joanna said, "Even with the data I'm able to access under my authority, I was unable to locate them."

"It was the same on my end as well." Conrad replied.

Conrad simply didn't push all the work onto the woman. Conrad himself continued to search on the net across the range he could access.

"I'm not making any progress," he said, "Because if the data were classified or even deleted until then... then there must be someone who knows something. Someone reliable."

Conrad pulled up a military personnel file on his computer.

"There should be someone who would listen in the appropriate department..."

"You'll ask the ones on the bottom then?" Joanna asked.

"Right. Those who are in just the right position..."

Conrad scrolled through the list and opened the file of a person whose photo he stopped at.

He gave a faint smile.

"The guy in charge of the section that manages the personnel files for headquarters is a good guy. Pedro Mendoza. Oh, he's a Lieutenant Commander? The same as me. Looks like he climbed the ladder too."

"Someone you know, sir?"

"Somewhat. Come meet this guy. We have to fly to Dakar. Find the fastest way to get us to Dakar."

"There's no need to worry about that." Joanna said, smiling, "Since you're a senior officer, I'll see about chartering a transport."

As he was waiting outside the office following his request to meet with Pedro Mendoza, he heard his loud voice.

"The Legal Affairs Bureau? I don't have time to deal with that. Send them away."

His private secretary could be heard answering him.

"There's a court-martial. They've said that it is an important matter..."

Conrad headed for the office door without caring.

"Please wait outside," she said, turning around.

"I can't afford to be sent away."

From the other side of the desk, Lieutenant Commander Mendoza glared at Conrad.

"I don't care about some court-martial. It's a waste of time, leave me."

Mendoza's facial expression changed in an instant. Flabbergasted, he stared at Conrad. Suddenly, he jumped up, standing to attention, which turned into a salute.

"Commander Morris. I haven't seen you for a long time."

Conrad gave an informal salute in return.

The secretary stared at the back and forth exchange between the two.

"Why didn't you tell me the name of the person I'd be meeting?" Mendoza asked, "This man was the commander of the mobile suit forces I was in."

"Oh, no, I just..."

"It's fine. You may leave."

As the secretary was leaving, Mendoza spoke to Conrad.

"You're with the Legal Affairs Bureau now..."

"Since leaving mobile suits behind, I went to law school."

"I'm indebted to you, Commander. You saved my life numerous times."

"Do you mind if I sit? Old war wounds still hurt after all."

"Please, have a seat on the sofa."

Even though he sat down on the sofa, Mendoza still remained standing.

"You should sit as well, it makes it hard to talk."

Mendoza finally sat down in one of the desk chairs across from his desk.

"What kind of business do you have here in Dakar? Its related to the court-martial I'm guessing..."

"I need your help."

"If I'm able to, name it."

"They are trying to court-martial a young man by the name of Eliard Hunter who was attached to the Titans."

"Eliard Hunter." said with a worried look on his face, "I know who he is. He was involved in the 'Colony 30 Incident' and has been indicted with various charges."

"He is under my council."

"Vaya tela!" exclaimed Mendoza, throwing his hands up in an exaggerated fashion akin to his Latin heritage.

"That is quite the lowly role. There's just no change of winning."

"But, I'm trying to do just that."

"And?"

"I'm searching for three people in the same team as him. Wes Murphy, Carl Matsubara, and Audrey April. I think you'll know there whereabouts following the war."

Mendoza immediately became restless.

"But why me..."

"What're you saying? You're the one in charge of the personnel files."

"You should search for it in the military's personnel files."

"I did that. But there was no record of Murphy following his release from the hospital. Matsubara and April were discharged from the military and there is no sign of them afterwards."

"If they were discharged not even I know where they went."

"Are you making a fool out of me? It's clear that the Federation Forces is covering up their whereabouts. The reasons are abundantly clear as well. It is all to make Eliard Hunter guilty. The top brass are going to forget certain facts behind closed doors. Because Eliard Hunter is directly affected by that secrecy, I'd like it dealt with."

Mendoza grew more and more restless.

"But that has nothing to do with me. My job is to bring together the military's personnel affairs files."

"Murphy, Matsubara and April. You had to pick up these three files. Besides, it would be strange if you didn't."

Mendoza stared down.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that."

"So you won't tell me."

"Correct."

Conrad stared at Mendoza for a moment but eventually stood up with his can in one hand.

"I'm disappointed, Pedro."

As he was exiting the room, Mendoza spoke to Conrad.

"This may be just a persistent rumor, but..."

Conrad froze.

After having shown some hesitation, Mendoza continued.

"I've heard the talks about someone who was seriously injured in the war, taking a lucrative job with the Colony Public Corporation. And there was even some talk of a pilot and a mechanic active during the Gryps War taking jobs at a subcontracting factory for Anaheim Electronics and as a Junker on Luna..."

"All of them are companies under Federation Forces oversight."

"There just rumors."

Conrad turned around and smiled.

"Next time, let's grab a drink since it's been so long."

Mendoza stood up again and saluted.

"*The Colony Public Corporation, huh?*" Conrad mulled it over in his mind.
"*This is becoming all the more convoluted.*"

July 0085

Aswan's Mobile Suit Deck

"This is overkill..." muttered the mechanic Pete Shelton as he looked at the unit on the catapult.

"I'm really going out with this? This is the unit used for the Hazel's spare parts."

"You talk too much!" bellowed Hendrick Ness' voice inside his helmet, "It's not like we're sending you out into combat!"

"It's carrying propellant and a booster pack as well. We improvised but, she's good. A novice pilot would black out when that thing suddenly accelerates."

"I can hear you, you know." came Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter's voice, "Excuse me for being a novice pilot."

Eliard was already inside the Hazel Reserve Unit's cockpit.

"I wasn't talking about you!" yelled Pete. "But, if you're not careful with how you use the thrusters, you'll cut across some serious G forces."

"Got it. Though we are an experimental unit to experience just that."

"You said it."

"Pete, I hope you quickly set the armaments output limiter to training mode." came Hendrick's voice again. "Training regulations. My butt's on the line if a ridiculously expensive mobile suit gets destroyed in a mock battle!"

"I did just that. The beam output is at ten percent of its maximum. Even if a unit sustains a direct hit, it won't damage it. It'll probably just get really hot."

Waiting on the other side of the Hazel Reserve Unit was Lieutenant JG Carl Matsubara's GM Sniper III. Attached to his unit was a mid-range support unit or cannon pack. In its right hand was a long range beam rifle. Furthermore, in order to test an expandable shield, a Galbaldy Beta's shield was mounted on the left arm. At the moment, the shield was in compact form for easy maneuverability inside the ship.

"Move out." came Lieutenant JG Audrey April's voice from the deck's control room. "Once you're 5 kilometers away from the model, the operation will begin."

"Roger that." said Eliard.

"Eliard unit, Gundam Hazel II. Moving out!"

July 0085

Lunga Sea, Near Confeito

Eliard felt the pride of wielding the Gundam well up in his throat. Even though it was called a Gundam, the Hazel Reserve Unit was a GM Quel with a Gundam Head mounted on it. In spite of that, calling the machine a Gundam had a special meaning.

The history of that began with the ace Amuro Ray during the One Year War.

Around the time of the GM's development, it is said that early trials of a Ground Type Gundam were made on Earth. Furthermore, a new Gundam was developed for Amuro Ray and was waiting to be rolled out just when the One Year War was ending.

The Zeon guerilla's attempting to destroy it inside a colony were ultimately wiped out by the lone Gundam. There were rumors that three Gundam units were active during the Delaz Uprising, however records of that were officially erased and Eliard had never actually seen a photo of them.

The Gundam has a glorious history. And now, Eliard was piloting one of those Gundams.

Although it was a mock battle with Carl, it was natural to be enthusiastic. Having reached the regulated distance, the battle commenced. Eliard hit his unit behind a convenient rock. The targeting scope on the monitor moved around frantically. It was searching for Carl's GM Sniper III.

"Where the hell are you?" muttered Eliard.

Comms were forbidden during mock battles so there was a sense of security that whatever was muttered in the cockpit wouldn't be heard by anyone.

Suddenly, a beam passed the left side of his unit.

Eliard automatically threw the unit sideways and jumped out from behind the rock. It felt as though all the blood in his body shifted to one side due to the sudden G's. He also felt a strange rotation in the machine. The long propellant produces momentum and he was unable to shift horizontally.

"It's a problem even with this huge propellant tank."

On the other hand, he didn't have to worry about running out of propellant. The unit should far exceed the mobility of Carl's GM Sniper III. But, the problem was the long range rifle. He'd have to stay far above the range. But today, Carl had the cannon mount.

"There!"

Carl's unit went around behind Eliard, firing his rifle again as soon as the Hazel Reserve Unit turned around.

Using his thrusters, he had no choice but to move erratically.

Even though he was aware the output was set for training mode, he shivered when the beam approached. Staring intensely into the target scope, Eliard followed Carl's signature. He fired several shots off from the beam rifle as a threat. But, Carl was at a safe distance. He was composed.

"So you're not coming closer, eh?"

He charged towards Carl's unit while shifting the unit side to side.

"What's that?" came Carl's voice out of the blue inside the cockpit.

The fool. Eliard thought.

They could only receive communications during training. Transmitting was prohibited.

Carl's voice continued, "What appear to be three mobile suits are approaching. This isn't a drill!"

Following that, another voice could be heard.

"This is the Aswan. Enemy confirmed. We're lifting comm limits. Repeat. Enemy sighted. This is not a drill!"

"You've gotta be kidding me!" Carl cried out, "I've only got training weapons!"

There was no way to release the output limiter on the rifle from inside the cockpit. It was a step to prevent accidents during training. That brought about unfortunate results.

Eliard looked around at his four monitors. There. Three mobile suits.

It was only a small point of light reflecting the sunlight, but using telescopic mode he was able to confirm the units. He recognized two of the units, the Rick Dom and Zaku they encountered twice before. The other unit was a Gelgoog with a Zaku's spike shield attached to its shoulder. It was the color of a production model. That meant the Zanzibar that was carrying them was somewhere nearby.

The Aswan was unable to locate them beforehand. Ahead, a small patch of space that would be a problem.

The three enemy units rapidly drew closer. Carl fired his long range beam rifle and the three units scattered.

As Carl threatened them, Eliard was somehow planning on luring them into close combat.

Even though his weapons weren't useful, he had no choice but to fight with the specs.

If he hit his opponent with the full mass of the unit, they might be damaged. In short, he'd ram them.

The enemy that had spread out still had distance on them, as if they were being cautious of Carl's rifle.

It was only a matter of time before they realize the limitations of the output. They had to find a way to get the upper hand somehow before it was too late...

The Gelgoog and Rick Dom headed for Carl's unit.

Carl rapidly fired the shoulder cannon and long range beam rifle as he fled about. They made a wide circle around him for their dogfight. The Gelgoog and Rick Dom were cautious of Carl's firearms.

The Zaku was right in front of Eliard's unit.

"That' pilot from before, huh?" muttered Eliard, "A veteran pilot. Maybe I should provoke him."

Eliard didn't fire his rifle. He advanced, swinging his machine back and forth fervently so his opponent couldn't get a lock on him. He felt like he was in a shaker. The blood in his head boiled, and his insides twisted up. It managed to work. He managed to provoke his opponent. He wasn't going to use a firearm, instead choosing to respond via close combat. Eliard rushed forward, intending to hurl himself at him, prepared to damage the armor.

It looked as though the Zaku was standing still in space.

"Don't make light of me!" In an instant, the distance between Eliard's Hazel and the Zaku shortened.

He prepared for the shock from the crash, but there wasn't one. The Zaku had moved just before he crashed into it. He dodged him.

Eliard used his main thrusters to turn the unit around and decelerated. The Zaku was right in front of him, brandishing its heat hawk.

His heart seemed to well up in his throat from fear.

"Like hell you will!" he cried out to encourage himself as he moved the Hazel's leg. At the same time, he poured everything into the main thrusters. A terrible shock came. He managed to kick the Zaku. He was able to seize the moment.

The Zaku began to rotate away, but was able to regain it's posture with a short burst of its thrusters.

"Shit. I've got no chance at close combat!"

At that moment, Eliard became aware that something was approaching at high speed.

"Hold him off for a minute." came Murphy's voice. "That should be enough."

Commander Murphy was on his way. With that alone, Eliard suddenly felt that he had the upper hand.

The Zaku fired his thrusters and headed for him.

Just then, he was frantic. Several times he rushed in and felt the violent clash.

And in spite of that, Eliard's unit managed to hold out. Suddenly he sensed a strong light toward his left.

Looking back for a moment, he saw Murphy's Hazel, the high mobility form that used the three shield boosters.

One of the shield boosters was engulfed in a ball of flames and the Rick Dom was blown apart. Murphy used the shield booster as a decoy and buried the Rick Dom before challenging the Gelgoog. The Zaku's offensive had become lax; the pilot having witnessed the Rick Dom being done in. Now, there were two Gundams on the battlefield. Their forms should be a threat to them.

Eliard rammed into the Zaku again, knocking him off into space as if jettisoned by a catapult. It was possible it lost the will to fight back or maybe it was at a loss and would go and help the Gelgoog fighting Murphy's unit.

A violent dogfight evolved between Murphy's Hazel and the Gelgoog. It was no ordinary pilot in that Gelgoog. Both units fired their beam rifles at one another. The beam fired by the Gelgoog destroyed the shoulder armor on Murphy's unit. At the same time, the beam fired by Murphy's unit caught the

Gelgoog from the front. The damage to the Gelgoog was severe and it saw it was unable to continue fighting. The Zaku was already in position to retreat.

The pilot escaped from the Rick Dom and Gelgoog. When the two pilots attached their towing cables to the Zaku he withdrew.

Eliard had escaped danger yet again. There was a despondency inside him following the fervent tension of the battle.

"That was good practice, wasn't it?" came Murphy's voice.

Carl responded to that, "Give me a break, will you?"

"Let's get back to the ship." replied Murphy.

Eliard realized he was gradually getting a feel for combat for himself.

June 0088

Wait and See

A commissioned officer accompanied by two sentinels came for Eliard. Eliard was already informed that it was the first day of hearings for the court-martial.

The real battle was just beginning. A struggle right along with Lieutenant Commander Conrad Morris.

Eliard was placed in handcuffs and was led behind the officer down a damp and dirty underground corridor. The two sentinels held onto both his arms. They soon exited the bright corridor and Eliard was placed in a jeep and taken towards an Earth Federation Forces facility.

His hair was blowing in the dry wind. It had been a while since he was outside. He took a deep breath without thinking. As he exhaled, his breath trembled slightly. He couldn't hide his nervousness.

Today, Eliard would take his fateful first step. The fate of literal life or death. Even on the battlefield he danced with death. However, today was different. Life and death was entrusted to someone else.

As they entered the room where the court-martial would take place, his nervousness rose again. The room was an actual courtroom. A level above was the seat for the chief judge. Already seated there, an officer of the Federation Forces with the rank of Commodore.

Eliard was led to the defendant's seat and his handcuffs removed. Conrad was beside him.

Looking at his face, Eliard was barely able to regain composure.

"Do exactly as I tell you." Conrad said, "There's no need for you to worry."

"Sir." Eliard had planned on doing that from the beginning.

Military or civilian alike, this is the first time he'd step foot into a court room. He had no choice but to do as Conrad said.

As chief judge, the Commodore gave his name and announced that court is in session. The man called Georgi Milkov had cold, bluish gray eyes.

"He's more of a politician rather than a soldier. He has considerable influence in the Federation government." Conrad whispered to Eliard.

Commodore Milkov read the name of the prosecution aloud and instructed them to give their opening statement. The name of the officer in charge of the prosecution was Captain John Gordon. He too gave off a coldhearted appearance.

Conrad whispered in his ear again, "He's been with the Intelligence Bureau the entire time. He's not an easy to deal with opponent."

With a clear, yet slow manner of reciting, John Gordon explained in detail the four charges against Eliard.

In short, the crime of participating in the "Colony 30 Incident," the willful and dangerous flight with an Asshimar, desertion in the face of the enemy during the colony laser battle and the last being the personal destruction of a new weapon.

Conrad whispered to him again, "At this point, they'll ask whether you plead guilty or not. You cannot sit on the fence for this. You will firmly deny it."

"Right."

Eliard was called to the witness stand.

He sat up straight and stared straight ahead. His attitude became tense in doing so.

Commodore Milkov asked how he would plead to each of the charges. Four times, Eliard gave a firm "Not Guilty".

"You may step down."

Eliard gave a military style right about-face and squarely returned to his seat.

"Well done." Conrad said.

From there, the prosecution spent a long time providing various proof regarding Eliard's charges. Even as Eliard was listening, it was convincing.

He submitted various evidence to try and prove the fact that during the "Colony 30 Incident", the Murphy Team launched from the cruiser Aswan and headed for Side 1. In the matter of the dangerous flight with the Asshimar, he called upon testimony from high-ranking officers on the scene. Regarding desertion in the face of the enemy at the time of the colony laser battle, it would be based on Eliard's own report after returning. Even for the destruction of a new weapon, he would be relying upon Eliard's report.

Eliard suddenly grew uneasy with Gordon's flowing explanation and glanced over at Conrad's profile. Conrad didn't even take notes, he just listened to what the other had to say.

Gordon soon finished his statement and the chief judge, Commodore Milkov, spoke.

"Does the defense have anything to say on the matter?"

Eliard waited for Conrad's remarks.

"No, Your Honor." responded Conrad as he remained seated.

Eliard was astonished. He believed that Conrad was going to take on Gordon's accusations. However, Conrad didn't say a word. His trust in Conrad nearly wavered.

"Then this military tribunal is adjourned for today." Commodore Milkov stated, "The next hearing will be in one week."

He banged the gavel.

The sentinels approached with handcuffs.

"Why didn't you say anything?!"

"There's no need to worry." Conrad replied.

"One must first size up the enemy, then search for their weak point."

"So then you've found a weak point?!"

"There is a weak point. So, just watch me."

The sentinels placed Eliard's hands in handcuffs and led him back to his cell again.

June 0088

Search

Although the Gryps War had met its end, the after-effects still continued.

Immediately after the war on February 29th, Haman Karn of Axis backs Mineva Zabi and begins dispatching suppression forces to each of the Sides. The Earth Federation Forces, freed from the controlling rule of the Titans, were rapidly rebuilding.

Then on June 6th, Axis forces, having brought on both Titans and Zeon remnants, adopt the name Neo Zeon and their advanced fleet were sent down to Earth.

They had to hurry, Conrad thought.

If the horrors of war spread out again, the Federation Forces might expedite their conclusion of the court-martial.

He told Eliard that every enemy has a weak point. The prosecution side surely has one. However, Conrad still hadn't obtained the resources to attack them.

"I'm going to the moon."

Conrad had said to his secretary, Lieutenant JG Joanna Pavlova.

"One of my old men who is in charge of personnel files hinted that I could find something if I go to the Moon."

"I'll make preparations. I'll reserve a military shuttle to get there as soon as possible. Civilian services are severely disarranged due to the Neo Zeon."

"Haman Karn shouldn't rush things. We need time."

"I think I can reserve two seats right away."

"Two seats? Whatever do you mean?"

Joanna smiled.

"I'm your private secretary, Commander. I have to go with you."

"There are things you have to accomplish here."

"That which I can do here I can also do on the Moon."

Few men could win against Joanna's smile.

"I suppose you're right. There's not much I can do limping along by myself."

Conrad and Joanna departed on a military shuttle from Cape Kennedy at 10 o'clock the next day and headed for the Moon.

It had been a while since he headed for outer space.

Conrad strapped himself into the uncomfortable seats of the military shuttle and felt a sense of exhilaration. The next trial was scheduled for one week later.

However, for both the defense and prosecution, an extension of time for the trial can be given with proper reason by the judge. That is item one from the Earth Federation Forces Military Tribunal handbook.

Conrad proposed that to Commodore Milkov directly. It was very difficult to return from the Moon in a week. At first, the Commodore firmly denied it. However, Conrad insisted that he must go to the Moon as it was something very important that could affect the outcome of the court.

Somehow he persuaded him.

Even still, time was limited.

While on the shuttle, Conrad worked out a detailed plan of action so he wouldn't waste time on the Moon.

First, he would consult with the subcontractor with Anaheim Electronics at Von Braun. With a company that large there would likely be a vast amount of subcontractors, so he would probably need Joanna to help.

Murphy. Matsubara. April. At any rate, he had to find someone among the three. All three if possible...

He suddenly looked out the window at the sea of stars. There was a fire in the pit of his stomach. The sea of outer space was no different as seen from the monitor of a mobile suit.

Conrad was still fighting and he took pride in that.

For those who are accustomed to living on Earth, the one sixth gravity causes lunar sickness such as hot flashes and sluggishness to a lack of equilibrium. Being a former mobile suit pilot, Conrad was accustomed to it right away, but Joanna seemed to be taking it hard.

She had no experience working on warships either.

Yet in spite of this, she worked admirably.

The two kept walking from early morning until the evening hours and continued pouring over their computers until midnight.

They dared not to stay at a military facility, instead choosing a civilian hotel. The military top brass all knew that Conrad was defending war crimes. To that end, they could encounter some unexpected interference.

Even after spending three full days, they found no clues.

The subcontractor of Anaheim Electronics had even more subcontractors, to the point where the numbers were mindboggling. The industrial area and junkers were concentrated in the deepest underground area of Von Braun. Most of the Junkers were subcontractors of subcontractors.

That very same day, Conrad split off from Joanna and went to those innermost areas to get information.

The climate management system was creating noon and night. The sun went down.

It was evening in the old factory district.

Conrad felt nostalgic towards the scenery for some reason.

Exhausted, he entered a small pub in town. There were no clues to be found that day either.

He ordered a whiskey at the counter.

There was an old drunk next to him.

As Conrad downed the contents of his shot glass, the dead drunk old person stared at him.

He tried ignoring them, but the old guy spoke up.

"Treat me to one, would ya?"

"It looks like you've had plenty to drink already..."

"If you buy me a drink, I'll tell ya the best story!"

"It's best you don't associate with him. He's always telling the same lies over and over." The bartender said.

Conrad took out a bill and treated the old man to a beer.

As the old man sipped the beer like it was a treasured item, he spoke to Conrad, his breath reeking of alcohol.

"You're a soldier, aren't ya? If you are, then you should know what I'm going to tell you isn't a lie."

"And what would that be?"

"About the Gundam. The new Gundam that was on the Aswan."

Conrad stared at the old man.

"You're familiar with the Aswan?"

"I was a mechanic on the Aswan. I'm not bull shittin' ya. The name is Hendrick Ness."

Conrad was unable to hide his excitement. Maybe he struck gold because this old man may hold a vital key to the mystery. He couldn't help but feel that way.

CHAPTER.02

August 0085

Zanzibar Hangar

Gabriel Zola was extremely worn out. The strength of the Zeon remnants was at its limit. The Zanzibar, which once took part in many fleet movements, was now forced to act alone.

They could no longer hope to fight like a regular army. They had no choice but to wage guerrilla warfare; always standing side by side with death.

But, they had to fight.

The Titans' hunt for Zeon remnants grew worse day by day.

Maintenance was being carried out on two mobile suits in front of him: a modified Rick Dom and Gelgoog.

Both machines are equipped with a winch unit, a device that was strongly conscious of guerilla warfare.

Solomon. We've come back here yet again.

Zola thought as he looked up at the Rick Dom and Gelgoog.

He once fought here with Anavel Gato. Gato was being talked about less and less now. Following the battle of Solomon at the end of the One Year War, Gato had decided to participate in Delaz's activities. He put his life in Delaz's hands.

Zola, on the other hand, did not participate in the Delaz Fleet; he missed his chance. As a result of that, Gato had died while Zola had lived.

"New equipment, huh?" came a voice from behind him.

It was Kazak Larson, a veteran pilot just like Zola.

The two had fought together at A Baoa Qu.

In other words, guerrilla warfare is growing harder at their age. But, for Larson being the dyed-in-the-woll soldier that he is, he never complained.

In the last battle in the Lunga Sea, the Rick Dom and Gelgoog sustained damage that took them out of the fight.

Had it not of been for Larson's Zaku, he would have been dead.

The destroyed suit was on an orbit around the moon, caught in the gravitational pull of the Earth and the Moon.

Larson's Zaku was picked up during a spacewalk by the Zanzibar that made a rendez-vous in orbit.

"You cannot fight with equipment like the regular army." Zola said as he continued looking up at the two suits.

"Mobile suits are scarce," said Larson, "So far, sympathizers in the colonies have arranged for resupplies but how long will that last...?"

"Which is why we're seeking an alliance with the anti-Earth Federation government movements."

"The AEUG, huh?"

"They're not just a civil movement. They're even constructing their own battleships."

"Ah, but it's a power struggle within the Earth Federation Forces after all. It's not worth it to work with them."

"They're stalling."

Larson nodded at Zola's words.

"Haman Karn?"

"Yeah. If we support Lady Mineva and Zeon is revived, our troubles will be rewarded."

"Our troubles?" Larson said as he laughed, "I don't think these are troubles. I'm the only man who can pilot a mobile suit anyways."

"There's an Alexandria-class stationed at Solomon..." Zola said.

"The Aswan, was it...? That ship is a problem."

"I was terrified when I saw the Gundam. The Gundam itself is what nightmares are made of for us."

"The Aswan Team has a Gundam. We've encountered them three times already. Still, we couldn't make any significant damage to them. They're formidable foes."

"They appear to be a test team."

"Come again?"

"They're a team who is charged with testing new weaponry. Their mark is a rabbit."

"So they'll keep sending out new weapons one by one?" Zola said, his face suddenly appearing sunken.

"If it weren't for them, Side 1's Colony 30 massacre may have been prevented."

"I don't know about that..." Zola said, "The Titans are determined."

"We might have even saved just the citizens who fled on shuttles."

"In any case, we must defeat the Test Team. Solomon belongs to the Zeon. We simply cannot let them do whatever they want with it."

"I'll pilot the newly equipped Gelgoog."

"Agreed. We won't be buried by the Gundam."

Zola called out to a mechanic servicing the Rick Dom.

"Paint this boldly on the unit: Zeon Alive."

August 0085

Shoal Zone Near Confeito

Eliard and the others of the Murphy Team were on a patrol mission.

Recently, anti-Earth Federation government movements were steadily becoming more active and Zeon remnants were back around to act in concert with it.

There was a high probability that the Zeon would target Confeito. Formerly a Zeon space fortress called Solomon, many men were killed in action in a fierce battle surrounding this place. Afterwards, the Federation Forces established a naval base here. It came under nuclear attack by Anavel Gato during the Delaz Dispute.

For the Zeon, it has symbolic meaning.

In the shoal zone nearby in particular, it is easy for guerrilla's to hide. A place of balance between the gravitational pull of the Moon and Earth, in other words a Lagrange point, is a region where rocks, fragments produced from combat, and garbage collect, following an orbit around the moon.

The Aswan entered into the same orbit as Confeito, positioning itself outside the shoal zone. From there, the Murphy Team took off.

Taking off first was the Gundam Hazel, piloted by Commander Murphy. Following him on his left wing was Eliard in a GM Kai and on his right wing was Carl in a Hi-Zack. Carl's GM Sniper III was currently being converted to its normal form.

"Feels as though the rocks and ship remains are standing still." came Murphy's voice, "They're moving at high speed have been drawn in by the gravitational pull of the Moon and Earth. If you hit one, your mobile suit is done for."

"Yes, sir." Eliard replied automatically.

This was completely different from a normal patrol mission. This place was a dangerous shoal zone.

"A Zaku."

Carl's abrupt outburst caused Eliard to survey his surroundings.

"An enemy attack?"

"Ah, sorry. It was just some bombed out remains."

"Don't scare him." Came Murphy's voice. It was the moment Eliard breathed a sigh of relief. A streak of light crossed in front of him. A large caliber beam cannon.

The light immediately swelled up on his right side.

"Carl!" Eliard yelled out without thinking.

The beam pierced Carl's Hi-Zack.

The enemy.

They were hiding somewhere out there.

"Spread out." ordered Murphy.

Eliard fired his main thrusters and distanced himself from the Hazel.

"Carl, you still with us?" Murphy called out.

"I'm fine. A little closer and it would've been a direct hit on my cockpit."

"Cut your systems and hide behind the rocks. You'll cause an explosion if you move."

"Roger that." replied Carl as he withdrew from the front.

How many enemy units are there? The rocks and combat wreckage were an obstacle so radar was ineffective. Using his thrusters, Eliard took a roundabout path to the other side of a large rock. He located the enemy.

"Enemy sighted. It's a Gelgoog."

"I've got a Rick Dom on my end. I'll leave the Gelgoog to you."

"Yes, sir."

Eliard closed in on the Gelgoog to get a jump on it and fired his rifle. The Gelgoog hid itself behind a chunk of ice, away from the rocks.

He'd have to shoot through the ice.

He fired his rifle towards the lump of ice. The mass and heat of the beam scattered the ice in all directions. But, the Gelgoog wasn't behind it."

"Above?"

Eliard unconsciously fired his thrusters. The enemy's beam passing close to him. He thought about returning fire but the enemy was too fast to lock on to.

"I shouldn't lose to mobility."

Eliard moved rapidly.

He could see brief, firing lines in the distance. Murphy's Hazel and the Rick Dom were fighting between the ginormous rocks.

"Dammit. Hit already!"

Eliard fired his rifle. He was gradually gaining ground but the enemy's movements were too skillful.

But just then, the enemy's movements became sluggish.

Eliard noticed it.

A beam fired from the Hazel's rifle blew off the right arm of the Rick Dom. The pilot of the Gelgoog noticed it. He expected them to be keeping in contact on their wireless.

"I can do this..." muttered Eliard. He was certain it was his chance to counterattack.

June 0088

Progress

"There was a Gundam," said Hendrick Ness. "Because I serviced it, that's why. Make no doubt about it."

Having joined Lieutenant JG Joanna Pavlova, Conrad Morris came back to the room of Hendrick Ness, a man who says he once worked as a mechanic on the Aswan.

It was a tiny apartment. There was the stench of a man tired with life in the room. The stench of alcohol, cigarettes and sweat, or garbage and dust too.

The apartment was located outside of the industrial area. There were lots of junkers in the surrounding area and Hendrick was working as one now.

"So about the Gundam..." Joanna enquired carefully, "It's not the Hazel frame that the Aswan's test team was operating?"

"Nope, you're wrong there."

Appearing to have sobered up, Hendrick Ness' face now revealed a depressing fatigue.

"The Hazel has the exterior of a Gundam but on the inside it's just a GM Quel."

Conrad was the next to ask.

"It had nothing to do with the Mk-II developed by the Titans on Gryps, right?"

"It had nothing to do with the Mk-II or the Zeta that the AEUG developed. It was an entirely new Gundam."

"But there is no such record of it in the military."

"I don't give a damn about that."

While what Hendrick said may indeed be correct, Conrad decided to continue.

"Do you know Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter?"

"Yes, quite well. He's a good kid. He was an excellent mobile suit pilot."

"Right now, Eliard is being court-martialed."

"Court-martialed..."

Conrad explained the four charges being placed on Eliard.

Although Hendrick Ness came off as dull-eyed, a clear rage appeared in his eyes as he listened.

"What the hell is the army thinking? Eliard fought risking his life for Christ's sake."

"I'm aware, which is why I'm trying to save him."

"You're with the Earth Federation Forces?"

"I'm a judge advocate. I'm responsible for defending Eliard."

"Can you save him?"

"We finally received some favorable news. That would be you."

"What could I possibly do?"

"The new type of weapon that Eliard destroyed, it may have been the new Gundam you mentioned."

Hendrick shook his head.

"I wouldn't know a thing about that. Back then, everything that was going on inside the ship was terrible confusing. But I am certain that Eliard went out in the Gundam."

There was no room to be discouraged by Conrad, he thought.

There were no records of the new weapons that Eliard destroyed.

The Earth Federation Forces had intentionally hid them. He was already aware of that point but he didn't understand the reason why. If the new weapon is a new type of Gundam, then he could understand the reason why the military covered it up.

The Titans had clearly run amok. They splurged by building battleships and developing mobile suits. The Earth Federation Forces was unable to put the brakes on this spending.

It was obvious that the Titans held power over the Federation Forces. They were fortunate that Jamitov Hymem had died and the Titans were destroyed in the colony laser battle.

The Federation Forces top brass, who finally regained power, wanted to completely bury the fact that they were controlled by the Titans. They wanted to forget the fact that they were unable to control the Titans.

If we acknowledge the fact that the Titans had invested huge expenses for the development of weaponry, that would mean that the Federation Forces had given their tacit approval. The media and public opinion were not silent.

If it were a new model Gundam, then cost would not have been odd at all. And it was a problem to be a Gundam.

The Gundam was still retained a symbolic existence for the Federation Forces. It was the same for those living in the Earth Federation. The legend of Amuro Ray was still being handed down.

People took note of the Gundam team that was deployed on the battleship Argama of the AEUG. Both good and bad, people responded sensitively to the name Gundam.

The degree of attention given by the media was also different. The Federation Forces top brass would have wanted to conceal its existence forever, so it was good that it wasn't introduced into actual combat.

For this reason alone they want to court-martial Eliard and execute him.

"Is there anyone that would remember what went on at that time?"

Hendrick once again waived off the question.

"The Aswan was sunk. Injured soldiers and some of us mechanics were able to escape in lifeboats, but many soldiers went down with the ship."

"Commander Murphy of the test team that Eliard was assigned to was injured and escaped on a lifeboat after being recovered by the Aswan."

"Oh yeah, you're right about that. I heard about Murphy, but I don't know what happened to Eliard."

"Do you know where Murphy is right now?"

"I have no way of knowing."

"Is there anyone who would know?"

Hendrick mulled it over for a bit before finally answering.

"Nope, no one that I can think of."

"Do you know Carl Matsubara and Audrey April who were a part of the Murphy team?"

Hendrick's expression grew brighter.

"Oh yeah, they were nice kids too. Carl was a rarity in the Titans though on account of his mixed Oriental blood... That's why there was a bit of a scuffle... I don't want to say that it was because of race because they all gave their very best. Audrey was a beauty... It was quite rare for a woman to be such a mecha maniac. She got quite a few looks from us mechanics."

It was a nostalgic tone. Conrad asked a question.

"You don't know where they are?"

"I dunno."

"I've heard rumors that they're here on Luna..."

"I told you I don't know."

Conrad felt as though Hendrick's attitude had suddenly hardened. He had a hunch he knows something.

"I don't have time. If things continue, Eliard will likely get the death penalty."

Hendrick seemed to have been shocked.

"Did you say the death penalty...?"

"Yes. Although he risked his life and fought to the death, the result is the death penalty."

"How idiotic..."

"I'd like to help him somehow. But in order to do that, I have to locate those who were his comrades."

Hendrick seemed to be upset.

"Are you forbidden from speaking about this?"

Hendrick said nothing.

"Every night you go to the pub and talk about the new Gundam to no one in particular. The military may be willing to overlook your conduct since no one takes it seriously, but I could easily have you detained by informing my superiors."

"Do you get off on bullying an old man with no future?"

"No future? Don't be ridiculous. You're the one who has shut the door on your own future. There are still people who need you. I need you. Eliard needs you. You still have a future as long as there are people who need you."

Hendrick lifted his head and looked at Conrad who was imploring him.

"Can I really save Eliard?"

"Your cooperation is necessary."

Hendrick started mulling things over again, much longer this time. He finally spoke.

"In the lowest level of Von Braun City, there's a manager of all the junk yards in the area. A guy by the name of King George or something..."

"King George?"

"No one knows his real name but everyone calls him that. King George should know something."

He didn't want to waste time. Conrad decided to visit this King George immediately. It was still too early to go to bed.

"I thought that there was no meaning for me to go on living."

Conrad turned around after hearing the voice behind him.

"But, I guess I can help someone..."

"You may have to testify. Contact me when you're subpoenaed."

June 0088

Discovery

They immediately located King George. Having asked about him at a junk yard, they were told he is always at the bar at night.

When they got there, it was a sleazier pub than the one they met Hendrick in. It gave off unsettling vibes. Conrad hesitated in whether he should bring along Joanna, but she didn't seem to mind at all. In the end, the two went in.

King George was a stout, hefty middle-aged man. He wore a white tshirt and jean overalls. A beard covered the lower half of his face.

"There's something I'd like to ask you."

As Conrad said this, King George turned towards him with red, bloodshot eyes.

"And how may I be of service to you, Mr. Soldier?"

"I'm searching for Carl Matsubara and Audrey April."

King George looked over at Joanna and said, "My, my. Aren't you a pretty little thing?"

"Carl Matsubara and Audrey April. Do you know where they are?" Conrad asked again.

"Why are you askin' me?"

"An old man named Hendrick told us to ask you."

"Were you interrogating him?" he asked, a look of hostility came into his eyes.

"Not at all. Hendrick is cooperating with me."

"And he said there's something I can help with?"

Conrad briefly explained Eliard's court-martial.

"That's got nothing to do with me..." King George said, "Still, just how much do you know about this Carl Matsubara and Audrey April?"

"What I've seen from their military files."

"Do you know what they look like?"

"I've seen their mugshots in their files."

"I said it has nothing to do with me, but that young lady over there might interest you."

King George pointed to a table by the window. There, a young lady was drinking wine alone. Conrad's eyes went wide when he looked at her face.

It was Audrey April.

August 0085

Shoal Zone Near Confeito

Eliard tried to pivot for a counterattack, firing off his main thrusters while blasts spewed out from his beam rifle, the acceleration pressing his body into his seat.

"I hope the rifle's energy holds up..."

Eliard muttered as he finally managed to lock on to the Gelgoog. But, the enemy repeatedly moved as though they were trying to catch him off guard. He felt like he was being toyed with.

"Dammit! I'm gonna catch you no matter what..."

He was staring intently at the targeting reticle floating on his monitor when he heard Murphy's voice.

"Ah, shit! It's a trap!"

Eliard looked around at his monitor and saw that the Hazel had completely stopped moving.

A trap? What did he mean?

Around the Hazel, he could see something glinting that reflected the sunlight, a thin strand of light.

"A wire?"

The Hazel was pushed into a wire trap the enemy had been running around. As it was, the Hazel was a sitting duck, a prime target. This wouldn't be the case if he pursued the Gelgoog, who was now firing its main thrusters towards the unmoving Hazel.

"Please, wait for me!"

Eliard called out to Murphy, "I'll burn through the wire with my saber."

He was one step away from doing so when the Hazel was suddenly enveloped in bluish-white light.

"Don't touch it!" Murphy's voice could be heard telling him, "He's feeding a current through the wire. They're trying to take down my systems."

Of course, a mobile suit's computer system was heavily shielded, but if a strong enough current is applied to the systems, there's no telling how long shields would hold up. Mobile suits are a mass of precision machinery and computer systems.

"The connectors in the joints to the arms and legs have been had," Murphy said, his voice frighteningly calm.

Who was supplying the current? Eliard looked around for the enemy, shielding the Hazel.

There. A third enemy. It was a Zaku. A Zaku was hiding behind a rock and deploying a wire. Eliard fired his beam rifle towards it.

The rock turned into an obstacle.

A Gelgoog cut into his monitor on the right side, the arm with the bazooka shot off, but it still had the missile launcher attached.

"Like hell, you will!"

Eliard fired off his rifle. It wasn't a hit, but it did keep the enemy in check. A Rick Dom appeared in the opposite direction, this one raining fire from its machine gun. His shield was hit.

"Pull back," Murphy said, "At this rate, both of us are done for."

His voice was still calm.

"You're kidding, right?" Eliard said, "I can't just let the commander die."

Eliard looked around at his monitors. He had to keep firing his beam rifle to keep the enemy in check, but the energy remaining on the monitor showed that it was rapidly depleting.

Beams from the Rick Dom burned up his shield again, so much so that they already became useless. The Gelgoog launched a salvo of missiles, each striking one after another, exposing Eliard to the shock of their impacts. He didn't know how long his armor would last.

His monitor displayed the damage from the impacts. His right leg was hit and was gone from the knee down. The missiles had also impacted Murphy's Hazel.

A round from the Rick Dom had torn through the Hazel's shoulder, and now, a second missile attack was incoming. Alarms blared in the cockpit. Air appeared to begin leaking. Eliard lowered the visor on his helmet. Even if the air in the cockpit were to run out, a normal suit's life support system would keep him going for a while.

"Shit, they hit me."

He had no choice left but to continue firing his beam rifle as long as he had the energy to do so. Yet, the enemy never wavered in their assault; they seemed keen on targeting the Hazel. Their eyes were set on the Gundam. Defeating the Gundam held immense meaning for Zeon remnants.

The Hazel was suffering from an onslaught of missiles and beams, and Eliard did everything in his power to protect it since it was unable to move. But, his efforts were in vain.

The Hazel's armor was in tatters, relatively fragile parts like the manipulators, ankles, elbows, and knee joints having already been sheered off by missile attacks. Eliard's GM Kai was in a similar state, the energy in his beam rifle running perilously low.

"Bastards think they'll do as they please?"

Came Carl's sudden voice as a beam grazed the Gelgoog. Carl's Hi-Zack was sticking its rifle out from behind a rock. He had managed to reactivate his Hizack, which had been struck by a round, despite disregarding the dangers of detonation. He must've been listening in over the wireless and couldn't bear to sit idly by.

"Carl," Murphy called out, "I thought I told you to get out of the line of fire?"

"I don't think this is the time to talk about that," he replied as his Hi-Zack continued firing off its beam rifle. Backup from Carl was reassuring, but it didn't change their situation much. Their crisis dragged on.

For now, the only way to shield the Hazel was with the tattered GM Kai. Soon his beam rifle would be out of energy. As the impact of round after round pummeled him, Eliard gritted his teeth.

August 0085

Aswan's Mobile Suit Deck

"So the Hazel II is up and running," said Audrey April who was wearing a normal suit, "We'll send it out right away."

"Now hang on just a sec," said Pete Shelton, "It only has a seventy percent energy gain."

"That should be enough," Audrey says as she settles into the cockpit of the Hazel II, deciding to ignore pre-flight inspections. Flipping the monitor on, she heads right for the catapult.

"Move it, move it." came the voice of veteran mechanic Hendrick Ness, "The beam rifle. Little lady, take another double pack with you. It'll be out of energy soon."

"Roger that."

Audrey attached the rifle and energy pack to the Hazel Reserve Unit and got on the catapult.

"Audrey unit, heading out." came the voice of the controller.

"Opening airlock. Clear in front."

The Hazel II flew out into the sea of outer space.

August 0085

Shoal Zone Near Confeito

The beam rifle's energy was finally depleted. Since it was originally a patrol mission, spare energy packs weren't brought along.

Carl was shooting at the Rick Dom.

Amidst the intense sounds and shocks striking the armor, Eliard felt that the sounds were suddenly fading away. He was keenly aware of the sounds of his own breathing and heartbeat.

"I might die." He felt.

He sensed no wonder or terror.

Suddenly, it grew quiet. I wonder if I'm dead, he thought for a moment. But, the reason it grew quiet was entirely different.

The enemy had ceased their attack.

What? What happened?

Just then, he finally noticed the radar. There was a bright spot approaching at high speed. Following that, a beam cut through space.

"You alive?"

It was Audrey's voice.

"Somehow..." came Carl's answer.

"You sound pathetic! Suck it up! You don't deserve the name Titans!"

With those words, Eliard regained the confidence he had lost.

The Hazel II's beam rifle grazed the enemy.

The enemy was clearly shaken. The appearance of a second Gundam may have sent them into a panic.

The Hazel II approached Eliard's unit.

"Here's an energy pack for your rifle."

"Load it for me, my left arm won't move anymore."

"Roger that."

Audrey's unit swapped out the energy packs. The remaining energy level on the monitor indicated he was fully charged.

He fired off his beam rifle towards the Gelgoog. The Gelgoog seemed to have already spent its missiles. The enemy was also being bombarded.

Looking at their reinforcements, they seemed to have realized their disadvantage.

The enemy began to pull back. Audrey tried to follow them.

"Don't chase them too far," came Murphy's voice, "Our battle is over. Return to the ship."

"Roger that."

Audrey's unit cut the wire restraining Murphy's unit with its beam saber.

"Commander, are your thrusters still functional?" asked Eliard.

"I'll be fine. I'll make it back to the Aswan somehow. Audrey, look after Carl's unit."

The only decent unit was Audrey's Hazel II. Eliard and the others, whose suits were the same as scrap at the moment, headed for the Aswan.

August 0085

Confeito Hangar

"They sure did a number on this, huh?" said the Aswan's operations commander Captain Otto Pedersen as he looked up at the destroyed Hazel.

The members of the Murphy team were all present. They had to receive orders for future mobile suit operations.

Eliard thought that he would be blamed for turning their valuable mobile suits to pieces.

Captain Pedersen spoke to them.

"Gracious, you're all very fortunate. It's a miracle that you all survived with your suits looking like this."

Commander Murphy kept his attention without saying anything.

"Is it possible to repair the Hazel?" Captain Pedersen asked the mechanic, Hendrick Ness.

"Whether it's possible or impossible, we gotta do it."

"Be quick with it. The Zeon remnants are beginning to move actively."

"Politics and how the war is going are outside of my specialty. But, you can just leave the mobile suits to me."

"We're counting on you."

Hazel Unit 2 was standing next to the destroyed Hazel. Next to that was the Asshimar TR-3 Kehaar.

Captain Pedersen turned to the members of the Murphy Team.

"Now then, as for use of mobile suits in the meantime, Lieutenant Murphy, you'll be piloting the Kehaar. Lieutenant Hunter, you'll be in Hazel Unit 2. Lieutenant Matsubara's unit will be passed along later."

Captain Pedersen looked at each of their faces one by one. It was time for their lecture. Eliard prepared himself.

"I'm glad you made it back alive." Pedersen said calmly.

The captain turned his back to them and walked away.

Carl breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well that was a bit anti-climactic."

Eliard felt the same.

"Eliard," Murphy said.

"Sir?"

"Why did you not follow orders? I told you to leave the battlefield, yet you didn't."

"I cannot abandon my commander."

"There should be some sacrifices. That is the iron rule of war. Remember that."

Eliard wasn't convinced. However, he wasn't allowed to defy a superior officer.

"Understood, sir."

Murphy nodded at his reluctant answer as he added, "What I said was just for appearances' sake. I'll be honest with you. You and Carl saved my life. I won't forget that until I die."

Murphy headed for the exit of the hangar. Eliard stood in shock, staring at his back as he left.

June 0088

Surveillance

As Conrad called out to her, Audrey April slowly turned her face. Upon seeing Conrad she promptly frowned slightly. Conrad was in a suit and Joanna was wearing plain clothes. Maybe there was the stench of a soldier about them and Audrey April was probably wary of them. After that, she slowly returned her gaze back down at her glass of wine.

"What do you want?"

"To talk to you about Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter."

"Who is that?"

Audrey April was languid-looking, and felt as though she had no ambitions whatsoever. Everyone in this bar was like that. She seemed exhausted, but not the physical kind, she seemed tired of living.

The lowest level on Luna. This is the area that people eventually arrive at. A poor area where junkers are lined up deal with scrap. Humans may be scrapped as well.

Audrey April, however, couldn't forget about Eliard Hunter. She probably didn't want to get involved.

"Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter is currently being court-martialed. My name is Conrad Morris. I'm a Judge Advocate with the Earth Federation Forces. I'm undertaking the defense of Lieutenant Hunter. I'd like to help him somehow."

"Didn't I tell you I don't know this Hunter guy?"

"Then how about Lieutenant Wes Murphy?"

"Dunno him."

"Lieutenant Carl Matsubara?"

"I don't know. Look, I don't have anything to do with the military. My job involves repairing scrap electronic parts so they're usable. I repair old industrial mobile suits with scrap parts. I make parts for them all day. It's not very profitable though, so when the day is done, I'm tired and just want to drink some wine. You're disturbing that very precious time."

"Time is crucial to me as well. I'm prolonging the hearing of a court-martial but the military will not wait forever, do you understand? If things continue, Lieutenant Hunter will be executed."

Audrey let out a slow sigh.

"And I told you, that has nothing to do with me..."

"I need your help."

"I cannot help that man."

"Even if it's just Wes Murphy or Carl Matsubara's whereabouts, that's fine. You don't know that, do you?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything."

Audrey April was truly admirable. She was only staring at her glass of wine the entire time.

There was no getting along with her. Conrad was irritated and grew impatient. He finally located Hedrick Ness and even reached out to Audrey April. He had no choice but to give up on everything he's done so far...

Let's make a fresh start. Conrad thought. There wasn't much time left. Even if they stuck around here they were likely to make little progress.

"I'll be back." Conrad said, leaving Audrey April. As he crossed the bar, he felt the strong stares from the other customers.

King George in particular showed his wariness as he watched Conrad. Conrad ignored them and headed straight for the exit.

"What shall we do now?" Joanna asked. She too was irritated. It was a race against time.

"Even though we've only confirmed that Hendrick Ness and Audrey April are on Luna, that's better than nothing."

Conrad was trying to think positive. Pessimism would yield nothing. He felt that it was important to think he was steadily moving forward one step at a time over yesterday.

"Anyways, we have to find someplace to stay. Let's look for a room."

"Is there anywhere to stay in a place like this?"

"There are beds and taverns in every town."

It was just as Conrad said. While they were walking towards the station, they found a cheap hotel. It was a hotel with only a hard mat bed and a bathroom.

"Anyways, we're done for today. Maybe we'll turn up something good when we head out tomorrow."

"As you wish, sir. Good night."

Joanna was in the room opposite his.

Conrad tried showering in the bathroom, but only a tiny trickle of lukewarm water came out. He wiped his body with the hot water before laying down on the bed. He was exhausted. At his age it was difficult for him to walk around with such a bum leg. But, he had to do it. While he was doing all this, Lieutenant Hunter was inching ever closer to death.

Just then he was startled by a sudden sound. It seems he was slowly dozing off. He looked around and heard the sound again. It was the sound of a knock at the door.

Conrad approached the door, but he didn't stand in front of it. He asked who it was on the other side.

"Who is it?"

"Audrey April."

He heard a faint voice. There was no doubt it was hers. Although wary, Conrad opened the door slightly while keeping the chain on it. He saw Audrey's face in a hood.

"Open the door. Hurry..."

"Just a sec."

Conrad closed the door, removed the chain and opened it wide. The door opposite his also opened. Joanna was holding a gun.

After glancing over at Joanna, Audrey came straight into Conrad's room. Conrad nodded to Joanna, and she put the gun away and came over to his room.

Conrad closed the door and spoke to Audrey.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"We're all under surveillance."

Conrad groaned.

"I was careless. I should have realized that."

The excitement of locating Audrey coupled with his growing impatience caused him to lose all rationality.

"I'm sorry. I had no intention of troubling you."

"Former Titans have more or less been put under surveillance by the Federation Forces."

Audrey said, her tone changing. Her attitude was that of a soldier against her superiors.

"Were you able to slip past them in coming here?"

"There's not many people watching me. It's low-level guys with the Intelligence Bureau that're bored with their mission. They're just thinking about going home and watching late night programs on television."

"So then you'll cooperate with us?"

"I'll do anything to help Eliard. The Murphy Team were all comrades I entrusted my life with."

"I heard from Hendrick Ness that there was a new type of Gundam."

"I heard the rumors but unfortunately I wasn't present at the time."

"Can you explain what the situation was at the time?"

"Those of us in the Murphy Team were carrying out a joint operation with the Aswan's mobile suit forces. Eliard's Gaptank was severely damaged and he withdrew from the battleline. I had heard that Commander Murphy was also injured. Immediately after Eliard retreated, our mothership the Izmir sank."

Conrad nodded. Her testimony was consistent with what he investigated thus far.

"Lieutenant Hunter and Lieutenant Murphy were later picked up by the Aswan. Although Lieutenant Murphy was injured, I heard that Eliard was ordered to sortie in the Gundam since he wasn't injured."

"When Eliard and the commander were picked up by the Aswan, Carl and I were still carrying out an operation. I don't know what transpired at that time."

"Lieutenant JG Hunter is being court-martialed with four charges. The first is his involvement in the Colony 30 Incident, the second involves dangerous conduct with the Asshmar in the atmosphere. The third is desertion under enemy fire during the Colony Laser battle and the fourth is the willful destruction of a new weapon in order to desert. So in regards to the third and fourth charges, you were not present. However, as for the first and second charges, you should know something."

Audrey nodded.

"The Colony 30 incident causes us psychological trauma even now. When I was in the Titans, intelligence was strictly managed so I wasn't aware of the incident."

"The Federation Forces top brass claims otherwise. They're saying that the Aswan was aware of the Colony 30 incident's planning and was actively involved. Operations Commander Captain Otto Pedersen was onboard the Aswan at the time but was killed in action during the Colony Laser battle. No one denies that the Aswan was involved in the Colony 30 incident."

"Captain Pedersen was never aware of the plan regarding the Colony 30 incident. He wanted to gain Captain Bask's gratitude. Captain Pedersen said so himself."

"Knowing that fact, what did you all do?"

"We escorted the transport and gave rear support."

"Were you aware of what was loaded onto that transport?"

"I know now that it was G3 gas." Audrey said firmly, "However, when we were sortieing, there was nothing mentioned about the contents of the transport."

"Please tell me the details."

"The transport in question headed for Side 1 from an elliptical orbit around the moon. The Murphy Team headed out from the Aswan that was on the same orbit as the transport and rendez-vous with them before accelerating towards Side 1. They went along, stuck to it just like a suckerfish is to a shark. As they approached Side 1, they were attacked by the enemy."

"Attacked by the enemy?"

"I remember there being a Zaku II FZ and a Rick Dom. They were Zeon remnants."

"You guys just protected the ship, correct?"

"Yes, sir. That was our mission."

"And then?"

"When we returned to the Aswan, I was immediately ordered to head out. It was for rear support for Captain Bask's operation."

"You're saying it was for the Colony 30 incident?"

"Yes, but again, it seemed as though not even Captain Pedersen was aware of the contents of that operation."

"Can you remember exactly what Captain Pedersen's orders were?"

"Bask and the others seemed to be undertaking some kind of operation at Side 1's Colony 30. The Aswan has been assigned rear support. I was instructed to sortie. That's what Captain Pedersen told me."

"Your testimony is invaluable. But, we need to prove it."

"The Aswan was at Confeito at the time."

"What does that mean?"

"Until Colony 30 it would have been impossible for a mobile suit to make it with its payload."

"I see." said Conrad. "We may be able to use that fact. It's objective data that the Aswan's role was solely rear support."

August 0085

Confeito, Aboard the Aswan

"It's scary, when you think about it..." Carl began, "Every time I sortie, I end up a mess. Plus, there's no guarantee we'll come back."

Contrary to what he was saying, his tone was quite relaxed. Like it was someone else's problem.

The mechanics continued to reconstruct and repair the suit with almost no sleep. The test pilots, in the meantime, were able to rest for a little while.

Audrey, the mecha maniac, was always with the mechanics. In fact, as far as Audrey's knowledge and technique were concerned, even the mechanics acknowledged it. Thanks to their efforts, the suit was finally finished and so the Aswan departed Confeito. Their objective was testing of the new mobile armor, the Asshimar Kehaar.

It would still take time for the Aswan to reach orbit for testing so Eliard and Carl were killing time in the recreation room.

"I never imagine you'd be scared."

Eliard said to Carl, "You always have plenty of confidence."

"A man who is truly confident doesn't have that type of attitude. Much like Commander Murphy, I carry out my duties pragmatically.

"Ah, I guess you're right."

"Even you were scared?"

As a member of the Titans, there was admitting to being scared of combat no matter what. But to Carl, it was fine. And it wasn't just Carl either. Everyone in the Murphy Team could speak frankly to one another.

He survived a life or death crisis more than once. In the beginning, he was fighting with the pride of the Titans. Now, he felt more pride in being part of the Murphy Team more than the Titans. But it wasn't just pride. There were more important things. It was probably the same for Carl. That's why he tells Eliard some things he never speaks of otherwise.

"I was."

Eliard said. "When you wait to launch in the cockpit, you are in fact trembling. But, when you enter the battlefield, you feel something completely different."

"And what would that be? That something different?"

"A gaze, I'd guess."

"A gaze?"

"Yes. The gaze of the crew on the bridge. Audrey's gaze as she's monitoring. Not to mention the sharp gaze of the enemy and the captains

reliable gaze. That type of feeling. Like someone is watching me. I can fight to the bitter end because of that.”

“Heh... you just might be a Newtype.”

“A Newtype? No one uses that word anymore.”

Murphy and Audrey appeared in the doorway. Eliard and Carl stood up. They were already accustomed to military discipline.

“Standby on the mobile suit deck.” said Murphy.

“Yes, sir.”

Carl replied. As they were leaving the recreation room, Audrey asked Eliard a question.

“What were you talking about?”

Carl answered instead of Eliard.

“Just a story between men.”

Eliard’s Hazel Unit 2 was launched from the catapult and jumped into the sea of stars.

Eliard felt joy in piloting the Gundam. The Gundam is a symbol of the Earth Federation Forces. The Gundam painted with the color of the Titans tells the glory of the Titans.

Using the momentum from the catapult, Eliard tried moving forward using minimal propellant and felt intense G’s, pressing him back into his seat.

He was approaching the Asshimar Kehaar in mobile armor mode directly in front of him.

Eliard tried to avoid a collision by using his shoulder thrusters. Just then, he was taken by heavy G’s and lost his balance.

He heard Murphy’s voice coming from the Kehaar.

“What’s the matter? You’re not a rookie!”

“I was confused by the Hazel’s thrust.”

“The Gundam’s name isn’t just for show. It’s different from a GM. We’re heading for the operation area. Grab onto the Kehaar.”

Carl’s GM Sniper III had already grabbed on to the Kehaar. Eliard eased up on the thrusters and carefully approached before grabbing onto the mobile armor. The next moment, he felt the strong acceleration of the machine.

August 0085

Near Confeito

The moment the Kehaar transformed into mobile suit was the sign for the battle to begin.

Murphy's Kehaar was facing Carl's GM Sniper III and Eliard's Hazel II.

Eliard was astonished at the speed of the Kehaar's transformation. He thought that it would be impossible to somehow meld mobile armors and mobile suits.

Yet, the transformation process was smooth; the transition from mobile armor to mobile suit occurred in almost an instant.

That wonder gave birth to a gap.

The Kehaar fired off its rifle. Eliard used his shoulder thrusters in haste.

Once again he found himself unable to control the Hazel's thrusters. It felt as though he was struck from the side with a giant hammer.

"What speed..." Eliard muttered without thinking.

"Go around and cut in," he heard Carl say, "What do you think your high mobility is for?"

"Roger that." Eliard responded, kicking in the main thrusters on the backpack.

This time it felt like he was kicked by a giant. It felt as though all the blood in his body was being pressed behind him.

"You don't know what to do with the Hazel's high mobility, huh?" he heard Murphy say, "Power that cannot be controlled will only destroy you!"

He knew that.

Eliard told himself in his mind.

I will control it. I was just a bit puzzled.

It didn't matter how he would get used to the acceleration. Eliard was determined to master the Hazel during the Kehaar's test.

Carl's GM Sniper III started shooting freely. Eliard, who was spread out ninety degrees sideways started firing his rifle too.

"Move around," Carl told him, "I need you to flat out cover me."

Eliard was moving with the thruster tuned down slightly but he noticed that it was doing nothing. Unless he moved about with the thrusters on full there would be no way for him to master the Hazel.

Eliard continued to shoot off his rifle as he was jostled about by the bucking bronco.

Carl also made use of the long range rifle's characteristics and was trying to catch up to the Kehaar somehow. Murphy easily dodged the shots from the

two units. It was almost as if the mobility of the mobile suit was supposed to do that.

He was impressed, even though he felt disappointed. It wasn't just a matter of learning it, he had to catch up.

Eliard bit his lip.

June 0088

Intelligence

As she was about to listen to the story from Audrey April, Joanna quickly leaned in close to the door. She had both hands on her gun. Conrad put his left hand on Audrey and places his right index finger against his lips. Everyone in the room was silenced.

Joanna moved to the side of the door and looked at Conrad. Audrey also seems to understand the situation they were in. As to be expected of a former mobile suit pilot. Training is engrained in the body. Audrey moved to the other side of the wall and waited for what could happen.

Conrad stood up and nodded at Joanna. Joanna gently unlocked the door and placed her hand on the knob. After taking a deep breath, she suddenly whipped open the door and point the gun outside.

Beyond the open door was the shadow of a giant. With his cane in one hand, Conrad stared at the person standing at the door.

It was King George. He looked down at Joanna's gun and then over at Conrad.

Conrad felt like muttering his disapproval. King George must have trailed Audrey. Given the impression he made at the bar, it was impossible to think of him as a friend.

Conrad looked at Audrey. Audrey was also looking at King George with a nervous look. It looked like no one knew what to do. It was King George's statement that broke the stalemate.

"This is one hell of a welcome."

Conrad felt that King George might be one of Audrey's watchdogs, one of the Junk yard owners around here. They're subcontractors with Anaheim Electronics so it was no surprise that they'd be able to communicate with the military.

King George had more to say.

"I don't think I can talk candidly in the doorway here..."

"I'll take that to mean you have something to tell us?"

"That depends on your attitude..."

Conrad looked at Audrey once more. His attitude would be determined after seeing what she was thinking. But, Audrey didn't say anything and he was unable to guess what she was thinking based on her facial expression. Conrad looked back at King George before speaking.

"Come in and close the door. Joanna is going to pat you down so just stay quiet."

"No one around here would dare speak to me like that."

"This is my room I rented. You'll do as I say."

King George shrugged his shoulders, his stomach protruding in his overalls shaking. He stepped into the room and closed the door. Joanna quickly locked it and confirmed that he wasn't carrying any weapons. He remained quiet as he was instructed.

"Were you tailing Audrey April?" Conrad asked.

"There's no need to," King George replied, "I can find anyone, anywhere in this town with a single phone call."

"Really?"

Audrey piped up, "King George is much stronger than the Federation Forces surveillance that is attached to me."

King George's bearded face contorted. He was probably smiling.

"Are you trying to curry favor to those that's watching Audrey?"

When Conrad asked this, King George seemed offended.

"And why would I show any sort of flattery for the Federation Forces?"

"It might make work here easier."

"I have no need to wag my tail to the Federation Forces. I manage all of the junk shops around here."

"Then why do you care so much about Audrey's activities?"

"I wanted to know what you came to see her for."

"For what?"

"Audrey is under surveillance by the Federation Forces and yet the Federation Forces came to look for her. That seems a little strange to me."

"And what would you do if you knew that reason?"

Conrad was wary of King George until the end.

"I just want to know what's up. This is my town. I won't overlook people who come here sniffing around without permission."

They had to protect Audrey no matter what. As Conrad was thinking of how to deal with King George, Audrey spoke.

"Mr. JAG here seems to have misunderstood."

Conrad looked over at Audrey without thinking.

"Misunderstood?"

"King George isn't our enemy. He just has mixed feelings, that's all."

Joanna, who was standing behind King George, was also perplexed by this. Conrad asked King George.

"What does she mean?"

"Before I answer that, I want you to answer my question. Why were you looking for Audrey? If you are an officer with the Federation Forces, you can just ask the military people where to find her. You said you were a judge advocate, right? What the hell is that?"

Conrad was lost. He didn't know how trustworthy King George really is. Still, there was a possibility that he is a powerful information source. He demonstrated his natural decisiveness and decided to bet on Audrey's point here.

"Audrey's former comrade is being court-martialed. The Federation Forces are planning on executing him in order to protect military secrets."

"And just what secrets might that be?"

"Have you heard Hendricks drunk yammerings?"

King George furrowed his thick eyebrows.

"About a new type of Gundam...? Don't tell me..."

"The Gundam has always been special. For the Federation Forces it is a double-edged sword in every sense."

"Oh, I'm aware. I even knew about the conspiracy between Anaheim and the military during the Delaz Uprising."

"The predisposition of the military will never change. They'll repeat the same thing over and over."

"Is this friend of Audrey former Titans?"

"He is."

"So, the Titans developed a new model Gundam. Now that they've lost their position and the leading faction of the Federation Forces regained its power, they're about to bury this fact, am I right?"

"That's what I've been thinking. I'm in charge of defending Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter who was a comrade of Audrey here. I'm searching for his former friends in order to save him."

Audrey was listening to their conversation with a serious look on her face.

"That's certainly a problem, isn't it?" said King George after thinking for a while.

"Even the court-martial is formal. The military is trying to erase the fact that there was a new Gundam along with Eliard Hunter. The military has already started obstructing me, which is why I was not able to locate Audrey through official channels."

"The Titans are a problem."

"What do you mean?"

"I too am a veteran... I'll admit though that I didn't do anything particularly meritorious while in the supply corps or with the ground forces stationed in the colonies. Piloting a mobile suit is something I longed to do. Those who were able to become Titans mobile suit pilots are out of reach. I couldn't give a damn about what happens to them."

"The Titans senior leadership was the problem. Still, the young pilots that were thrust into battle were desperately struggling without knowing the motives of the top brass."

King George interrupted Conrad by raising both hands.

"Please listen to what I have to say until I'm finished. When I was in the military, I thought about stuff like that. I was a worthless soldier. But, I was a soldier. A soldier who longed to be a mobile suit pilot. Oh how I longed for it. Every soldier does at one point. When the Titans came about, even I wanted to enlist with them. It was a dream that would never come true. Still, once I lost those feelings of longing to be a pilot, I could no longer be a soldier. That was it. I retired. But, my feelings are still very much like that of a soldier."

"So you're pledging allegiance to the Federation Forces?"

"It's the other way around. I wasn't fond of the military. I like those who actually fought on the battlefield. I'm an ally of Audrey and Hendrick."

"I see. It is as Audrey said, you do have mixed feelings indeed."

"So you're trying to save this Eliard fella by going against military policy?"

"That's what it's come to."

"That's funny."

"I wouldn't exactly call the situation for myself or Eliard funny."

"So you said you were searching for Audrey's former comrades?"

"I'm hoping to elicit a strong testimony from them to save Eliard somehow."

"I'll find them for ya."

It was quite an unexpected offer and Conrad was surprised.

"Can you do it?"

"My colleagues are everywhere. It's a network of former war buddies and veterans."

Audrey piped up quite surprised.

"You never once told me that."

"Because you never asked me. Besides, you're under surveillance by the military. I wouldn't do this under any other circumstances."

"We don't have much time. I cannot prolong the hearing forever."

"I'll do as much as I'm able to. It's better than nothing."

"I'd like to know about Commander Murphy and Carl as well." Audrey said.

King George nodded.

"Well then, we'll leave it to you then." Conrad said.

"It's highly likely that they're with an Anaheim Electronics affiliate or the Colony Public Corporation. If that's the case, they can be put under surveillance like Audrey."

"Gotcha. How long should we stay on Luna?"

"To be honest, you should go back to Earth soon. If worse comes to worse, they're liable to resume the court-martial without counsel."

"Fine, I'll wait on Earth. Let me know immediately if you locate them."

"How?"

"Don't think lightly of a network of vetrans."

"Gotcha."

Conrad spoke to Audrey, "Prepare to leave for Earth right away. You'll be giving testimony."

King George interjected.

"Will you be able to take her? The military will probably cause quite a stir."

Conrad smiled for the first time that night.

"No one can complain if they're hit with a subpoena."

October 0085

Zanzibar Hangar

It was quiet.

The Zanzibar was currently in L5 orbit, one of the Lagrange points of the Moon and Earth. It is an elliptical orbit with Side 1 and Side 4.

Their main engine was stopped and it was on an elliptical orbit around the colonies. They were waiting for their closest approach to Solomon.

The Federation Forces refer to it as Confeito. However, for Gabriel Zola, an officer of the Zeon forces, there was no name other than Solomon.

"We only have three suits left." said Kazack Larson, standing next to Zola. Sand colored hair with a bushy sand colored moustache with white splotches standing out in both.

The two were looking up at the three mobile suits. A Zaku, Rick Dom and Gelgoog.

These three suits were exhausted, much like Zola and Larson were. The armor had dents in various places, their paint was showing its age. There were even sections where the paint had worn off, showing the metal surface beneath.

There were multiple layers of oil in the frame. There was even traces of patchwork in the ducts and countless fine scratches on the cover of the mono eye.

While they had received supplies from the sympathizers in the colonies, that had come to its limit.

"There is intel that the Titans made a frontline base in Side 7." said Larson.

Zola nodded. It is intel from the sympathizers in those colonies.

"It's known as Gryps. They're baseless rumors though. Why would they need to build a base in such a remote area?"

"Even within the armies of the Federation Forces, the Luna II area forces are insufficient. They're likely planning on advancing their Earthnoid supremacy activities outside of the reach of the mainstream faction of the Earth Federation Forces."

"Jamitov Hymen's delusions...?" Zola mumbled without thinking.

"The Titans are rapidly expanding their forces," Larson said, "Considering how exhausted the Federation Forces are, only the Titans are high-spirited."

Zola chuckled, "You're right. The main duty of the Federation Forces now is escorting colony transports and major cleanup of outer space."

Following the One Year War, reconstruction of destroyed colonies was imperative. Since only the former Principality of Zeon at Side 3 had the

facilities and know-how, destroyed colonies were transferred to Side 3 and then sent back to each Side after being rebuilt.

That's when the "Delaz Uprising" occurred. Zeon remnants easily jacked the colonies that were being transported. Following the Delaz Uprising, the Federation Forces were concerned about the situation and entrusted the military with colony transport.

Another problem was the fragments scattered in various sectors from combat. The space debris as it is known by is not drifting. It is locked in orbit at high speeds due to the attraction of the Sun, Earth, Moon and Lagrange points.

That is causing serious accidents. There was also an accident that sank a shuttle due to impact from a single screw. To that end, the Federation Forces were forced to develop a major cleanup operations to collect debris.

It is a fact that the Federation Forces placed considerable devotion to both jobs. In doing so of course, morale of the soldiers went down.

The Titans, however, were different. Under the pretext of hunting Zeon remnants, they continued conducting grandiose military operations.

"How many years have I been fighting with you?" Larson asked.

"That's not the problem, what's important is how many years we can fight together." Zola replied, looking up at the Zaku.

Larson let out a gentle sigh.

"Do you think there is a future?"

Zola nodded.

"There is."

"You're saying there is a future for us who have no choice but to fight as guerrillas?"

"Axis," said Zola, "Axis is our future."

Larson seemed to be thinking about something for a while before he finally spoke.

"How many times must we experience a losing battle...?"

October 0085

Solomon

The Zanzibar accelerated, putting it into an orbit to break into Solomon.

"I'm heading out," called out Zola from the cockpit of the Rick Dom. Larson climbed aboard the Gelgoog next to him. Behind them in a Zaku was Shorter, one of Larson's men.

The surface of the Rick Dom's control sticks were already worn down and portions of the monitor were slightly darker.

Nevertheless, Zola was filled with confidence when he was in the cockpit.

"We'll destroy the Gundam and return Solomon to our hands."

It was nothing more than unfounded propaganda. But, it was necessary for Zola and the others now.

Zola's Rick Dom took off into the Solomon Sea.

The battle began immediately. Two mobile suits and one mobile armor emerged from the enemy's Alexandria-class. The mobile armor was unidentifiable; it wasn't registered in the Zeon remnants computers.

"It's three on three. Don't fall behind." said Zola.

October 0085

Near Confeito

"Carl, cover me," came Commander Murphy's voice, "Eliard, move forward."

"Roger that."

Eliard accelerated by the mobile armor form of the Asshimar Kehaar. He felt the G's as he kicked off.

Nonetheless, he was finally getting used to it, the bucking bronco that was the Hazel II. As he grew accustomed to it, the thrust was promising.

The enemy in front was the Rick Dom.

"Damn old types... Times are different now." Eliard muttered as he tried to lock on. Just as he did, an alarm blared in the cockpit. Someone else had locked on.

Eliard fired his side thrusters in a panic. Feeling the sharp G-force from the side, the Hazel II moved to the right. A Zaku shot up in front of him.

"Is he insane?" Eliard fired his beam rifle at point blank range. There's no way he could miss. He scored a direct hit on the Zaku. The pilot was probably helpless.

"Damn, these legs are in my way!"

He heard Murphy's voice. Looking over at him, Murphy's Kehaar transformed into mobile suit mode and was about to join the dogfight against the Zaku and Gelgoog.

Eliard moved to back him up. Just then, a sharp turning Kehaar showed up on the monitor. The long protruding leg propulsion unit rotated sharply and was struck against the body of the Gelgoog.

The monitor unit in the head of the Gelgoog was blown off. It showed the shock from the terrible collision. With that one blow, the Kehaar lost all three of its leg propulsion units but the Gelgoog was also destroyed.

The Rick Dom also stopped moving. Eliard intercepted the transmission between the enemy and Murphy.

"Let's hear your name."

"Lieutenant Wes Murphy. Earth Federation Forces, Titans Test Team. And you are?"

"Lieutenant Gabriel Zola of the Principality of Zeon. If fate allows us the chance, let's meet again."

Leaving a trail of hot gas, the Rick Dom pulled back to the Zanzibar.

October 0085

Hangar Inside Confeito

"Repairs to the Hazel are complete." said Captain Otto Pedersen.

Eliard and the other members of the Test Team looked up at the unit.

It was the Hazel all right. But, Eliard felt that its impression was different somehow.

"Testing of the Kehaar in orbit are finished. All that's left is the atmospheric testing." Captain Pedersen added as a sarcastic smile appeared on his face.

"I suppose it's necessary to also repair the portions Murphy destroyed..."

Murphy said nothing in return.

"I'll have Murphy pilot this Hazel. I sure you've already noticed, but it wasn't just repaired. I'll have the mechanic Hendrick explain those points to you."

Hendrick, who was waiting behind Captain Pedersen, spoke with pride.

"This is our magnum opus at the moment. By changing the combat data of the first generation Hazel, the reaction has gotten faster. We've made it more light weight overall and increased the thruster output. Best of all is the cockpit. The suit utilizes a new spherical, panoramic monitor and linear seat. Yup, this thing is a brand new Gundam."

"Model Number RX-121-1. It's official name is the Gundam TR-1 Gundam Hazel Custom." said Captain Pedersen.

October 0085

Near Confeito

Following Commander Murphy's Hazel Custom, Eliard took off on the catapult from the Aswan.

The image of the suit was much sharper than the high mobility Hazel II. It must handle differently from Unit 2, Eliard thought.

As the Murphy Team left the Aswan, they fell into formation with the Hazel Custom at the front.

"How is it? What're your thoughts on it, Commander?" asked Carl.

He seemed very interested, which wasn't surprising. Eliard was given the Hazel II and Murphy changed units from the Hazel to the Asshimar Kehaar and now to the Hazel Custom.

Carl was brimming with curiosity more than anyone because he was always piloting the GM Sniper III. Eliard was certain he had a lot more to say.

"It's not bad," Murphy replied, "It'll probably be easier to use if I could get used to this fishbowl like monitor. But for now, I feel like I'm naked and have been thrown out into space."

The panoramic monitor and linear seat had only just been developed and the Hazel Custom was probably the first to be deployed with it. This meant that the generation of mobile suits was about to change. Technology has been steadily progressing since the mobile suits of the One Year War era.

The transformable Asshimar is a prime example of this. When one is in the Titans Test Team, you're able to experience the latest technology before anyone else.

New technology and new weaponry may not always be safe. A test pilot operates state of the art mobile suits, hand in hand with danger. Eliard felt a sense of pride in that.

Audrey jumped down as soon as they returned to the Aswan.

"Commander, what did you think of the new OS?"

Eliard strained his laughter. Just like Carl, Audrey seemed very interested.

"It's stable," responded Murphy, "It goes well with the suit and I saw an increase in accumulated combat data. I felt that the reference time from the database was also quicker."

Audrey was satisfied.

"In the near future, this panoramic-type will likely be adopted for all mobile suit monitors." she said.

"You're right," was Murphy's response, "and it all depends on our test data too."

June 0088

Interference

It was almost time for the shuttle to leave, yet the official in charge still wouldn't let Conrad and the others board. The first claim was that civilians were not allowed to board military shuttles, which was a problem for Audrey April and Hendrick Ness.

Conrad showed them the subpoena. The official in charge was discussing something with the officers. Two soldiers carrying rifles were standing beside them.

"At this rate, the shuttle will leave without us," said Joanna, quite irritated.

"Hmph. My guess is they're trying to run out the clock. They want to prevent Audrey and Hendrik from going to Earth, but they can't do it out in the open. The public and media are watching, which is why we're harassing them."

"So then the Earth Federation Forces are already taking action...?"

"Of course they are, but we know that much already."

Audrey and Hendrik were tense the entire time. On Luna, they were placed under the watchful eye of the Federation Forces. The military's methods had always been the same. Whenever the military wants to protect something, they had no choice but to restrict people's actions and speech severely. Audrey and Hendrik had been forced to live in such a way that they weren't even allowed to talk to one another. Now, even at the terminal, they were wary of the eyes around them.

Conrad suddenly felt angry and approached the officer who was talking with the terminal attendant. He looked at the rank insignia and saw that he was a Lieutenant.

"Are you aware that at this point, you have at least three violations of military regulations?"

The attendant and the officer looked at Conrad with puzzled looks on their faces.

"You are deliberately delaying the departure of a military shuttle. This is contrary to the provisions which stipulate the prompt operation of battleships, military vessels, and military aircraft. If officers and men are to be transferred at the military's request, the requirements therein must be fulfilled unconditionally. You all are in violation of that. What's more, blatantly disregarding a court-martial summons is a clear violation of the law."

The Lieutenant responded with caution, "I have no such intention, sir. I'm just trying to be thorough..."

"I am well aware that you want to leave us at the airport and let the shuttle leave. However, if you allow that, I'll have you all court-martialed on several additional charges. You're aware of what happens when you make an enemy of the Legal Affairs Bureau, right?"

The Lieutenant's face went pale as he thrust the document he was holding back at the official in charge and asked, "What are you doing? Hurry up and get the Commander and the others onboard the shuttle."

The official in charge was in a panic. Conrad and the others finally passed through the gate to the shuttle.

"That's certainly a rarity for you," Joanna said, "For a Commander to make threats like that..."

"It's effective with the lower lackeys, but it's not exactly a card that can be played forever."

"At any rate, we can get Audrey and Hendrik to Earth now."

"Therein lies the problem. We have to make sure they're safe."

"Then I'll leave that to you."

Conrad nodded. Joanna wasn't all talk, and that much was evident from her past careers. Still, she felt a twinge of unease. They had to be cautious and vigilant.

Already, this was becoming more than just the defense of a single officer. Conrad would have to take on the entire Earth Federation Forces. And, he had to win.

"This isn't the time for us to be complacent..." Conrad said as he settled into his seat on the shuttle, "It would be so much easier if we could threaten them, but we have to use every trick in the book instead."

"You're right."

"Is there a journalist you trust?"

"I know a few people from my stint in the military's public relations."

"Make a list."

"You're going to release intel to journalists? If you leak classified material, you'll get the death penalty."

"If we sit idly by, Eliard will be executed. I wouldn't take up his defense unless I were prepared to share his fate."

"But it's too dangerous."

"The Federation Forces top brass are being backed into a corner as well. They need to drain the swamp."

Conrad smiled, "If I'm ever court-martialed, I'll have you defend me."

On the day he returned to his office, Conrad was summoned by his superior officer, Commodore Eddie Southwell.

"Close the door." Commodore Southwell said, clearly in a foul mood.

"I understand you flew into Dakar, pressured the personnel files admin, then boarded a military shuttle bound for the Moon. What the hell are you doing?"

"I am preparing the defense for Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter."

"How much can we reduce the sentence? That's all you need to think about. You just need to bargain with the authorities. Nothing more is required."

"Even I need a moment of excitement. If I'm going to be his defense, I have to make him look just a little bit better..."

"Listen. I'm not asking you to make enemies of the leaders of the Federation Forces."

Conrad gave him a surprised look, "What do you mean by that?"

Commodore Southwell suddenly looked even more unhappy.

"I shouldn't have to spell it out, but you know what I mean."

"I'm only going to do my best to defend Lieutenant Eliard Hunter. I believe that is my role as a law officer."

Commodore Southwell let out a sigh.

"Enough already. But remember this. If you overdo it, I won't be able to cover for you."

There must be a lot of pressure on the Legal Affairs Bureau from the top brass.

Conrad thought. Bringing Audrey April and Hendrik Ness to Earth must mean that the higher-ups must be impatient.

We have a chance to win. Conrad felt more confident.

Conrad's home was located at a Federation Forces base in Carson City. It was one of the officer's residences in a vast green zone surrounded by fencing.

He lived alone and usually had plenty of space in his large house, but when he gave Audrey and Hendrik each a room, he felt that it was relatively small after all.

Still, there was no other place he could safely hide them.

"There's no need for you to worry about bugging devices here."

Conrad said after sitting Audrey and Hendrik on the living room sofa.

"Now then, let's save Eliard together. Tell me everything you know."

Joanna was getting ready to record.

"Good grief..." Hendrik finally seemed at ease, "At my age, long trips are exhausting. Plus, it's been a while since I've had a good drink."

"Can I get you one?"

"No, there's no need for that. The only reason I was drinking was because I had nothing better to do. Now, there's something I have to do."

Conrad spent a long time listening to them. Around midnight, they finally went upstairs to the rooms they had been given. Afterward, both he and Joanna discussed their plans. Conrad was exhausted. He was still tired from the trip. After sending Joanna off, he went to bed and immediately fell asleep.

He was awakened by a noise and immediately reached for the gun on the bedside table. It sounded like a window had been broken. He quietly slipped out of the bedroom, dragging his left leg as he looked down the hallway.

There was a shadow crossing the swath of light coming through the window.

Conrad disarmed the safety on his gun. The suspicious shadow appeared to be ascending the stairs. He tried to position himself so he could see the stairs, but his left leg didn't move as quickly as he wanted, and he stumbled, causing a stomping sound on the floor.

The shadow immediately lept down the stairs and started firing towards him. They fired two shots in rapid succession. Conrad instinctively ducked down and fired back. If you're shot at, you shoot back immediately. That's what you're trained to do.



Then there was a shot from another location. There were at least two intruders. Conrad fired back towards where the muzzle flash was.

The sound of gunfire hurt his ears. The frames and mirrors on the walls cracked, and furniture was probably ruined by the bullets being fired.

Conrad counted the remaining bullets as he fired.

Two more shots.

He fired those two shots at the moving shadow. The slide stopped in the open position; he didn't have a spare clip. Still, the last two shots were effective. The two shadows turned to retreat, firing as they made their escape.

Conrad had no choice but to lie still in the hallway.

The footsteps retreated. Still, he didn't move for quite a while. Silence returned, and that's when the sweat started to pour out of him.

He realized that his heart was beating rapidly. He slowly sat up. Nothing happened.

He climbed the stairs, gripping the railing. It was infuriating that he couldn't move his left leg properly.

"Are you two all right?"

Conrad called out loudly as he went upstairs. Just then, the back door opened. Audrey April appeared.

"What's going on?"

Just then, the front door opened, and Hendrik appeared.

"That was quite a fancy shootout..."

Conrad leaned back against the wall and breathed heavily.

"I never imagined burglars would break into an officer's residence on base... The MPs should be on their way shortly." Audrey said.

"They were after us, weren't they?"

"It would appear so."

"Lend me a gun, please. I can take care of myself. I was a mobile suit pilot, after all."

"You just might have to," Conrad said, in all seriousness.

The enemy had been firing two shots in rapid succession, which indicated to him that they were trained. His opponents were soldiers, which meant that interference was in full swing.

If we stay on the defensive, we'll be beaten. It's time to go on the offensive. Conrad thought to himself.

October 0085

Earth, Satellite Orbit

A bright, blue light overflowed before his very eyes. It is the ocean's color reflecting the sunlight—a warm, blue planet: Earth.

This place is the birthplace of humankind, Eliard just realized. Just gazing out at the Earth from their orbit like this, he felt at peace. It was a miraculous planet brimming with life. When you're in outer space, you realize just how special of a place the Earth is.

Eliard and his team were currently leaving the Aswan in orbit around the Earth and descending into satellite orbit. Even the continents' topography was clearly visible, and in the night portions, they could even see lights from the cities.

"Don't deviate from your orbit."

He could hear Commander Murphy's voice, "If you botch it, you'll burn up in the atmosphere."

Eliard was piloting the Asshimar Kahaar. On his right was Murphy's Hazel Custom, and on his left was Carl's GM Sniper III.

"Understood. I'm quite familiar with Earth's gravity."

"We have about twenty-three minutes until rendezvous with the shuttle. Stay alert."

Following the attitude control program, the Kahaar automatically activated its thrusters, and Eliard felt a strong G force. While Eliard and the other mobile suits appeared to be stationary in the vacuum of space, they were orbiting the Earth at a dizzying speed. There is a strong realization of this when the thrusters fire for attitude control. That's how dangerous this all is.

Whether in ancient or modern times, all accidents in space have occurred when a spacecraft breaks away from Earth's gravity and when it re-enters the atmosphere.

"I don't remember the Earth being this beautiful..."

He heard Carl's voice. He, too, must have been admiring the blue planet. Just then, a transmission from the Aswan came in.

"Test Team, this is the Aswan. We've detected a debris cluster in orbit during your operation. Approximately fifteen minutes until contact."

As if to interrupt the Asswan's communications officer's voice, the team could hear Captain Pedersen's voice.

"Lieutenant Murphy, protect the shuttle. We must get the Kahaar down to Earth safely."

"Understood." Murphy said, "I'm calculating the revised data for the rendezvous."

"We've done the calculations. We're transmitting them to you now, so input them immediately. Still, things are going to get a little hairy out there."

"I've always been a little crazy."

"To speed up the rendezvous, your three mobile suits will lower your altitude and increase speed. Then, we'll reboost to raise your altitude and contact the shuttle a short time later."

"Understood."

Murphy replied matter-of-factly, but Eliard was utterly horrified. Earth was indeed beautiful, but at the same time, it was also a terrifying gravity well.

The revised data transmitted from the Aswan was input into the Kehaar. While the computer onboard the mobile suit could easily calculate the orbital correction data, the Aswan must have taken every possible precaution.

"Let's go."

Murphy's voice could be heard saying, "We're relying on the Kehaar's thrusters."

With its manipulators, the Hazel Custom latched itself tightly onto the body of the Kehaar from the right side, and the GM Sniper III followed on the left. During reboost, all of the main thrusters firing lines must be aligned in the same direction to ensure thrust. In a lower orbit, if they stalled out, gravity would pull it down to the Earth. The greater the speed, the more thrust is needed for reboost. In other words, the lower the orbit, the greater the burden and danger there is to the unit.

Added to that was the problem of debris. Debris in orbit travels around the planet at high speeds, and each one is like a projectile or artillery shell. They were approaching in swarms, and they threatened to breach the shuttle's hull.

The Kehaar's computer, following the revised data, entered into accelerated positioning.

"We'll accelerate for five seconds to maintain low orbital velocity," Eliard said.

"Understood. I have confirmation on my computer," said Commander Murphy, "Keep an eye on your propellant levels. With our change in course, we probably won't have much time."

"Yes, sir."

The Kehaar fired its leg thrusters.

The radar picked up the shuttle. They should have been contacted about the debris, and the crew likely feeling numb as a result, Eliard thought.

Their monitors displayed their course and time to rendezvous.

"Reboost. Rendezvous in two minutes and thirty seconds," said Murphy.

"Understood."

Eliard and Carl said simultaneously. No problems so far. They heard from the shuttle, and the plan was to open the cargo bay doors to receive the Kehaar as soon as they linked up. But, they decided to wait with the doors closed until the debris had passed.

The outline of the shuttle grew larger and larger on the monitor.

"One minute until rendezvous." Murphy's calm voice could be heard saying.

"We've got a debris cluster on the radar," came Carl's voice, "Contact in four minutes fifty seconds."

"The mobile suits will act as a shield," Murphy said. Then the shuttle hailed them.

"Don't destroy the Kehaar. It's undergoing testing on the surface."

"Not isn't the time for that. Mobile suits can still move even if they're slightly damaged, but if a shuttle's hull is damaged, it won't be able to enter the atmosphere."

This was no time to be arguing. The Hazel Custom and GM Sniper III alone were far too small to protect the shuttle. Murphy gave orders to the shuttle.

"Point your nose in the direction of the debris cluster. Keep the contact surface to a minimum. We'll protect the cockpit."

The shuttle did as it was told, firing a few thrusters for attitude control and changing its heading.

The Hazel Custom and GM Sniper III positioned themselves in front of the cockpit. There was a shock that struck their armor. It was the first wave of the debris cluster.

"Use the shields to protect the monitors."

"Dammit... there's a bit one headed right for us."

Carl said, and Murphy immediately gave orders.

"Then burn it down with your rifle."

"So long as there's time..."

Carl replied as he continued to fire his long-range rifle. A ball of flames erupted in orbit. The sound of the armor being struck grew more and more intense, like they were in the middle of a storm.

"Eliard, move to the right," came Murphy's voice, "The window on the far right of the cockpit has been hit hard."

"Understood."

The debris' speed and mass seemed as though it could smash right through their mobile suits armor.

Just endure it... Eliard prayed throughout the violent crash and impact sounds. Eventually, collisions with the debris became less and less, and the sounds from the impacts grew quieter. The debris swarm had passed. Eliard looked at the Hazel Custom and the GM Sniper III on his monitor.

Their shields were in tatters, and there were a few marks that looked as though they'd been struck, but there didn't appear to be any more problems. The Kehaar's computer also reported minor damage.

"We made it..."

"We can move, somehow," came Carl's voice.

"Did you see that huge piece of debris?" asked Murphy.

"It looked like fragments of a Gelgoog..." replied Eliard.

"It was probably from the One Year War, ghostly debris wandering in orbit, still trying to inflict damage on the Federation Forces."

The cargo bay doors opened, and the Hazel Custom and GM Sniper III worked to secure the Kehaar.

"How do you feel about going down to Earth?" Carl asked.

"Honestly, I can't even begin to describe it."

"Heh, well, don't screw it up down there."

"The same goes for you. You're the one who has to get back to the Aswan."

The doors to the cargo bay closed, and the shuttle crew notified Eliard to come into the cabin.

"Please remain in your normal suit and secure yourself in a seat. We're behind schedule due to the debris. If we don't enter the atmosphere soon, we'll miss our window to land where we're supposed to."

Eventually, the shuttle entered the atmosphere. There was a violent shuddering, and the temperature of the craft rose significantly. Eliard felt as though he was at the mercy of Mother Nature's intense gravity and dense atmosphere.

July 0088

Court

Eliard was taken to the court-martial site, following along the same course he had taken the other day. He was taken through a darkened corridor from his military cell and put into a jeep, giving him a sense of liberation.

It had been more than two weeks since the last military tribunal, and each slowly passing day was excruciating. The hearing hadn't reconvened, and he felt as though he'd been abandoned.

He almost felt desperate, hoping and praying that they would sentence him to death. He wasn't going to make it through this anyway.

A court-martial's purpose is for punishment. It doesn't decide who is guilty or innocent; it's for determining the charges. At least, that's what Eliard thought before he was court-martialed.

There was no doubt, though, that he wanted to be saved. He did nothing wrong, and he was confident of that. But, after having been locked up for so long, that confidence started to waver. The fact that he hadn't heard anything from Conrad, the man who agreed to represent him was more than a little distressing.

The thought that he had already been abandoned crossed his mind, yet he clearly remembered Conrad's words of encouragement. His appearance was indeed a godsend for Eliard. But, he hadn't heard anything from him for a considerable amount of time. And, once again, he felt as if he'd been abandoned and all alone.

The mere thought of going to the hearing was terrifying; he was afraid that he would suddenly be sentenced to death, and the anxiety was welling up inside of him. He envisioned a courtroom without Conrad and that he would be sentenced with no defense.

While it was only just a nightmare, he had a sinking feeling that the nightmare was about to become a reality as he was about to face the court-martial.

The sentries brought him to the same room he had been taken to during the first hearing. The door opened, and Eliard, still in handcuffs, stood in the doorway. As before, Commodore Georgi Milkov was seated in the judge's seat, as one would presiding over a regular trial. He nodded, and the MP removed Eliard's handcuffs.

"The defendant will take his seat." Commodore Milkov said. It was then that Eliard noticed that Conrad was sitting next to where he was supposed to sit.

A wave of relief washed over him. Conrad's presence had that much of an impact on him. He finally felt that he wasn't alone just yet.

"Why did you come to see me? Why has there been such a long gap between hearings?" Eliard whispered to Conrad as he sat down.

"I went to Luna," Conrad replied, still facing forward.

"To Luna?"

"It was necessary. I had to stop the hearing while I was there."

"What possible need could there have been to go to the Moon?"

Commodore Milkov banged his gavel.

"Order. This hearing will now begin. Would the prosecution please make their opening statement?"

At his urging, Captain John Gordon stood up. He looked like a ruthless man, and Conrad had described him as a real go-getter.

"First, there is the matter of the first charge: the massacre at Side 1's Colony 30 by the Titans. The so-called 'Colony 30 Incident.' Under Captain Bask Om's orders, the Titans injected poison G3 gas into the colony and slaughtered some three million inhabitants. This is an atrocity rarely seen in history and should not be tolerated whatsoever."

Captain Gordon looked at Eliard as he spoke, and it made Eliard furious. The Colony 30 incident is something that no one would ever forget.

"The massacre of the colony inhabitants by poison gas. It was a strategy favored by the Principality of Zeon, but this wasn't a strategy at all. It was nothing more than an act of terrorism, which is why there was justice for the Federation Forces in the One Year War. However, the Titans, for post-war cleanup, did the same thing in order to hunt down Zeon remnants."

Captain Gordon looked at Eliard as if to say he was responsible for all of this. Eliard almost looked away.

"Don't move."

Conrad whispered, keeping his eyes forward, "Stay put. We are not at fault here, so glare back at him."

Eliard elected to follow his advice and stared Gordon right in the eye.

Captain Gordon's intentions were clear. He wanted to emphasize the horrific and despicable nature of the Colony 30 Incident to rob Eliard of his chance to fight back. At the same time, he wanted to give Commodore Milkov, the trial judge, as well as the officers in the gallery, the impression that Eliard was the villain in all this.

Conrad straightened his back and listened carefully to what Captain Gordon. Eliard followed his lead. Captain Gordon suddenly pointed at Eliard.

"At the very moment of the horrific Colony 30 Incident, he was in the immediate vicinity of Side 1 and had sortied in a mobile suit. This is evident from the following evidence. First, Exhibit Number One. This is a copy of the operations log of the GM Type CR piloted by Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter on the very day of the incident. The GM Type CR left lunar orbit and headed for Side 1. Shortly after that, he sortied again from the vicinity of Confeito."

"Objection," Conrad said, suddenly having spoken up, "I ask that you clarify your point. The relationship between his operations log and the Colony 30 Incident is unknown."

Milkov turned his cold, gray eyes towards Conrad, and then he looked at Captain Gordon.

"Sustained. The prosecution is asked to clarify their point."

Captain Gordon showed no signs of flinching.

"I have here the transcript of testimony by a former Titans transport crew member. This is Exhibit Number Two. It clearly states that he once transported cargo from lunar orbit to Side 1's Colony 30 and later learned that it was G3 gas used in the incident. That is why the date and time match with the GM Type CR's operations log in exhibit one. In other words, Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter escorted the transport of G3 gas, and the timing of his subsequent sortie coincides with the exact time of the Colony 30 Incident.

Captain Gordon paused for a moment to allow Commodore Milkov and the officers in the gallery to understand just what he had laid out for them entirely.

"One cannot deny that there is something truly odd about sortieing again so soon after returning from a transport mission. I believe that oddity is what makes the Colony 30 Incident so extraordinary." Captain Gordon said slowly before returning to his seat and sitting down.

"Counsel, is there anything you'd like to add?"

Eliard looked at Conrad's profile and was afraid that he would say 'Nothing, Your Honor.' again like he had last time. But this time, Conrad stood up.

"First of all, there's the matter of the copy of the GM Type CR's operations log that the prosecution gave as Exhibit Number One. It's common practice in all courts of law that copies of any kind have no admissibility as evidence. I strongly hope that this military tribunal will also follow that common practice."

Commodore Milkov soured his face.

"The prosecution acknowledges that exhibit one is not admissible evidence."

Conrad went on to add, "Which means that there is no longer any evidence that the defendant was directly involved in the Colony 30 Incident. However, even if the GM Type CR's operations log wasn't a copy, it doesn't prove anything. While it is true that Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter may have escorted the transport from the Moon's satellite orbit to Side 1 with a GM Type CR, but it wasn't G3 gas or anything like that for him. In other words, he had no idea what the cargo was it was transporting. He had only one thing on his mind, and that was carrying out his mission of protecting the transport ship."

Conrad looked around the courtroom.

"I would like to ask something of the officers here. If orders are handed down during an operation, what is the right attitude to have as a soldier? If you're on the side that is ordered? Now, how about if you're the superior officer giving those orders? The answer is obvious: it is only right to follow orders and carry out your mission. All responsibility lies with those who give the orders. Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter always did the right thing as a soldier. I intend to assert that fact consistently in this military tribunal."

Conrad returned to his seat.

Eliard felt as if a bright light was finally shining in his heart. It seemed Conrad was starting to fight back. As if he knew just how Eliard felt, Conrad whispered to him.

"The enemy's only just beginning with their attack."

As Conrad had said, Captain Gordon turned on him during the prosecution's interrogation. The details of his mission to escort the transport, as well as the sorties that followed, were closely scrutinized. Eliard answered as accurately as he could remember, but not everything was crystal clear for him. As soon as he gave an answer that came off as vague, Captain Gordon came down hard on him, trying to provide the court with the impression that Eliard was lying about his testimony.

"So, you're telling the court that you came under attack by an enemy while on an escort mission?"

Captain Gordon asked, "What direction did this enemy come from?"

"From satellite orbit at 11 o'clock, as I recall."

"Eleven o'clock... And what direction is that in terms of coordinates?"

"We didn't have confirmed coordinates. It was a visual battle, which is common with mobile suit battles."

"So the enemy came from the direction of Side 1. It's the resistance of the Zeon remnants who got wind of Bask Om's operation early on. Isn't that what you're deliberately trying to hide?"

"Objection." Conrad said quickly, "The prosecution is making statements based on speculations about facts that the defendant cannot confirm."

"Objection overruled." Commodore Milkov said, fed up, "The prosecution may continue..."

It was like that time and time again. By the time the cross-examination was over, Eliard was exhausted, but then Conrad questioned him. He asked a question that went along with what Gordon was trying to get at. This allowed him to state that he had been entirely unaware of what the transport ship's cargo was that he had been escorting and that the team had only been told that the subsequent sorties had been for rear line support.

Captain Gordon summoned mobile suit pilots who had been on escort missions as witnesses and repeated the general questioning of whether the cargo was disclosed to them during their escort missions. Most of the escorts stated that they knew the contents of the cargo they were carrying.

Conrad listened carefully, and when their testimony was over, he said, "The defense would like to call a witness as well, Your Honor."

Commodore Milkov agreed. The door opened.

Eliard was so surprised that he couldn't speak.

Standing in the doorway was Audrey April.



CHAPTER.03

October 0085

Khartoum, Africa

The white, glistening land lay before his eyes. Sparse shrubs dotted the landscape beyond the fencing surrounding the sprawling facilities of the Federation Forces Khartoum base. It was a mite of greenery that seemed to cling to the roughness of the ground. Beyond lie the desert with skies so blue it'd almost make a sound if you hit it. Still, it was a shining blue that couldn't be experienced in space. The sunlight was gentle.

Eliard was testing the operation of the Asshimar TR-3 Kehaar. Today's objective was to test out the thermonuclear jet engines in mobile suit form. The control room of the Federation Forces base was packed with ordinary, non-Titans officers. Eliard was awaiting instruction from the control officer.

He was frustrated. He had been standing on the burning ground for more than ten minutes now.

"What the hell was going on in the control room? Could there be trouble?"

"Do you read me?"

There was finally a comm from the control room. It was the voice of Lieutenant Commander Roberto Bernardo.

"So, how does it feel to stand with two feet on the ground?"

Eliard gave his frank and honest opinion.

"Gravity is terribly inconvenient for mobile suits, isn't it?"

"Well, that's certainly a surprise. The Titans are almost saying something a Spacenoid would say."

Eliard was stunned. He was a rare breed of Spacenoid in the Titans.

"Listen up, Titans. Stick to the altitude limits and follow the return course. Both of these are crucial when you're in the atmosphere."

Commander Bernardo said mockingly.

"I know what I'm doing here. We're not amateurs here, for Christ's sake."

Eliard retorted in his mind.

The upper echelon of the Earth Federation Forces had their own staunch opinion toward the Titans. Still, he was prepared for that. Special treatment of the Titans would be resented.

"The TR-4 or whatever is coming down from space. I'll send you the scheduled coordinates so you can patrol the area until it lands."

He suddenly had orders. The TR was the code assigned to the suits operated by the Murphy Team, so that meant that someone from his test team would be entering the atmosphere with the new suit.

"I didn't hear anything about that, sir."

"Well, I just got word now. Christ, you Titans just do whatever the hell you want anyway."

He was almost certain that Lieutenant Commander Bernardo didn't know about it beforehand, either, he thought to himself. Or was he just harassing him?

"Get a move on, Titans."

The commander had finally given the go-ahead, 'You're buddies are coming down, so you'd best keep tabs on your surroundings.'

The roar from the thermonuclear jets was horrific. The first thing he had to do was check the stability of flight in mobile suit form. The coordinates of the point where the TR-4 was scheduled to land were transmitted to him. Eliard input them into the Kehaar's computer and mapped his course.

"Titans."

Just then, Lieutenant Commander Roberto Bernardo's voice cut in on the comms, "You're veering off course. Are you trying to get lost or something?"

There's no way that could be.

Eliard checked his monitor. He was indeed following the course that had been transmitted to him.

"My computer says I'm on the planned course..."

"Then there's something wrong with your computer, isn't there? Find. Correct three degrees to your right."

"Understood."

It didn't sit well with him, but he had no choice but to follow the controller's instructions. A vast desert then stretched out before him. He wondered to himself how much energy flying in the atmosphere consumed. It's like they're flying while constantly blasting their thrusters.

In space, you could move freely with a single burst of the thrusters. In Earth's atmosphere, they'd have to keep firing the thrusters constantly. The skies of the atmosphere, after all, belonged to the world of the winged. The birds were proof of that.

Eliard landed the Kehaar. According to the plan, he should have reached the point where the TR-4 was scheduled to come down, but he was ten kilometers off target. Had it not been for Bernardo's instructions earlier, he might have reached the correct location. That's what Eliard thought, at least.

Just then, something popped up on his monitor. There was a signature on the radar. It was coming from the desert.

"Radar contact. There are two of them approaching."

Eliard reported to the control room.

"We're picking them up too. Are you able to make visual confirmation from there?" Lieutenant Bernardo responded.

"I'll try."

He shifted the monitor to maximum magnification and saw a bright spot approaching from the sky.

"One appears to be a mobile suit, the other a fighter or some kind of mobile armor."

"It could be those anti-Earth Federation government bunch... or maybe they're Zeon remnants..."

"There are Zeon remnants on Earth?"

"Some of them are buddy-buddy with those Karaba guys. Let's see what you've got, Titans."

"What about backup?"

"We don't have any operational mobile suits right now. Your guys are coming down from space, aren't they? That'll make two of your suits. You'll just have to do something."

Eliard bit his lip. Lieutenant Commander Bernardo was clearly trying to isolate him. Leaving him to die was more like it.

"I'll do it," Eliard thought to himself, "This isn't the first time I've been attacked during a test. What I've gotta do is protect the TR-4 as it enters the atmosphere. In that case, I guess it's a good thing that I'm off course from the landing point."

The mobile suits coming in from the sky were now within visual range at maximum magnification. One of them looked like a Gouf, and the other was a Dodai. He'd draw them in and then finish them off. Eliard stared hard at the monitor. Another mobile suit had emerged from the Dodai. It was another Gouf.

Two Gouf's and one Do-Dai. Three versus one, huh?

He was at a definite disadvantage, but there was nothing he could do about it. The Kehaar was the latest model, with different specs from old mobile suits and bombers.

The Dodai fired off its missiles at him.

Eliard fired his thermonuclear jet engine. The sand around him kicked up. He secretly hoped that it would act as a smokescreen and fend off the missile attack.

The Gouf also fired their rifles.

It was too early for him to return fire. He'd have to draw them out and try and take them out in a single shot.

"Titans." Came Lieutenant Bernardo's voice, "Give me a sit-rep."

He sounded contemptuously nonchalant.

"Shut the hell up already!" Eliard cursed in his head.

"It's not my problem."

The enemy's attacks grew fiercer and fiercer. A missile landed nearby, and a beam grazed him. Eliard fired back, but his sights seemed off, so his aim was also slightly off.

"Shit. The refractive index of the atmosphere wasn't included in the calculations..."

The Goufs soared high into the sky as if they were modified for aerial combat. There was also the Dodai in the sky too.

"The Kehaar is far superior when it comes to flight abilities!"

Eliard increased the output of the engines even further and sent the Kehaar soaring off into the sky. It was the first time he'd even been in a dogfight in the atmosphere.

"S-shit... damn, this gravity's a bitch..."

"Your buddies are here. In the skies east-northeast of your position."

East-northeast... He wasn't accustomed to orientation on Earth. So whenever he's in the sky, he'd use Polaris or the Sun as coordinates. He continued surveying his surroundings, keeping the enemy in check.

There.

A small dot descended from space, trailing a white trail behind it. Wireless was probably still blacked out, though. As it was descending, its frame was burning with the frictional heat from the atmosphere.

"Please make it down safely."

Eliard fired off shots towards the three enemies in the air.

"Who is fighting them?"

He suddenly heard a familiar voice.

"Carl?"

"Eliard is the one piloting the Kehaar? Oh, man, I'm picking a fight right off the bat after landing, eh?"

"Can you manage it?"

"Of course I can. That's what the Dandelion is for, after all. I'll link up with him in three minutes. He just has to hold them off for that long."

The Dandelion? Is that what they're calling the TR-4?

Having heard Carl's voice, Eliard felt that he was more reliable than a hundred reinforcements.

July 0088

Testimony

"Audrey..." Eliard couldn't help but murmur.

After the war, the two had gotten separated, and he didn't know whether she was alive or dead. But, that Audrey April was slowly making her way to the witness stand. He had believed she was alive, but he was a prisoner, and there was no way he could hope to have seen her again.

He never expected to see her again at the court-martial.

"I needed some time," Conrad said, "And now you know why?"

Eliard's eyes were glued to Audrey. She was looking straight ahead, taking cautious steps. Then, for a brief moment, she shifted her eyes towards Eliard, and he felt the urge to jump out of his skin. He wanted to grab her shoulders and make sure she was real.

There was silence in the courtroom.

Eliard glanced over at the prosecutor, Captain John Gordon, and saw that the color had completely drained from his face. He seemed to be as shocked, or even more so than Eliard was. The same was even true for the Earth Federation officers in attendance. They looked like they had seen a ghost.

"Your honor," Captain Gordon said with a hint of annoyance, "May I approach?"

Commodore Georgi Milkov beckoned to Captain Gordon and Conrad.

"Looks like our first strike was a clean hit."

Conrad whispered to Eliard, then left his seat and approached the judge's bench.

Captain Gordon was complaining incessantly about something or another. Commodore Milkov sat and listened with a sullen look on his face while Conrad remained silent.

There really was nothing to say, thought Eliard. Captain Gordon was completely caught off guard because of a surprise witness appearing. This was the first time he had seen the stone-cold Captain Gordon like this. It was as Conrad had said, they struck the first blow. Eliard had a pretty good idea what the Captain was talking about. He didn't want to admit Audrey as a witness, so he was trying to find a reason to stall.

Eventually, with a disgruntled look on his face, Commodore Milkov said something. Captain Gordon said something more before Commodore Milkov took his gavel and banged it. Captain Gordon's protests had been brushed off. When he returned to his seat, Commodore Milkov spoke to Conrad.

"You may begin your testimony."

Audrey took the oath and then sat down at the witness stand. Conrad calmly positioned himself in front of her. First, he asked her name and current occupation for the record, then began his line of questioning.

"You know the defendant, Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

Her tone was firm.

"And how do you know him?"

"We served in the same unit together."

"What unit was that?"

"A Titans Test Team. We were first assigned to a ship called the Aswan, which was a Confeito Defense Unit, then we were assigned to a ship called the Izmir."

"You flew a lot of missions together with him, is that right?"

"Yes, sir. We flew most of our missions together."

"I'd like to ask you about some of those missions."

"Objection." Captain Gordon interjected, "The witness is now a civilian and is in no position to discuss military operations."

"Overruled. Counsel, you may continue." Commodore Milkov said immediately.

Captain Gordon was balking at something, or so Eliard thought.

Conrad resumed his questioning.

"First, I'd like to ask you about the transport escort mission in July of 0085. Do you remember that operation?"

"Yes. I remember it quite clearly."

"Please explain for us specifically what type of mission it was."

"The mission was to escort a transport ship from lunar orbit to Side 1. The Aswan was also in lunar orbit, from which Lieutenant JG Eliard Hunter's GM Kai, Lieutenant Wes Murphy's Hazel, and Lieutenant JG Carl Matsubara's GM Sniper III launched. They rendezvoused with the transport ship in lunar orbit and accompanied it to Side 1 nearby. At the time, they encountered what appeared to be enemy Zeon remnants, and a battle ensued. However, the three of them drove the enemy off and were able to escort the transport to Side 1 safely."

"What happened to Lieutenant Eliard and the others after that?"

"They returned to the Aswan."

"So that was the end of the mission?"

"Immediately after their return, the captain of the Aswan ordered us to provide logistic support for Captain Bask's operation."

"Who was the captain of the Aswan?"

"The captain and commander of the defense forces was Captain Otto Pedersen."

"And this was all just for logistic support, correct?"

"Yes."

"Going back to your first escort mission, were you briefed on the contents of the transport cargo?"

"Not at all, sir."

"And Lieutenant Eliard Hunter wasn't aware of what the cargo was either, right?"

"No, neither he nor anyone else in the test team."

"Objection."

Captain Gordon spoke up again, "Defense is trying to elicit unverifiable facts out of the witness."

Conrad turned to Commodore Milkov.

"This is rare testimony from the party involved. However, it is not unverifiable if you compare what is said to the facts. I believe the truth will emerge from this."

"Objection overruled." Commodore Milkov said. "You may proceed, Counsel."

"Lieutenant Eliard Hunter's only duties were to escort the transport and to provide logistic support for Captain Bask's operation, is that correct?"

"Yes, it is."

"None of you were directly involved with Captain Bask's mission, were you?"

"No, sir. We had absolutely no idea of the details of Captain Bask's operation. We were merely following orders."

"You mentioned that you were attacked by the enemy while escorting the transport. What kind of weaponry did the enemy use to attack you with?"

"Mobile suits. There was a Zaku II FZ-type and a Rick Dom."

"Those are mobile suits used by Zeon remnants, are they not?"

"Yes."

"So, in other words, you risked your lives against the Zeon remnants to protect an Earth Federation Forces battleship...?"

"Yes. In that battle, Lieutenant Murphy's Hazel sustained heavy damage. Because of that, he had to be assigned to a logistic support mission right after the escort, in a Hizack that hadn't even been tested yet."

Conrad nodded, taking a moment to pause. He wanted to emphasize that Eliard and the others were only fighting for the Earth Federation Forces. It was quite an effective silence, Eliard thought.

Conrad opened his mouth to speak again, "I'd like to ask you about the payload of the mobile suits. How long would you say the propellant would last?"

"That all depends on the suit."

"Normally, they launch from the ship and then return. Is that how you operate?"

"Yes."

"So could it, for example, travel from one Side to another Side?"

"That would be impossible. The propellant wouldn't last that long. A ship is essential to operate a mobile suit."

"I'd like to ask you about the logistic support mission."

Conrad's tone had changed, and Eliard knew he had something important he was about to ask.

"When the escort mission was over, Lieutenant Eliard Hunter and the others said they returned to the Aswan. Where was the Aswan at that time?"

"We were orbiting the moon and returning to Confeito."

"So you left the transport and returned to the Aswan at Confeito? And then from there, you went out to provide logistic support for Captain Bask's operation..."

"Yes."

"Would it be at all possible to get from the Aswan at Confeito to Colony 30 in a mobile suit?"

"No, that would be impossible. The propellant wouldn't last."

"And even if it did, there'd be no way to carry out operation actions, right?"

"Of course not."

Conrad looked at Captain Gordon and then at Commodore Milkov.

"I would like to submit evidence regarding what she just stated."

Commodore Milkov nodded.

"So be it."

Conrad handed over the documents.

"These are records of the location of the Aswan at the time. It is consistent with the witness testimony. As the witness stated, the Asway was without a doubt at Confeito when Lieutenant Eliard Hunter and his team were ordered to provide logistic support and sortie."

Captain Gordon and Commodore Milkov had a disagreeable look on their faces.

Eliard noticed this. Conrad had brought up the operational range of a mobile suit to prove the fact that he and his team had only been able to provide logistic support.

"Questions concerning the first charge are finished. As for the remaining three charges, I would like to ask Your Honor to allow me to call Miss Audrey April as a witness."

"We'll confer on that," Commodore Milkov said, "Prosecution, do you have any questions for the witness?"

Conrad returned to his seat, and Eliard spoke to him.

"I've never felt more reassured in my life than I do today."

Conrad kept his gaze fixed forward.

"We're not there just yet. The enemy has only just started their counterattack."

"...?"

Captain Gordon stood up and approached the witness stand.

"Miss Audrey April. Are you familiar with the Colony 30 Incident?"

Eliard saw Audrey bite her lip. Conrad had folded his arms and appeared to be waiting to see just what Captain Gordon would do.

October 0085

Khartoum, Africa

Just as Carl had said, the Dandelion was able to shift to combat mode immediately after entering the atmosphere. Although its armor appeared conspicuously scorched from the frictional heat of reentry, there didn't seem to be any operational issues. The surface paint probably just burnt off.

The Dandelion began flying in the opposite direction from when it entered the atmosphere, or rather, it flipped upside down, penetrating the atmosphere in the opposite direction. Then, following its dampening of the tremendous energy from its fall via air brakes, it shifted the focus of its jets and kicked into combat maneuvers without touching down.

Up to then, what had previously been the tail became the nose, and from either side, what appeared to be manipulators, something akin to claws, were deployed. It was a high mobility mobile armor, one you could imagine the thrust simply by looking at it. Under gravity, it seemed much more agile and maneuverable than the Kehaar in mobile suit mode.

"The Dodai and the Gouf riding it," he heard Carl's voice, "I'll take care of them."

"Gotcha."

Eliard set his sights on the Gouf Flight Type. Its movements were dizzying. The enemy was well-versed in maneuvering under gravity as their rifle fire vanished into the sky.

"Give me a sit-rep."

Commander Roberto Bernardo's voice broke in, his tone still one filled with contempt. Eliard responded, dodging the rifle fire of the Gouf Flight Types.

"Enemy is a Dodai, one normal type Gouf, and three Flight Type Gouf. They're currently engaging in return fire."

"Copy. This will be the perfect test."

Commander Roberto Bernardo's voice carried a hint of derisive laughter.

"There won't be reinforcements?"

"Reinforcements? We're a facility for conducting testing. We don't have mobile suits ready for combat deployment."

There's no way that was possible. It was an Earth Federation Forces base; the fact that it was a testing facility changed nothing. At the very least, there should have been a mobile suit team deployed here. In fact, Eliard recalled seeing a GM in the hangar. Commander Bernardo clearly harbored antipathy towards the Titans. And yet, he wasn't alone in those sentiments. Every general

officer in the Federation Forces had their reservation and mixed feelings towards the Titans.

Envy and a sense of inferiority, something that sometimes morphed into hatred. Commander Bernardo seemed to be under the assumption that the Titans Test Team members would be willing to die.

“Don't go breaking your precious toys, Titans. I'm reminded of Amuro Ray's mobile suit dogfight they mentioned in the officer's school textbooks. That early RX-78 managed a dogfight, and its thrust was considerably weaker than the Kehaar.”

While listening to Commander Bernardo over the wireless, the Gouf also made an aggressive attack.

Shit. Toys, he says?

While it was true that both the Kehaar and the Dandelion were mobile armor developed by the Titans, whether or not their data would be fed back to the Earth Federation Forces remained to be seen. Though testing was being carried out at a Federation facility, Commander Bernardo likely had no interest in that fact.

The Dandelion seemed to demonstrate ample flight performance in the atmosphere.

“Relics from the One Year War...”

Carl's voice could be heard again as a rifle beam fired from the Dandelion appeared to have struck the Gouf B-type atop the Dodai. Just then, the Gouf used the jets from its backpack to leap off the Dodai, firing its tri-barrel minigun at the Dandelion as it fell towards the surface. He didn't appear to be afraid of falling. The Dandelion arced, avoiding the onslaught from the miniguns. The Gouf B-type landed with a gout of fire erupting from its backpack, sand flying up into the air around it.

These guys don't even think twice about gravity, do they?

Well, that would be a handicap if they did. As Carl had said, this lot are nothing more than relics from the One Year War, and the Zeon remnants themselves were mere ghosts of that war. The Gouf B-type was now firing up from the ground. From an angle of nearly ninety degrees to its line of fire, the Gouf H-type Flight type was firing. Even in the middle of combat, they hadn't forgotten the basics. It was evident that the pilots of the Gouf were exceptional soldiers. The Dodai fired off a salvo of missiles as the Gouf Flight type shot at them from the air. From the ground, the Gouf B-type launched a surface-to-air assault.

They were entirely well-coordinated, an unrestrained attack. If they didn't break off at some point, they'd eventually be killed. At least that's what Eliard thought as he levied blasts back at them. The enemy was very adept and seemed to be reading their moves. Both of their units were the latest model of mobile armor, but their movement patterns in the atmosphere were quite limited. All vehicles were controlled by gravity and the atmosphere. But, to those accustomed to fighting on the surface, their movements probably didn't feel that much different. Even for the latest weaponry, that was no different.

Still, if we don't do SOMETHING, we're gonna be hit. Eliard thought.

But what should we do? How can we take out these guys if they're more adept...?

It was then that Commander Bernardo's words returned to him. Amuro Ray's dogfight, was it? Well, it might be well worth it to conserve fuel, too. A repeated jumping moving pattern must be difficult to lock on from their enemy's point of view. Nevertheless, it was still an effective tactic to use under gravity; that's why it was in the cadet training textbooks, after all.

Eliard moved to land the Kehaar. At that moment, venting his verniers to jump high from the force of the actuators in the legs, but the impact was far, far beyond his imagination. It felt like he collided with a colossal battleship as his entire body slammed back into the seat, and the cockpit shuddered from the jolt. He shook his head involuntarily. Were he not pinned to the seat, he very well could have been severely injured.

Amuro Ray repeatedly jumped and shot down the enemy fighters after enduring such an impact.

Cutting thrust as he came to the peak of the jump, he let himself fall naturally. In that gap, he fired off rounds from his rifle. Another landing and yet another violent impact. Eliard gritted his teeth as he kicked the dirt with his legs, gouts of flames coming from his thermonuclear jets. He jumped, sending off another rapid volley of fire toward the enemy.

Two of the Gouf were clearly disturbed by his movements, their two lines of fire being disrupted in the process.

"Heh, going with a classic, I see?" came Carl's voice.

"Classics can be useful." Eliard retorted, "Just stow the chatter and do something about that Dodai."

"Leave it to me."

The Dandelion approached the Dodai, firing off its beam rifle, and deployed its claw arm wide. The Dodai arced around and attempted to get behind the Dandelion.

"Like I'm gonna let you!"

Carl belted out, "I'm the one with better mobility!"

Carl was correct; the Dandelion was a size bigger than the Dodai, though it seemed to have far better speed and cornering in comparison.

Eliard continued jumping over and over, enduring the impacts. He glanced over at the Dandelion as he fired off his rifle in the air. Its massive claw had a grip on the Dodai, illustrating the sheer difference between a mere bomber and a mobile armor. The Dandelion swooped down towards the ground, tossing the Dodai from its claw before soaring away. The Dodai slammed into the ground before erupting in an explosion moments later.

One point of the unrelenting attack was now broken. Plus, both Gouf were clearly perturbed by Eliard's unexpected motions, so victory was in sight for them. The enemy seemed to realize this, too. They began their retreat. The Gouf B-Type was slowing them down, and if they pursued them, they likely would've been annihilated. But, Eliard had no intention of going after them as it would prove to be too dangerous if they ventured out too far. More importantly, though, he was unwilling to wipe out a fleeing enemy.

Their objective for this mission was to test the Kehaar and patrol with the Dandelion when it entered the atmosphere.

That mission was accomplished.

July 0088

Counterattack

"I am familiar with it," replied Audrey April.

Captain Gordon nodded slowly. His demeanor was as though he were a man who knew just about everything.

"The Colony 30 Incident. An abhorrent past. The massacre of civilians at the hands of the Titans. An entire colony eradicated. The colony was injected with poisonous gas, the Titans slaughtering the entire civilian population simply because Colony 30 was the base for the anti-Earth Federation government movement. They slaughtered the entire civilian population of the colony despite only a tiny percentage of its inhabitants being involved in those movements. Old folk, children, everyone. It didn't matter who they were; they killed them all."

Eliard was biting his lip, as was Audrey. It was a shock to the two of them that they'd been complicit in that operation. This was precisely why the Titans top brass had kept the operation under wraps.

"Objection!" Conrad suddenly said, "The prosecution is attempting to state something that is not directly relevant to the witness."

Commodore Milkov glanced at Conrad before speaking, "Overruled. The prosecution may continue with its questioning."

Conrad retained his composure. Maybe that was because he didn't expect the objection to be accepted, Eliard thought to himself. A way to keep the enemy in check, slapping them in the face before they gained any sort of momentum. Either way, Captain Gordon didn't so much as flinch at that.

"The Titans caused this abhorrent incident; there is no doubt about that. You and Lieutenant Eliard Hunter, seated in the defendant's seat over there, were members of those Titans. You admit that, don't you?"

Gordon looked at Audrey as he pointed over toward Eliard.

Audrey responded.

"Yes, sir. We were Titans. However--"

Captain Gordon cut Audrey off.

"As a member of the Titans, shouldn't you feel responsible? I mean, you're all guilty of slaughtering so many innocent people. Isn't that right?"

"Objection."

Conrad stated in a tone that was much firmer than before. "The prosecution is sidestepping the issue. This tribunal is not here to debate responsibility for the Colony 30 Incident."

Commodore Mirkov frowned.

"Sustained. The prosecution is to limit their questioning."

Captain Gordon's confident demeanor did not waiver.

"Then I will change the question, Your Honor. You were a mobile suit pilot, were you not?"

"Yes, I was," came Audrey's reply.

"And you said you need a ship in order to operate mobile suits."

"Yes, that is correct."

"You also said that it's impossible to move from Side to Side by mobile suit alone, is that right?"

"That is correct. Propellant and life support systems would not last. Mobile suits have limited operational time."

"And yet, wouldn't it be possible for a mobile suit to travel long distances were it equipped with a booster unit or propellant tanks, for example?"

"Those are special loadouts."

"Ah, but you were a test team. You were always testing special equipment. In fact, in October 0085, you were testing a machine called the Kehaar. This 'Kehaar' was outfitted with three propellant tanks, and its range of operation far exceeded the norm for ordinary mobile suits, wouldn't you say?"

Eliard was shocked by the question. Captain Gordon must have scrutinized the test team's records.

"While it's true that the Kehaar was outfitted with propellant tanks for space use, that is a unique example. Such equipment is not necessary for routine escort missions or logistical support."

"But the Test Team did have the technical capability to do so. You admit that much, don't you?"

"Testing of the Kehaar was long after the Colony 30 Incident. The incident took place in July while the Kehaar test was in October of 0085."

Captain Gordon gave a faint smile.

"So, let me repeat what you just said. The 'Colony 30 Incident' was in July, and the Kehaar test was in October 0085. In other words, your Test Team was involved in the Colony 30 Incident in July 0085?"

"No, sir."

Audrey's face took on a look of surprise.

"I meant to say that we were involved in escort and logistical support missions."

Captain Gordon smiled.

"Very well. I'll ask you the same question again. The Test Team possessed the technology to extend a mobile suits range of operation far beyond the norm utilizing a booster unit or propellant tanks, correct?"

"Well, that matter is actually--"

"Please answer the question with a yes or a no."

"I would have to say yes."

He's just making false accusations, though Eliard. He's just trying to incriminate me with a bunch of irrelevant facts. He looked over at Conrad, expecting another objection, but the man just folded his arms with a pensive look on his face.

"When I was on a logistics support mission, we had a standard loadout. We didn't use booster units or propellant tanks." Eliard said to Conrad, unable to keep it to himself.

Conrad whispered back while looking at Captain Gordon.

"That was Gordon's counterattack. Now we have no choice but to answer his questions."

Captain Gordon continued with his line of questioning.

"Now then, what did Captain Otto Pedersen the Captain of the Aswan, say to you when you went out to provide logistical support for Captain Bask Om's operation?"

Audrey's demeanor, which had been resolute earlier, started to show signs of restlessness. She was getting anxious, Eliard thought. It didn't matter what she said, Captain Gordon would trip her up in her own words and launch another counterattack at her. She winced.

"Captain Bask Om and the others were going to conduct some operational maneuvers at Side 1's Colony 30 and that we're going to provide logistical support for them..."

"And then..."

"And that it may not be a bad idea to make a name for ourselves with Captain Bask here..."

"It may not be a bad idea to make a name for ourselves... Doesn't that imply that Captain Pedersen knew what Captain Bask Om's operation was all about?"

"I wouldn't know."

"So you're saying that Lieutenant Eliard Hunter and the others were assigned to a logistical support mission as soon as they returned from their transport escort mission?"

"Yes, sir."

"I would have to say that's a bit excessive to head out back out. Normally, pilots aren't overworked that much, isn't that right?"

"I don't know."

"So, the Colony 30 Incident was a catalyst for the Titans to expand their power within the Earth Federation Forces. Captain Pedersen was well aware of this, which is why he demanded such a rash sortie from Lieutenant Eliard Hunter. Am I wrong here?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Objection."

Conrad barked as if losing his patience. "The prosecution is attempting to confuse the witness by asking her questions about facts she is unaware of. I fail to see the intent of the questioning."

Commodore Milkov frowned yet again.

"The prosecution will limit their questioning."

Captain Gordon still remained unconcerned by it all.

"When did you learn of the Colony 30 Incident?"

"I didn't know exactly when until after the end of the Gryps War."

"You mean after the end of the battle for the colony laser?"

"Yes, that's right."

"How did you learn about it?"

"I learned about it from news on the net and on TV."

"And before that, you were entirely unaware of the incident?"

Audrey hesitated for a brief moment.

Captain Gordon followed up.

"Is something wrong? Please answer the question. Were you really unaware of the incident prior to you hearing about it on the news? Need I remind you, you swore an oath before you sat down on the witness stand. If you lie, you too will be charged with perjury. More than that, it would nag at your conscience. You owe it to yourself to tell the truth for the sake of those lost on Colony 30. Don't you agree?"

Captain Gordon's assaults grew more and more severe, and Eliard was seething.

"I was aware of Colony 30 long before it hit the news," came Audrey's response.

Captain Gordon nodded.

"And how did you hear about it?"

"Rumors were floating around on the private net."

"Civilian internet? You're a soldier, yet you got your information from the civilian internet? Intel on the Titans from the outside and not the inside? How would anyone be convinced of that?"

"It's true. There was a severe coverup of the Colony 30 Incident even in the Federation Forces, let alone the Titans at the time. The media didn't report on the matter because of the media control measures enacted at the time. But, rumors of the incident were circulating on the private networks."

"You said you heard rumors but isn't that entirely different? There were people aboard the Aswan who knew about the incident, yet you didn't hear about it from them? Captain Pedersen, for example, or Lieutenant Eliard Hunter over there, for example..."

"No, sir. There were no such facts."

"Can you prove your word on that?"

"Objection. The prosecution is asking questions based on conjecture and is trying to goad the witness." Conrad said.

Commodore Milkov was looking increasingly displeased.

"Sustained."

"I rest my case, Your Honor." Captain Gordon said.

Commodore Milkov motioned for Audrey to leave. Like the former soldier that she was, she headed for the doorway, ever as resolute as she had come in. She glanced at Eliard, and the moment their eyes met, she gave him a slight nod. Though they couldn't say a word to one another, in that one solitary moment, Eliard felt he had gained courage.

Audrey's figure disappeared out the door.

October 0085

Khartoum, Africa

"Looks like they got you real good!"

Eliard called out to Carl over the wireless. Carl's voice came back as laid-back as ever.

"Nah, just think of it as a decorative touch."

Carl had to be exhausted; there was no denying that. The dangers of atmospheric reentry are no different now than in the past; it's still a nerve-racking experience for pilots. Then, just when you think you've made it safely into the atmosphere, you're immediately thrust into combat. No matter how tough you claim to be, you can't last in a situation like that.

The only saving grace for that was probably the performance of the Dandelion. Carl calls them a "decorative touch," its armor was a key piece of equipment to execute atmospheric reentry safely. His confidence in that equipment and its performance may have relieved some of the burden placed on him. But, he had no prior knowledge of the Dandelion. Test craft were always the best military secrets.

Eliard's Kehaar and Carl's Dandelion were currently en route back to the base in mobile armor mode. Eliard was tired too. The jumping combat technique known as "Amuro Ray's Aerial Combat" took a terrible toll on the pilot's body. That and the fear of gravity.

Suddenly, an alarm sounded.

"I'm picking up something on radar," Eliard reported instinctively, "I'm picking up two objects."

"I'm picking them up too," came Carl's voice, "Are we being pursued?"

Eliard bit his lip.

"They're being awfully persistent, aren't they?"

At that moment, the voice of Commander Bernardo interrupted from the control room.

"You Titans brought along two new weapons. I'll be damned if I'll allow you to return with the enemy in tow. Get back out there and stop them."

Eliard couldn't help but grit his teeth. Carl was exhausted. Eliard had just completed his first battle under gravity in an utterly unfamiliar suit. He was running low on propellant and energy for his rifle.

"We need reinforcements."

"No reinforcements. I told you that."

Anger swelled up in Eliard, but not before Carl broke in.

"It's fine. We'll handle it."

Carl was the first to change course.

"Shit."

Eliard flipped the Kehaar in mobile armor mode back around. Unfortunately, unlike being weightless in orbit, he had to use the air resistance to arc around to change course, which frustrated him.

"I have visuals!" called out Carl, "Two Dodai and two normal-type Gouf."

"I'm picking them up here too. The Gouf are riding the Dodai."

"What're they planning on challenging mobile armors to a dogfight?"

Though it was likely true that their flight capabilities were far superior, the problem lies in the amount of energy left in their rifle and propellant. They couldn't afford to waste ammunition so that significantly reduced their intimidation factor.

The enemy fired first, missiles streaking away from the Dodai and rifle fire from the Gouf. Left with no other choice, they dodged them, making full use of their superior flight capabilities. Their energy for a counterattack had to be kept to a minimum.

Carl seemed to understand this, and instead of shooting back, he took evasive action. But, even this had its limitations. When the enemy realized they weren't returning fire, they concentrated their fire on Carl's Dandelion. The bigger you are, the easier the target. They were, after all, accustomed to fighting, Eliard thought. By attacking one of them, they could separate from one another, but that would also force Eliard into laying down covering fire.

Energy, c'mon, just a little more. Eliard fired off blasts from his rifle as though he were praying.

The Gouf's rifle caught the tattered armor of the Dandelion.

"Hmph, I've got no use for this thing anyway." he heard Carl say as the Dandelion's outermost armor was forcefully purged in flight. Two large shields and the head of a mobile suit surrounded by two more binders could be seen. The Dandelion was now in a form that was somewhere between a mobile armor and a mobile suit.

"I'm kinda tempted to try out the Amuro Ray Aerial Combat myself, ya know?"

Carl said as he suddenly cut thrust. Gravity pulled him down as he plummeted. His thrusters belched out as soon as he landed, catapulting the Dandelion up high.

The Dodai with the Gouf onboard fanned out to either side. At the peak of his jump, Carl fired off his rifle, hitting a Gouf on top of one of the Dodai.

"Yeeowzuh! Best screaming machine ever!"

Carl was probably far beyond the limits of mental fatigue. Eliard fired off more rounds from his rifle to keep the enemy in check, his energy supply rapidly depleting. He would only have a few shots left.

Carl's unit jumped off again. According to their textbook from officer's school, they'd be an easy target the moment they landed. He fired off another shot to cover that moment. Carl's unit soared into the air before a missile from the Dodai slammed into it from two o'clock.

One shield was down.

"I've still got it!" Carl said as the shield that was hit was purged in mid-air. Gradually, the true form of his unit emerged. The rifle of the Gouf atop the Dodai now shot through the binder of Carl's unit.

"If you think I'm gonna let you get away with anything else, well..."

Eliard fired his rifle, his line of fire piercing the Dodai carrying the Gouf. A direct hit. Firing its verniers, the Gouf leapt into the air, narrowly avoiding the detonation. As it fell, it peppered them with return fire. Eliard demonstrated his mobility by bypassing the line of fire as the Gouf landed. He aimed and fired at that exact moment.

The Gouf went silent.

"The moment you land is the most dangerous. Didn't we learn that in school?" Eliard said, looking at Carl's unit. Carl's unit was jumping again, using the thrust from the binder that had been hit.

The missile had hit somewhere further up. Whether it was the armor on the main body or the optional armor, Eliard couldn't tell. He was unfamiliar with the structure of the Dandelion.

"This is the last one," Carl had said. As he said that, a beam fired off from the rifle of his unit caught the final Dodai causing it to explode in mid-air.

Carl's suit touched down, purging the binder that had been hit on the spot. There stood an entirely new mobile suit painted in Titans colors.

"That thing was a mobile suit?" Eliard asked before Carl responded.

"It's the same one you're piloting, just a new generation one."

Eliard watched him from the air for a moment. Around him, the Dandelion's armor that'd been purged in the fight lay scattered about.

"Anyway, let's return to base."

Eliard hailed Commander Bernardo at the base.

"Everything is in order, I take it?"

"We managed to survive, somehow. But, the Dandelion's armor is scattered all over. The new unit has already lost its ability to fly. Requesting extraction."

"I wouldn't know. Handle it there. Out."

Eliard's patience had finally run out.

"Wait here for a bit," he said to Carl.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?"

Eliard blasted off towards the base with the Kehaar in mobile armor mode. He could see the control room facility elevated over the building.

"Titans, you are deviating off course for return," Commander Bernardo's voice could be heard, "Altitude is too low. Maintain prescribed course heading."

Eliard continued flying towards the control room. It was Commander Bernardo who lost his cool this time.

"What do you think you're doing?! You're violating military regulations--"

Eliard shot straight for the man. He heard the Commander scream, but his suit changed course just before it hit the control room. Looking back, he watched as the shock blew several panes of glass out of the control room.

"Just what in the hell are you up to, Titans?"

Eliard decided to respond to the Commander's panic-stricken voice.

"We're requesting extraction of the new suit and its armor. I can fire my rifle this time if you'd like."

"You bastard. You'd threaten a superior officer?"

"This new suit and its armor are supposed to be classified top secret. But, if left as they are, that could tarnish your career."

There was a pregnant pause.

"Fine. We'll send someone out to recover it."

"Thank you for doing as we've asked."

"You are to report to the control room immediately."

I'll be in the brig or solitary, either way, Eliard thought to himself, despite feeling slightly better now.

July 0088

Sad News

Just before the court was adjourned, Eliard turned and spoke to Conrad.

"I feel like I'm imagining things. Seeing Audrey still alive and all..."

"She, too, had a hard life on Luna, as do most former Titans. Many of the former members were court-martialed, sentenced to death, and executed. Even those who are still alive today are under the watchful eye of the Federation Forces, their words and actions severely restricted."

"Do you think I'll be executed too?"

Conrad looked at Eliard, his eyes stern.

"That will never happen to you, seeing as how I'm defending you."

Eliard nodded.

The sight of Audrey had instilled him with a renewed vigor. He had to survive now, no matter what the cost. Conrad had said that this trial was a fight to live, and Eliard had intended to do just that. But, he finally realized that he still wasn't yet ready.

Audrey must have come planetside without even bothering to consider the danger of doing so. Conrad had to of taken considerable risks getting her on the witness stand in front of this tribunal.

I'm not fighting this alone.

Eliard was keenly aware. It was something he would never forget, no matter what were to happen in the future.

"I need a witness for the second charge, which is dangerous conduct during testing in Africa. There's a possibility the prosecution will call the air traffic controller as a witness."

"Commander Roberto Bernardo, huh? He clearly harbored antipathy towards the Titans."

"As is the same mindset of the current mainstream Federation Forces. This isn't going to be an easy fight."

"Carl was there at the testing site. Since he was there, he'd testify to Commander Bernardo's unreasonable disposition..."

"So, we're looking for Carl Matsubara?"

A feeling of incredulity crept over Eliard. Not only had Conrad been able to find Audrey, but he may even be able to locate Carl as well.

"Do you think you'll find him?"

"I'm still waiting to hear back from my collaborators," Conrad said, "But I'm willing to bet on the possibility."

Eliard nodded in vigorous approval.

"Was that the right thing to do?" Audrey anxiously asked when they returned to Conrad's house. Conrad offered her a warm smile and replied.

"You've been more than helpful. Captain Gordon, the prosecution, was quite irritated seeing you up there. We scored a lot of points for that."

"Yeah, but isn't the judge some bigshot in the Earth Federation Forces? Points be damned, isn't the outcome already decided?" came the voice of Hendrick from the living room as he leaned back on the sofa.

"There is no such thing as a trial with a predetermined outcome. I will not tolerate an unfair trial." Conrad said in reply.

"Oh, that's all very encouraging and all, but I'm sick and tired of the military's way of doing things."

"Hendrick, I want you to look at me right now, okay? I'm an officer of the Earth Federation Forces. Do you honestly expect me to allow Eliard to be executed?"

Hendrick furrowed his brow and frowned as he looked at Conrad.

"I guess I wouldn't think that, no."

"Then believe it. There ARE other soldiers in the Federation Forces that are on Eliard's side beside me, though not everyone thinks the same."

Hendrick shrugged and said nothing.

"Excuse me, sir."

Joanna appeared. She was at Conrad's house to escort Hendrick and Audrey and was using the study to check her email. Her face was pale.

"What is it?" Conrad had asked as Joanna held out the paper that was in her hand.

"It's an email from King George that I've printed out."

Conrad took the paper from her, quickly looking it over. He let out a low groan and an exasperated sigh.

"What's wrong?" Hendrick asked. Conrad handed him the printout of the email without saying anything.

Hendrick read it, mumbling an "Oh Christ," and passed it to Audrey.

Audrey gasped and looked at Conrad.

"Carl was dead?!"

King George's email had said the following:

"Carl Matsubara, who had been working for the Colony Public Corporation in the Republic of Zeon, was found dead several days ago; an accidental death while working. I've dispatched a messenger from the Republic of Zeon to Earth with detailed information."

"The Republic of Zeon is far closer to Luna than Earth." Conrad said, "And yet we were SO close..."

He looked at Audrey and Hendrick, both of whom looked crushed. He wanted to do something to lift their spirits but now wasn't the time.

"The dangerous violation of regulations by Eliard towards the Federation Forces facility during the testing of mobile suits in the atmosphere. We have very little to go on this."

Hendrick looked up, his eyes burning with anger.

"Carl is dead. He was like family to Audrey. Yet all you can think about is the trial?"

"If we're careless, then Eliard is as good as dead, too."

Hendrick looked like he'd been punched square in the face by Conrad's words.

Conrad continued.

"You may think that that the war is over, that the Gryps War is over, but I don't. We're still waging war. This court-martial is my war. Eliard thinks so as well, so right now, our priority is to think about how to come out victorious."

"I get that and all, but—"

"No, Hendrick," Audrey cut him off, "Commander Morris is correct. Our priority has to be on helping Eliard..."

Hendrick looked plaintively at Audrey.

To be expected of former Titans, Conrad thought. Audrey was doing a remarkable job of controlling her emotions.

"There is one thing that is bothering me, though," Joanna said.

"What is that?" Conrad asked.

"A messenger from the Republic of Zeon. What, pray tell, could they be bringing?"

Hendrick's eyes grew wary.

"Maybe they're bringing something from his estate or something... Or, maybe..."

Conrad looked at Hendrick.

"Or maybe, what?"

"Or maybe they're bringing along some kind of secret?"

"Some kind of secret?"

"Yeah, like evidence. Like proof that the Federation Forces killed Carl by making it look like an accident..."

Joanna and Audrey both looked at Conrad in unison. It's not impossible, thought Conrad.

"At any rate, we'll just have to sit tight until this messenger or whatever they're called arrives." Conrad said, "I'd like to know more about the mobile suit testing conducted in Africa. Tell me everything that you know."

"It was a ground-breaking test," Hendrick began, "Testing on mobile suits for a new era. The Kehaar that Eliard piloted and the Dandelion that Carl was aboard were transformable mobile armor. The Dandelion, in particular, was a machine capable of atmospheric reentry without any auxiliary equipment."

"According to the documents, Eliard's unit was to link up with Carl's unit coming down from orbit. At that time, it's said that they came under attack by Zeon remnants."

"I wouldn't know about that. We were all aboard the Aswan."

"Did you hear anything from Eliard, though?"

It was Audrey who answered Eliard's question.

"He was put in solitary confinement for three days for egregious violation of flight regulations."

"Three days of solitary confinement? None of that were on his record. Eliard didn't say anything about it either."

"Those records may have been deliberately covered up."

"You might be right about that. If so, then it's in our favor."

For some time, Conrad went over detailed facts from both Hendrick and Audrey. Later on, Joanna was just about to stand in the kitchen and refill her coffee mug when the doorbell rang. Joanna looked at Conrad who nodded. Then, taking his cane, he stood up, the two drawing their pistols at the same time.

Joanna moved to stand by the door.

"Stay where you are." Conrad motioned to Audrey and Hendrick as he approached the door, pistol in his right hand and can in his left."

"Whose there?" Conrad called out as he closed the door. A muffled voice came from behind the door.

"I'm a messenger from King George."

It was a young man's voice.

Looking at Joanna, she nodded toward him, a nod that meant she could handle whatever came her way.

Conrad opened the door. A man stood there with a cap on his head, slouched forward so you couldn't see his face.

"You're from the Republic of Zeon?"

The man gave a slight nod.

"Please, let me in quickly. I don't want anyone to see me."

"Very well."

Conrad motioned for the man to come inside. The man seemed to glance at Joanna posted by the door.

"I received an email from King George," Conrad said, closing the door, "But I didn't expect you to arrive so soon."

"I heard that you were in a hurry..."

"So, what intel have you brought? Is it about Carl Matsubara's death?"

The man removed his cap, eliciting an audible gasp from Audrey and Hendrick, who had been watching intently. Conrad stared at the two. Audrey had stood up, stunned one moment and lunging toward the young man the next. Her moves were so sudden for Conrad to react.

He tried aiming his gun at the man, thinking that Audrey was about to attack him. But she did not. Audrey wrapped her arms around the man tightly, murmuring as though she were overcome with emotion.

"Oh, Carl..."

October 0085

Khartoum, Africa

The third day of solitary confinement had passed.

When he returned to the base, Eliard reported to the control room as ordered, where the iron fist of Commander Bernardo suddenly greeted him. His fist slammed into his cheek, and Eliard hit the floor. Under gravity, operating mobile suits were different, and fighting barehanded was far more damaging than he expected. Falling down alone, he'd hit his hips and shoulders on the floor. Plus, throwing in the pain and shock of being punched and bruises like that can cause a lot of damage.

"Like hell you're going to make a fool out of me!"

Commander Bernardo said, clearly fired up.

"Solitary confinement. And don't think for a second you'll be getting out for a while, Titans. So you'll have plenty of time to think about what you pulled."

Eliard stood up and saluted.

Three days had passed since he was thrown into solitary. Commander Bernardo's attitude perfectly summed up the air in the control room. Everyone in the room seemed to have an overall antipathy toward the Titans, probably a nuisance over the fact that they're treated a rank higher just for being Titans.

If that's how it is, then maybe you should fight the Zeon remnants a little better too, Eliard thought.

The last the Federation Forces had fought was in the Delaz Conflict, when Anavel Gato alone sank countless battleships at Confeito. But, the Delaz Fleet was wiped out, thanks to the efforts of Captain Bask Om, one of the creators of the Titans. Following that conflict, the Titans were solely responsible for fighting against Zeon remnants. The regular forces of the Federation Forces had pulled most of their forces back planetside and were just living it out there.

Even now, the Titans were fighting, yet it was just Eliard and Carl this time. That could have been partly because Eliard and the others were the only ones piloting new weapons that the regular Federation Forces officers had zero interest in. But it was no joke. Testing out weaponry that could be flawed in any way was a dangerous mission. Commander Bernardo had told him to reflect on things, but he didn't think he had anything to reflect on.

He was proud that the Titans were chosen warriors. Solitary confinement was torturous, but Eliard endured it with that pride in his heart. It was his seventh day after being thrown in the brig when he was suddenly summoned.

When Eliard was taken to the control room, he saw Murphy standing there; he had come down from orbit. Eliard stood at attention. Murphy glanced at him before speaking to Commander Bernardo.

"I apologize for the mismanagement of my men. However, if you prevent my men from doing their duties, we will be unable to complete our testing schedule."

"He'll be court-martialed for his dangerous actions towards a Federation Forces facility."

"Then follow the proper formalities for court-martial procedures. After that, however, you will be responsible for requesting new personnel to test the new weapons."

"Why don't you just have the Titans send them to us?"

"We don't have the luxury of doing that either."

Commander Bernardo gave a faint tsk before spitting out, "Fine, do as you please."

Murphy nodded and approached Eliard. Eliard wanted to thank him, but before he could open his mouth to say anything, Murphy slapped him across the cheek. It was a slap, but a hard one at that. There was an audible thwap, and everyone in the control room turned their attention to the duo at once.

Eliard stared at Murphy's face in astonishment.

"I heard you were going to fire your rifle into here?"

"I wasn't being serious, of course."

"Serious or not, it is unacceptable to even speak of pointing a gun at one of our own. It is a disgrace to the pride of the Titans. Reflect on that."

"Yes, sir," Eliard responded, standing to attention.

"You've had plenty of rest while in solitary, but we don't have time to rest now."

The Hazel Custom with Murphy aboard was flying high, its thermonuclear jets blazing. Eliard was piloting the Kehaar, assessing things from the air. Murphy's Hazel Custom exhibited maneuverability as though it didn't have a care in the world for the handicap that was gravity.

As to be expected, a difference in experience, I suppose. Eliard had thought as he watched his movements.

Eliard steadily worked through the testing list for the Kehaar. Ironically, a bulk of the items on the list were things he had already experienced through combat with the Zeon remnants. The final test, though, was the transformation from mobile armor mode to mobile suit mode and vice versa while in mid-air. The unique feature of the Kehaar, a transformable mobile armor, is that it combines both advantages of mobile armor and mobile suit.

It was a feature that should have been particularly useful in Earth's atmosphere, using equipment and a special theory known as an aerodynamic lift for flight. Still, the process behind transformation could be a major disadvantage in combat.

Eliard felt that if it were a real battle, it would probably rarely transform, and depending on the mission assigned to it, there would be a decision made whether to operate it as a mobile armor or a mobile suit. That is the most rational way to use weapons. However, with those hair-raising battles, it could

be transformed, which was the purpose behind the testing. Under gravity, there is a risk of stalling and crashing during transformation.

For that very reason, the Hazel Custom was deployed for support throughout the transformation testing of the Kehaar. With the transformation testing successfully completed, Eliard and the others pulled up to their barracks, exhausted after stowing their test craft in the hangar.

After work, everyone was allowed to drink; military personnel were no exception. So, Eliard and Carl headed to a bar on base for a beer. As they approached the counter, they could overhear the young Federation Forces officers as they slinked away.

"Not very welcoming here, huh?" Carl said.

"I decided that I don't really care." Eliard responded.

"Solitary hurt?"

"Yeah, but what hurt more was the Commander's slap."

"Speaking of which, here he comes now."

As Carl spoke, he was looking at the doorway where their team commander Murphy had come into the bar. He walked straight towards the duo. The two stood to attention.

"As you were." Murphy said.

"We're here to drink," he said to Eliard as he ordered a beer.

"So I heard you used Amuro Ray's aerial combat in a real fight?"

Eliard wondered who he heard that from as he instinctively looked at Carl's face. Carl gave him a wink. It must've been him that told Murphy.

"We were at a bit of a disadvantage, so I guess it was a bit of a spur-of-the-moment decision on my part."

"A lot of folks are satisfied with what they know from the textbooks, but few of them actually put into practice what they learn. You made the right call."

"Thank you, sir."

"Testing is almost over. All that we have left are the final tests to Carl's Dandelion. That unit has excellent specs as a mobile suit alone."

"Will we be returning to Confeito once testing is complete?"

"That I don't know. But I've heard rumors that the Titans' top brass are growing increasingly active as of late."

Eliard's heart fluttered.

"You think something is going to happen pretty soon?"

"Hard to say. Are you familiar with Gryps?"

"It's a newly constructed colony next to Green Noah 1. I heard that it was constructed by joining together two closet-type colonies from Side 3."

"There are rumors that they're developing their own new weapons there, apart from Confeito."

"The Titans?"

Eliard was surprised to hear this. Titans' weapons development was believed to be focused around Confeito, which was blessed with energy and resources. This is primarily why the test team was assigned to the Confeito area.

"Well, the military has its secrets. We just do our duty, and that's it."

"Yes, sir."

Eliard had thought the same.

The next day, all testing was completed. The Hazel Custom, Kehaar, and Dandelion were all waiting for the day to return to space.

July 0088

Offensive I

Did you just say Carl?"

Conrad was puzzled. Moments earlier, he'd received word from King George saying he was dead. Joanna also stood there, stunned. Audrey was firmly clutching the arms of the man at the door while he was grabbing her shoulders with both hands. Hendrick rushed over to them.

"It's been a long time, you two," the younger man said. "I'd like to think that you're all well, but I don't think this is the situation for it. We're taking a lot of risks."

Conrad interrupted, "You're sure this is Carl Matsubara?"

The man only gazed at Conrad.

"Yes, it is." but it was Hendrick who answered. "This here is Carl Matsubara in the flesh!"

"But—" Conrad interjected, "They said you were dead."

It was Carl's turn to answer.

"The military monitors all comms; e-mails are no exception. The interception system checks for a huge number of keywords. It'd be picked up immediately if my name was in there."

"Still, that's no reason to write that you're dead!"

"Well, this may make the Earth Federation Forces let their guard down just a little. Who is going to outwit who? That's how the game is played, right?"

"Still, you're also under military surveillance. You worked for the Public Colony Corporation at the Republic of Zeon."

"I WAS under surveillance, but the EFF that's in space right now is so full of people who couldn't care less. As soon as I got word from King George, I started working on a cover story. I faked the accident. The Feds would believe it so long as all the paperwork was in order. They assumed I was dead."

Carl's dark brown eyes were alive, almost brightly lit. Conrad couldn't help but wonder, though. Life for him must have been just as hard as Audrey's and Hedrick's, but it wasn't enough to dull the fire in his eyes now.

"You're absolutely right. A trial is all about outwitting the other side."

"It's not just a trial," Carl said flatly as he looked at Conrad. "The Federation Forces is intent on killing all of us ex-Titans. Following the uprising of those young officers of the Titans' Instructor Corps at Pezun, they're tightening the noose on former members."

"The Alpha Task Force matter? That battle is already over, and the task force was disbanded."

"That's not the point. The problem is that the Titans have been enemy number one from the get-go. Sure, we fought against Zeon remnants, Axis, and the anti-Earth Federation government, the AEUG. We thought we were the vanguard of the Federation Forces, but they only saw us as a nuisance. They want to eliminate us and bury us in history. That's what this court-martial is all about, isn't it?"

"You bring up some valid points, but as a legal officer, I will make sure that it is a fair trial, and I will fight to have Eliard acquitted."

Carl, who had been looking at Conrad with a stern expression, suddenly smiled, turning surprisingly friendly.

"If it weren't for you, I certainly wouldn't be here."

Realization dawned on Conrad. Carl had continued to fight even after the end of the Gryps War. It was a fight for survival, a fight not to lose himself. His eyes still had a fire in them because he was STILL fighting.

"Eliard saved my life on the battlefield many times over." Carl said, "That's why I'm here to help him. So, where do we go from here?"

Conrad filled him in.

"What happened at the Khartoum base in Africa. He's been charged with endangering the base's facilities, but if I'm being honest, there's not much I can do about that."

"The threat on the control room with the Keehar?"

"Yes, that's right. You were there, weren't you?"

"I was," Carl nodded, "Ask me anything. I remember it all."

Conrad looked at Audrey and Hendrick before speaking.

"You're going to have to wait a little while longer to rekindle your old friendship. First, we need to have a meeting with Carl. This will be a powerful weapon for us."

Eliard's hope just about fades every time he is dragged into the court-martial hearing. Even more so today because he saw Lieutenant Commander Bernardo on the witness stand.

As expected, the prosecution had called him in as a witness. As he sat there, Eliard recalled the attitude of the officers and soldiers at the Khartoum base. Everyone seemed to harbor resentment towards Titans. He was confined to solitary confinement for three days and then placed on suspension in a light detention cell for four days until their team leader Murphy came down from space. Had Murphy not negotiated with Commander Bernardo, he probably would have been in the brig even longer.

Questioning of the witness by the prosecution began.

Commander Bernardo had gone on to describe how Eliard had acted by doing things his way, disobeying direct instructions, and acting dangerously.

"So that would mean..." Captain Gordon, the prosecutor, glanced at Eliard before launching into his question for Commander Bernardo, "So what you're saying is that the defendant failed to follow instructions by the control room from the very beginning?"

"That is correct. He ignored the coordinates indicated by the air traffic controller and missed the rendezvous point with his partner coming down from orbit by ten kilometers."

Is he being serious right now, Eliard thought. It was the Commander who was being spiteful by deliberately issuing them the wrong instructions.

"Furthermore, he went on to engage the enemy, whom he believed to be Zeon remnants, on his own."

We had asked for reinforcements, but Commander Bernardo refused to comply, saying we had to fight them ourselves.

"Then?" Captain Gordon nudged him along.

"Then sent US in to clean up the mess from that new model armor that came down from orbit."

"Really? The cleanup?"

"Yes. And to force us into complying, he made a dangerous flyby that could have damaged the base facilities and threatened to fire his rifle into the control room."

Eliard was having a considerably hard time controlling his anger. Conrad said nothing. Eliard already knew what he was planning to do, and he was watching to see how his opponent would react. First, he would assess, then launch his counterattack. But how would he go about that? Eliard stole a glance at Conrad's expression since it seemed like he could afford to.

"No further questions," Captain Gordon said.

The chief judge, Commodore Georgi Milkov, spoke to Conrad. "Does the defense have anything for the witness?"

Conrad stood up.

"So, as I understand it, the defendant missed the rendezvous point with the new model coming down from orbit, but isn't that the responsibility of the control room?"

Commander Bernardo had a sullen look on his face.

"No, sir. We provided accurate flight data."

"So you're saying that Lieutenant Eliard Hunter ignored that data?"

"Yes, sir."

"That strikes me as being impossible. Not only was he unaccustomed to flying in the atmosphere, but this was also his first time at the Khartoum base, and thus unfamiliar with the geography. I see no reason for him to ignore instructions from the control room, wouldn't you say?"

Commander Bernardo winced slightly at the comment.

"The Titans were a reckless lot."

"It is also my understanding that Lieutenant Eliard Hunter and company engaged an enemy that appeared to be Zeon remnants, yet you didn't send out reinforcements?"

"We didn't have ample reinforcements."

"Really, because I find that strange. According to the records, two teams of GMs were deployed at the Khartoum base at the time."

"Yes, well... The Titans had stated that they didn't need reinforcements, so I—"

"Need I remind you that you took an oath before taking the stand. You swore to tell the truth, sir. So lying here right now is tantamount to perjury."

Commander Bernardo had suddenly become restless on the stand.

"Objection," came Captain Gordon's voice, "The defense is putting undue pressure on the witness based on supposition."

"Sustained," replied Commodore Milkov, "Defence will take note of their questioning."

Conrad pressed on with his questioning.

"Did you take disciplinary action against Lieutenant Hunter for his series of actions?"

"Disciplinary action? An Earth Federation Forces officer against a Titans? No, I did nothing."

"No further questions, Your Honor."

Commander Bernardo stepped off the witness stand.

Conrad then spoke to Commodore Milkov.

"The defense has also called in its own witness. I would like to ask that you allow me to question them."

"What is the name of the witness?"

"Carl Matsubara."

Eliard was once again surprised by Conrad. One after another, he tracked down his comrades who had gone missing since the war and brought them in as witnesses. Eliard wasn't the only one surprised, though. The prosecution was clearly upset as a panic-stricken Commander Bernardo was talking to Captain Gordon about something. Captain Gordon was gritting his teeth, and even the chief judge seemed perturbed.

The doors to the courtroom opened, and there was, without a doubt, Carl accompanied by a soldier. Carl looked over at Eliard and smiled. Taking the oath, Carl went up to the witness stand. Conrad asked him his name and past military affiliation before launching into some serious questioning.

"So you entered the atmosphere with a test craft called the Dandelion and were then involved in the battle?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please describe in detail what happened."

"During atmospheric reentry, comms were lost and monitors temporarily offline due to a blackout. As soon as I recovered from that state, I saw them fighting. It was Lieutenant Eliard Hunter. The enemy consisted of two Gouf and one Do-Dai. I joined the battle almost immediately."

"Immediately after you entered the atmosphere? That's a bit reckless, wouldn't you say?"

"I didn't have much choice. Lieutenant Hunter was asking for reinforcements from the base but was denied."

Eliard could see Commander Bernardo getting flustered again. Conrad was brimming with confidence. They were going on the offensive now, and Eliard could see that clearly.



July 0088

Offensive II

"Really now?"

Conrad moved right along with his questioning of Carl.

"You requested reinforcements, but they refused?"

"That is correct," Carl answered calmly, "So we had little choice but to fight them together."

Commander Bernardo had a sour face as he said something to Captain Gordon, who was clearly annoyed himself. They were at a disadvantage, Eliard thought. Captain Gordon stared intently at Carl, jotting down notes from time to time. He wasn't going to give up either. Eliard couldn't help but stare at the man's profile. He was a man who was as passionate as could be about getting someone executed.

Eliard knew the man was only doing his duty, but he couldn't help but loathe the man trying to get him killed. Still, it all boiled down to one question: how did Conrad manage to find Carl? Eliard continued to ponder things.

When they had first met, he was quite skeptical of what Conrad was telling him. Despair had begun to sink in, but Conrad dared to stand up to a trial that clearly wasn't in his favor and was slowly and steadily tracking down former comrades of his who had gone missing and putting them on the witness stand.

Let's fight until the last moment. Eliard was now resolute in fighting with everything he had. Audrey and Carl had given their testimonies, even putting themselves in jeopardy. If he were to give up hope now, he'd never be able to face them.

"So you didn't need reinforcements?" Conrad asked Carl.

"No, we needed them. As I indicated earlier, the enemy consisted of two Goufs and one Do-Dai. Eliard was taking them on alone as I dropped through the atmosphere in the Dandelion."

"All by himself?"

"That is correct. He was engaged with one Kehaar. It might have been crazy for me to join in the fight right after entering the atmosphere, but I had to do it."

"I see."

Conrad paused for a moment, looking over at Commander Bernardo to emphasize what Carl had to say. Commander Bernardo was staring straight ahead, his lips pursed. He was trying to feign a calm demeanor, but his face was too pale, and a slight sheen of sweat was forming on his forehead.

Captain Gordon was glaring at Carl, the gears in his head seemingly spinning furiously as he tried to find a chance to take advantage of Carl's comments."

"Then what happened?" Conrad asked Carl.

"Once the Do-Dai was destroyed, the two Gouf withdrew. As we were en route back to base, the enemy gave chase. There were now two Do-Dai and two Gouf."

"And there were no reinforcements at that time either?"

"Lieutenant Hunter had requested reinforcements from the base but was again denied them. The officer in charge of the control room at the time indicated that we weren't allowed back to base with the enemy in pursuit of us. He told us to turn around and fight."

"So, you fought them a second time?"

"Correct. We engaged and destroyed the enemy. But, at the time, the exterior armor of the Dandelion sustained damage, so it was purged because it was dead weight. Pieces of it were left behind on the battlefield. Since the Dandelion was a new weapon undergoing testing, we felt that we couldn't just leave them behind, even if the exterior was destroyed. To compound matters, the Dandelion had lost its ability to fly during the battle, and we needed a way to retrieve it."

"And that's what you had requested from the base?"

"Correct. Again, Lieutenant Hunter had requested it but was yet again denied. The control officer stated that we were to 'handle it ourselves.'"

"That doesn't sound like the way someone should be treated who just entered the atmosphere and immediately followed that up by engaging in two more battles."

"Objection," rang out Captain Gordon's voice, "The statement by the defense isn't directly related to the facts at hand."

"Sustained," replied Commodore Milkov, "Counsel is reminded to keep questions related to the facts at hand."

Usually, one to sensibly follow instructions, Conrad suddenly turned to Commodore Milkov with a stern look on his face. The chief judge looked back at Conrad in surprise.

Conrad spoke.

"I am pointing out a fact. The two had to engage with only two test-use mobile suits, one of which had just entered the atmosphere. Lieutenant Hunter repeatedly called for reinforcements but was denied by the officer in charge of the control room. This is not something that should happen in the military, is it not?"

Commodore Milkov picked up his gavel and struck it, clearly offended.

"We are here for witness testimony. Should you continue to repeat unnecessary statements, I'll have the defense removed from the courtroom. Understood?"

Conrad turned his back to the Commodore without replying and resumed his questioning of Carl.

"Can you tell us about Lieutenant Hunter's actions that followed?"

"Lieutenant Hunter had headed to the building where the control room was located to request the recovery of the Dandelion, which I said had lost flight

capabilities, and the pieces of the exterior armor that had been purged. While it's true that he didn't follow the return course and pointed his rifle at the control room, had he not done that, the officer in charge would not have accepted the request."

"And there was no other way?"

Carl thought for a moment before answering.

"I couldn't think of anything else at the time, but if I think about it now, I don't think there was any other way."

"And Lieutenant Hunter pointed his beam rifle at the control room?"

"That is correct, but it was evident that he didn't want to fire."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"Because he couldn't fire. After two successive battles, his unit's rifle had been depleted of energy. I knew that, and of course, Lieutenant Hunter knew it."

"I see. But, regardless of the reason, Lieutenant Hunter's actions violated military regulations. Was there any disciplinary action taken in that regard?"

"The officer in charge ordered him to solitary confinement for three days. After that, he was placed under house arrest in a detention facility. That sentence lasted until our team leader Wes Murphy came down from the Aswan in orbit."

"That seems to go against the witness's testimony earlier, doesn't it."

"I'm merely stating the facts."

"Understood. Do you know the name of the officer in charge at that time?"

"I do."

"Could you please tell the court?"

"Lieutenant Commander Roberto Bernardo."

"Thank you. No further questions, Your Honor."

Eliard looked over at Commander Bernardo and Captain Gordon. The commander was staring aghast, while the captain had a serious expression on his face.

Eliard spoke softly to Conrad, "Aren't you glad you brought Carl in?"

"Indeed. I'd even say the tables are turned."

"But doesn't that put us at a disadvantage by upsetting Commodore Milkov?"

"Don't worry about it. I didn't protest out of emotion, it was all part of my calculations. We have to let them know that we aren't going to do their bidding."

Eliard could see what he was getting at. As long as he left everything to Conrad, he really had nothing to worry about.

"Does the prosecution have anything for the witness?" he could hear Commodore Milkov asking.

Captain Gordon thought for a moment but eventually raised his hand and stood up.

"I would like to question the witness." Captain Gordon said before continuing, "Lieutenant Hunter indicated that he asked for reinforcements from Khartoum base, but the control officer in charge, Commander Bernardo, testified that no reinforcements were requested. How could this be?"

"I don't know."

"You were assigned to the same team as Lieutenant Hunter, is that correct?"

"That is correct."

"You're like family. That's sort of how it is with him, right?"

"More than that, I'd say. We skirted death more than once together."

"With that kind of relationship, you can't help but want to save Lieutenant Hunter; it's only natural, after all. You must have been so consumed by that desire that your memory is twisting the facts, wouldn't you say?"

"Objection," Conrad was quick to interject, "The prosecution is asking questions about matters that have nothing whatsoever to do with the facts and are based on supposition."

"Sustained," said Commodore Milkov, looking disgusted, "The prosecution should ask questions based on the facts."

Captain Gordon didn't seem to mind being reminded.

"You stated that Lieutenant Hunter requested reinforcements from Khartoum base on numerous occasions, yet there is no record of that anywhere. Is that correct?"

"I don't know."

"In fact, there are no records of any such communication. In other words, there is no way to corroborate what you told us today."

"You may not be able to prove it, but I am stating the facts."

"So you're saying you can't prove whether it's true or not."

"If you can't prove my statement, then you can't prove Commander Bernardo's statement either."

Suddenly, the sound of the gavel resounded in the courtroom, and Commodore Milkov's stern voice boomed out.

"The witness is only to answer the questions and not give any unnecessary remarks."

Eliard was nervous, but to his surprise, Conrad seemed quite pleased.

"We've lit a fire under his ass." Conrad said in Eliard's ear, "Gordon can't think of any questions, so he's stalling. Commodore Milkov is aware of it and is getting frustrated with him."

Captain Gordon was silent for a moment, then spoke with a twinge of resignation in his voice.

"No further questions, Your Honor."

"There is something I would like to say before the witness leaves the room." Commodore Milkov said, "Oftentimes, there are discrepancies with testimonies, which is sometimes unavoidable. However, you are mistaken if you think that I would allow you to perjure yourself with obvious intent. Keep that in mind."

Commander Bernardo grew even paler with those words, while Carl looked quite triumphant. A glance at the two of them made it apparent just which one of them was right.

January 0086

Orbiting Confeito

Eliard and the other members of the Test Team had returned to the Aswan after finishing their Earth-side missions. There were no fond memories from the Khartoum base. Eliard did, after all, spend his time suspended and in solitary confinement. The Aswan, though, was a battleship. Although he was still under considerable tension when on board, he felt nostalgic, even feeling like he was back home.

The Titans' weapons development had been ratcheted up recently, which was evident by just how busy the Test Team had become lately. After returning, Eliard and the others had very little time to rest.

"A sub-arm unit?"

Carl asked Pete, the mechanic. Both Eliard and Carl were on the mobile suit deck staring up at the Hazel Custom with its new equipment.

"You betcha." came Pete's response, "Two more arms will prove useful. You could probably fire a couple of rifles off at the same time."

"Hokay," Carl says sarcastically, "How are you going to use two manipulators? That's impossible system-wise."

"For the experiments this time around, we'll be switching between the device drivers of the Hazel's arm and the sub-arm unit. Though if there are two pilots in the cockpit, they might be able to use both arm units simultaneously, though?"

"You know we can't afford to take that kind of time and effort in a real battle."

"Yeah, well, engineers don't think like that. It's YOUR job to test whether it's useful or not."

"Still, doesn't the arm look like some six-legged insect when it's deployed?"

Carl looks up at the Hazel Custom again. In the cockpit is their team commander Murphy. His voice thrums down through the comms equipment.

"Carl, you're going out with the Hi-Zack, aren't you? Or are you planning on dawdling there all day?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Carl kicked off the floor and flew up toward the cockpit of the Hi-Zack. Eliard was tasked with supporting the testing of the two suits with the Hazel Unit 2. And by support, that meant he would also be on patrol duty while they were conducting testing. Eventually, maintenance on the suits was completed, and Audrey gave them the order to begin testing from the control room.

"Let's roll out!" came Murphy's voice. The Hazel Custom launched from the catapult, followed by Carl's Hi-Zack. As soon as Eliard stepped outside the Aswan, he felt like a sea of stars surrounded him. A sea of freedom, freed from the Earth's gravitational pull. But, the sea was ripe with dangers far greater than any of those on Earth, the source of life itself.

"Deploying arm. Hazel's arm controls are deactivated, and the system has been switched over to sub-arm control." Murphy spoke as his suit stabilized in orbit. Eliard kept watch on his surroundings, making preparations for any contingencies. An arm extended from the Hazel's front armor. Murphy had the rifle gripped by the sub arm.

"I'm going to try firing off some shots to see if the cockpit's target scope and the sub arm are working together." Eliard could hear Murphy's voice. Just then, he spotted two small yet bright blips on the radar.

"I'm picking up something on the radar. They appear to be mobile suits." An immediate response came from the Aswan.

"We're seeing them too. But, they're sending out IFF codes indicating their friendlies. They appear to be Titans' Hi-Zacks."

"God, don't scare me like that." Came Carl's slightly exasperated voice, "You had me thinking it was an enemy attack!"

Murphy's calm and cautious voice followed, "Aswan, any reports of operation activity in the area?"

There was a pregnant pause before they finally replied.

"No reports of any operational activity."

"You're certain they're transmitting Titans' IFF codes?"

"No doubt about it. Both of them are Hi-Zack types. They're Titans' mobile suits."

"Which means they're our allies..."

"Whoever they are, let me know when they get close."

"Understood."

Eliard had been listening in on the comms between the Aswan's bridge and Murphy, but he felt terribly restless. The two Hi-Zacks were now close enough that they were faintly visible. The two suits in a uniform motion, riding an orbit below Eliard and the others. Suddenly, the two suits began accelerating, attempting to change their heading. It was almost like they were encountering an enemy and trying to evade it. Murphy called out to them using a standard frequency used by Titans.

"To the two Hi-Zacks, state your affiliation and purpose of your actions."

No reply. They appeared to be in a hurry to get away.

"I say again," came Murphy's voice again, "State your affiliation and purpose of your actions."

Still no reply. Instead, a comm burst from the bridge of the Aswan cut in.

"Test Team, track and capture those two Hi-Zack."

"Capture?" Eliard couldn't help but ask in bewilderment.

"I repeat, track and capture those two Hi-Zack."

"Copy that," Murphy responded.

Eliard couldn't understand why they had to capture allied mobile suits, but if the bridge had issued those orders, he had to follow them. The distance between the two Hi-Zack was already widening. If they accelerated too hard,

they'd risk flying out of orbit and would quickly run out of propellant. Murphy spoke.

"It's risky, but if we lower our orbit just a bit, we'll pick up speed."

"Shouldn't we just fire at them to scare them off?" Eliard heard Carl ask, "We might be able to stop them in their tracks."

There was a pause, an awkward silence as Murphy was unsure.

"Okay, open fire. But, don't hit them."

"Roger that."

Carl's Hi-Zack moved forward, firing off his rifle.

"Eliard, you are authorized to fire your rifle," Murphy said.

"Copy that, sir." Eliard raised his rifle towards the Hi-Zack, hesitant to open fire on friendly suits. He had a lock on his targets.

"Whoops, can't go letting it hit them now, can I?" Just when Eliard was about to pull the trigger, the two Hi-Zack flipped around and opened fire on him.

It wasn't a threat. They were clearly aiming at them, which took Eliard by surprise. They had been the ones to make the first move, but Carl had clearly missed the targets. The Hi-Zacks altered their trajectory upward and decelerated, appearing to wait for the Test Team. They were facing them, and they opened fire in rapid succession.

"We're going to neutralize the enemy," ordered Murphy, "Listen, our objective is to capture them. Avoid direct fire. Carl, you handle the rear. Eliard, let's move."

The Hazel Custom flared its main thrusters and shot off towards the waiting Hi-Zack. Eliard followed. Almost immediately, a dogfight ensued. While Murphy may have specified avoiding direct hits, it was do or die in a situation like that. Eliard had no time to spare. Despite their three-to-two advantage, there was still a difference between Eliard and the others fighting to capture them and the Hi-Zacks putting up a desperate fight.

In the end, the two suits were allowed to escape.

"They can't be acting with mobile suits alone." Murphy noted, "There has to be a ship somewhere."

But, they couldn't locate any such ships. There was a possibility they were lurking in the shoal zone. Eliard couldn't help but wonder who they were. They were obviously Titans' Hi-Zack, but how could their Test Team have been challenged and then fled from? They were intent on putting up a fight, but it also didn't make much sense that the Aswan ordered their immediate capture.

Something was amiss, and Eliard sensed that.

July 0088

Probing

"How did it go?" Hendrick asked just as soon as Conrad brought Carl back to his home on the Carson City base.

Carl replied with a shrug.

"I said what I wanted to say. But, I don't think we will win that easily."

It was Conrad's turn to speak, "Carl scored us a lot of points. I wish you two could have seen the look on the prosecutor's face when they saw him, though."

"Still..." Audrey said with a stern expression on her face, "We still don't know if Eliard will get off with the death penalty, right?"

"Correct." Conrad was never one for reassurances, "The situation still remains grim. We can deny any involvement with the Colony 30 incident or the little outburst at the Khartoum base, but two major issues remain."

Hendrick nodded, "That's where I come in, right?"

"Yes, but the Federation Forces top brass will never let up."

"Sounds like they're hard to deal with," Hendrick said, "Not that the military is all that accommodating anyway."

Conrad smiled, "I'm aware of that on a daily basis, but I didn't expect that to come from a mechanic of all people. Come on, let's eat. We've got a lot to feast on to get ready for another battle tomorrow."

Conrad began preparing dinner with Lieutenant Joanna Pavlova, who was staying at his residence with Audrey and Hendrick as their escort.

"I'll help too," Audrey said.

"Color me tickled pink," piped up Carl, "I didn't know you could cook, Audrey."

"Cooking and tinkering with mecha work are pretty similar," Audrey said back to him.

Each one of them had their own difficult challenges. Carl, Audrey, and Hendrick were even in jeopardy. Still, being around the dinner table with so many people seemed to put their minds at ease. Hendrick laughed about his terrible situation after the war had ended.

"No amount of punishment from any guy can put a dent in me," Carl quipped with a sarcastic tone.

He told the group that he had resigned himself to taking the lowest-ranking job at the Colony Public Corporation, one that all bets would be off if he gave up at that point. The lowest-ranking job was a daily battle against radiation, decompression sickness, extreme heat and cold, and hard labor.

Audrey was also a junkyard worker under supervision. The electronic components she painstakingly scavenged were sold for a fraction of their value. Poverty in the lowest depths on Luna was unrivaled by the slums of Earth. Yet, they had all survived in such conditions, conditions that almost cost them their humanity. They were environments they had to persevere in just to survive. Yet, despite that, they came to Earth to help Eliard, with no regard for the perils they'd face.

Conrad was reminded of the strength of the bonds between Eliard and the others. The Aswan must have been one heck of a ship. But when he thought about it, it wasn't limited to just the Aswan. People who fought together were like that, and that was something Conrad had experienced too. Nothing can replace a comrade-in-arms—those who have skirted death form a bond that can only be compared to family.

The problem with the military was that a small group of the elite with no real combat experience was in charge. They were nothing more than bureaucrats who tended to think of those who shed blood and fought as pawns in a game. Some officers leave military academies and become officers without ever having experienced frontline combat. These individuals sit in the upper echelons of the military, but they're no longer soldiers. Instead, they collude with the politicians to seize power and eventually try becoming politicians themselves someday.

"Now then, where to go from here..."

Hendrick posed as they all finished eating dinner and gathered in the living room.

"How long do court-martials usually last?"

"Military tribunals are usually short-lived," Conrad replied, "Though this time, the chief judge Commodore Milkov, is being cautious and has allowed it to drag on this long, but that won't last forever."

"Even though a man's life is at stake?"

"That's what the military does."

"Many of the Titans' were killed," Hendrick added, "They were killed in the war, and young officers who called themselves the New Desides after the war, they were killed in the trials, and now another one of them is about to be executed. Can't someone put a stop to this?"

"That's precisely why we're fighting."

It was true that the Titans had indeed gone rogue. They massacred civilians on Side 1's Colony 30. They also destroyed Side 2's Colony 18 with the colony laser, not to mention massacred the inhabitants of Colony 21 with poison gas. But, it was the top brass that had gone rogue. Many officers and enlisted soldiers were merely used by the warped idealism of the upper echelon.

When the Titans were formed, many young officers wanted to enlist. The Titans were an elite group burning with ideals. Young people gathered and fought under this banner of ideals, merely carrying out their orders. They followed their orders while risking their lives. That, Conrad believed, was the theme of this trial.

Soldiers didn't have the authority to judge the merits of an order, nor did they have the authority to refuse their orders. That is what the military is. Deny them, and you deny the army itself. Humanitarianism had no place on the

battlefield. That was something that was only discussed after the war. On the battlefield, everyone is desperate, and ordinary common sense and judgment are easily erased.

Orders were absolute, and just how each operation affected the war as a whole was not something the soldiers with boots on the ground had to consider.

Carl and Audrey listened silently to Hendrick and Conrad. They had actually fought, Conrad thought, so they may no longer have anything to say. Moreover, they were Titans. After the war, the press treated the Titans like they were a group of demons. The media, not knowing anything about what transpires on the battlefield, irresponsibly wrote only about the results. People in positions like Carl and Audrey couldn't make excuses for it.

After the war, Eliard also learned of the rogue upper echelons of the Titans, so he, too, was in despair. This is precisely why the trial must be won, Conrad thought. He had to plead loudly on his behalf. It was the high-ranking Titans officers who should be punished, not Eliard and the others.

A brief silence fell over the group before Joanna, who was using the computer in Conrad's study, entered.

"A report from the MP, sir. The bandits who broke in were just thieves."

It happened the night they had brought Audrey and Hendrick. Two bandits broke in. Conrad couldn't help but chuckle sarcastically after hearing Joanna's report.

"So you're telling me a bunch of thieves broke into an officer's residence, on base no less? And, with guns?"

"That's what the MPs are saying."

"They always fired two shots in a row. They have military training."

"I agree, sir. Unfortunately, there are various discrepancies between my investigation and the report from the MP."

"Really? You investigated this?"

"I felt it was natural to do so. Right after the incident, I had my own investigative team working on the case."

"Well, I'm sure we can trust them."

"I put together a team of those who were indebted to the Captain. By that, I mean those the Captain defended at one point."

"And?"

"There were two intruders. No trace of them since they escaped."

"Really?" Conrad was intrigued by what he heard.

Hendrick looked at Conrad, confused, "What? You mean you don't have any leads at all?"

Conrad turned to Hendrick, "You really think so?"

"I don't think that's it, that's all. Of course, they don't know where they went after they escaped, do they?"

"Where do you think we are? This isn't just some residential area."

Hendrick thought about that for a moment before making a face.

"You finally realized that we're on base grounds. So there's no way that an intruder could have escaped with a gun and not have been able to be traced. Furthermore, the base is surrounded by a high fence, and there are sentinels

all around it with surveillance cameras. In other words, it would be quite odd for someone to escape from here and not be able to be tracked down.”

Joanna nodded, “Indeed. That would indicate that the intruders came from within this base and disappeared back into it.”

“That’s a pretty ridiculous thing to do…” Hendrick said, “Anyone can see that it’s got military written all over it.”

“They think they can make it all go away,” Conrad replied, “In fact, the MPs are saying that it was just a group of thieves. That’s the military’s official word on the matter, so no one in the army or the police will pursue the matter any further.”

“So you’re saying they’re just going to cover it up?”

Conrad gave Hendrick the faintest of smiles.

“You really think we’re going to let such juicy prey get away?”

“Juicy prey?”

“Of course. The military made a mistake, so there’s no way we can avoid taking advantage of that mistake, isn’t that right, Lieutenant Pavlova?”

“Indeed, sir.” Joanna responded, “The investigation team is top-notch. We’ll gather all the evidence and try to prove the intruders are military personnel. We’ll do that as soon as we can, and—“

“I told you to keep a list of journalists you can trust, so what’s going on with that?” Conrad cut her off.

“I’ve already compiled that list, sir.”

“Good. First, leak the story of the attack to some of those people. Let them know that the issue has spread beyond the military.”

“Right away, sir.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” came Hendrick’s voice incredulously, “You have nothing to be afraid of?”

Audrey and Carl looked a little surprised by his question before Conrad spoke again.

“Compared to the fear of death that Eliard is going through right now, nothing scares me. I have some things to ask the three of you again.”

“What is it?”

“It’s about that phantom Gundam. I need you to tell me everything you know about it in as much detail as possible.”

February 0086

Inside Confeito

Testing of the Hazel Custom had gone well, with troves of new data rapidly amassing. Eliard and the others celebrated the new year at Confeito. Side 1, Side 6, and Confeito, all in the same L5 orbit, celebrated a relatively peaceful new year.

"We have intel that the AEUG is building up their forces," Captain Otto Pedersen said at a briefing one day in February.

"Some financial circles are backing them, and they now possess a military force that simply cannot be overlooked."

Skirmishes between the AEUG and the Titans had already begun, and even the Zanzibar that Eliard and the others had fought could be seen as a force leaning towards the AEUG.

"Not only are the AEUG an obstacle to the Titans' attempt at establishing a postwar order, but they're also a terrorist group that threatens peace. Their incorporation of Zeon remnant forces makes that abundantly clear."

Captain Pedersen continued, "As Titans, we will not tolerate terrorist activities. We expect even greater efforts to be made to protect Earth."

Audrey spoke to Eliard and Carl when the briefing was over as they were going their own way, "There have been some strange rumors on the net lately."

"Strange rumors?"

"The Zabi family is starting a full-scale effort to revive Zeon..."

Carl couldn't help but snicker, "Probably just some BS being spread by Zeon remnants."

"Still, something strange is going on in the world these days."

Audrey is right, thought Eliard. He couldn't shake the feeling that there would be a real battle, not just skirmishes with the Zeon remnants.