

A D V A N C E O F Z

今野敏

原案 矢立肇・富野由悠季

ティターンズの下 旗のもとに



角川文庫

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CHAPTER.04

February 0086

Satellite Orbit Around Earth

Rumors circulated aboard the Aswan about the two Hi-Zacks that had transmitted Titans' identification signals but then engaged in hostile actions against the test team. There was no official explanation, but it was undeniable that they were insurgents.

Eliard couldn't believe it.

The Titans were an elite force. Eliard took pride in being among the chosen. He assumed the other crew did as well, at least the test team members. Carl was a bit twisted, reluctant to admit it openly, but Eliard could tell he took pride in being a Titan. Audrey and Commander Murphy were likely no different.

No, Eliard believed that all of the Aswan's crew felt the same way. That's why the existence of insurgents within their organization's ranks was so unbelievable. Where had those two Hi-Zacks gone since then? It had been confirmed that no other Titans' ships were nearby at the time.

The Aswan orbited around Confeito, sharing the orbit with Side 1 and Side 6 colonies. However, the mobile suits' payloads were insufficient to reach those colonies.

There must have been a ship somewhere, and it couldn't have been a Titans' ship.

Was the Earth Federation Forces faltering? Or was it that even the Titans weren't a monolithic organization?

Eliard felt frustrated. No one knew the answer. Moreover, Confeito was a remote region; it was difficult to assess what was happening on Earth and at other Titans' bases.

Compounding that, news about the AEUG's activities unnerved Eliard and his comrades. The AEUG was an Anti-Earth Federation government movement.

Supposedly organized to resist the oppression of the Spacenoids, the Titans officially recognized it as a radical terrorist group. Eliard knew that they had organized anti-government rallies in several colonies.

He had only thought of it as a political movement without substance, but he now realized they possessed considerable military power.

Still, they were just a terrorist group. Eliard believed they were no match for the Titans, an elite force within the regular army.

Yet, Eliard couldn't shake the feeling that the two Titans' mobile suits that had evaded the test team's restraint and escaped had something to do with the AEUG's activities.

He didn't know how they were related, but he felt something was gradually changing. Eliard sensed it in his bones.

"Galbaldy β...?"

Carl asked the mechanic Pete, "RMS-117. Isn't that the mainstay unit of the Earth Federation Forces developed at Luna II?"

"That's right."

"Why is a suit like that coming to the Aswan?"

"They want to test some enhancement parts."

Eliard, standing beside Carl, couldn't help but ask Pete.

"What kind of enhancement parts?"

"To improve mobility, they're equipping it with joints to attach boosters and the like."

"Can you be more specific?"

"You know Hazel's shield booster, right? I heard they're attaching two of those."

"Huh..."

"What I'm more curious about is..."

Pete spoke up. "A pilot's coming along with the Galbaldy β. Usually, for a test, they'd just send in the suit and leave it to you guys."

"Maybe they're attached to it?" Carl suggested. "You might not get it, but maybe the pilot doesn't want it damaged during the test."

"Hmph," Pete said. "As a mechanic, I can't understand that."

The pilot, who had finished reporting for duty, descended from the bridge to the residential block. By chance, the test team's briefing had just ended, and they met in passing.

He wore the uniform of the regular Earth Federation Space Force, not the Titans. His hair was short and golden, and his eyes were gray.

"Maxim..."

Seeing the new pilot, Commander Murphy called out to him. "So, it was you who came on the Galbaldy β?"

"Murphy, huh..."

"Let me introduce you. These are the test team members: Eliard, Carl, and Audrey. This is Maxim Gunar."

After checking the newcomer's rank insignia, Murphy introduced him. "Lieutenant Gunar of the Earth Federation Forces."

Eliard saluted. Weightlessness made it impossible to stand at attention. It was customary and permissible on a ship to salute while floating in space.

"Maxim fought alongside me during the Delaz Conflict," Murphy said.

Maxim didn't smile but replied, "I was in your debt back then."

"That's in the past."

"No, that's not what I mean. I'm talking about when I was undertaking an operation at Colony 30. I heard you guys provided rear support."

"Were you at Colony 30 too? Does that mean you were with the Titans?"

"I was with the Titans. Captain Bask's team recruited my entire squad. After various events following the operation, I was expelled from the Titans and assigned to my current mission."

Eliard had many questions. Who had shot down the civilian shuttle that was with the Zanzibar? Who had been aboard the civilian shuttle, and why was it destroyed? If they were with the Zanzibar, there was a possibility they were part of Zeon remnants or a similar force, but why had they come from Side 1?

Questions kept surfacing. Rather, they were always lurking in the back of his mind. However, no one had given him answers. The Aswan crew and those stationed at Confeito didn't know the truth.

Lieutenant Maxim Gunar, who was partaking in an operation at Colony 30, should know the truth. But the conversation about Colony 30 went no further. Lieutenant Gunar changed the subject.

"You're aware the Zeon remnants have been laying low lately?"

Murphy nodded.

"But we don't know why they're staying quiet."

"It's the AEUG."

"What does the anti-Earth Federation government movement have to do with the Zeon remnants?"

"The AEUG is no longer just an anti-Federation movement. They've acquired a significant amount of weaponry independently, and they're steadily drawing in Earth Federation Forces. There are even rumors that they involve Zeon remnants due to their shared opposition to Earthnoids."

"Zeon remnants joining forces with the AEUG?"

Lieutenant Gunar shrugged his shoulders.

"It wouldn't be strange if that were the case. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, after all."

"AEUG and Zeon remnants..."

Eliard said, "Isn't that just terrorists joining hands?"

That's how it seemed to Eliard. The ghosts of the old Zeon army and the anti-Federation movement come together. It couldn't be anything but a terrorist organization. Lieutenant Gunar looked at Eliard and smirked sarcastically.

"So, the Titans are the heroes of justice, and everyone else is just a dangerous terrorist?"

"Isn't that the truth?"

"You're a happy fella, aren'tcha?"

Lieutenant Gunar kicked off the wall, leaving the test team behind.

It was sixteen Earth hours later when the scramble order came through. First, the on-duty 2nd team went out, followed by the deployment order for the test team. An unidentified warship was on an intersect course with the Aswan, set to reach their closest point in fifteen minutes.

"Lieutenant Hunter, Hazel II, launching."

Propelled by the catapult, Eliard entered outer space. He tried to control his position while assessing the situation around him. Suddenly, the communication became chaotic.

"Who are you? Don't use the catapult without permission!"

"Who's piloting the Galbaldi β?"

Eliard flipped the Hazel II around. Something had burst out of Aswan's mobile suit deck.

The Galbaldy 6... Eliard thought.

What on Earth is happening?

"Gundam isn't just a nickname for a mobile suit," Hendrick began wistfully. "It's a symbol. For the Earth Federation Forces, it represents victory, while for the Zeon forces, it symbolizes fear and hatred. You could call it a legend."

Conrad nodded in agreement.

"A single mobile suit changed the course of the One Year War. That was the Gundam. Being a mobile suit pilot myself, I'm quite familiar with the legend."

"Various investigations have been conducted on the Gundam, but in the end, the reason it could play such a significant role in the One Year War remains a mystery. There were credible rumors that the pilot was a Newtype, but the military never officially commented on this matter. Regardless, the name 'Gundam' continues to live on as a symbol. So it's only natural that the Titans, who took control of the Earth Federation Forces, wanted to inherit this legend. I worked as a mechanic aboard the Aswan. The Aswan was affiliated with the Confeito Theater Forces, where Gundam development was also being conducted."

"I've heard that Gundams were being developed at Gryps. But I never knew it was being developed at Confeito too..."

"Their approach was different from Gryps. The one developed at Gryps was an expensive, cutting-edge model. It quickly adopted innovations like the movable frame and panoramic monitor that would become the basis for the next generation of mobile suits. However, at Confeito, they were thinking about a more economical and efficient operation. In other words, they slightly tuned up the GM Quel and attached a Gundam head to it."

"A GM is still a GM, right?"

"But here's the thing," Hendrick leaned in. "As soon as the Gundam face was attached, something strange happened. Eliard and his team engaged in combat with remnants of Zeon, and during those encounters, the Hazel, their team leader's mobile suit, and Eliard's second unit provided tremendous reassurance to allies and instilled fear and confusion in the enemy. So, the Gundam head indeed had a psychological impact."

Audrey spoke up.

"The Hazel wasn't just a GM with a Gundam face slapped on it. Various parts, like the enhanced backpack and leg thruster units, were reinforced, and even a shield booster was prepared. In my experience, it truly had the potential worthy of being called a Gundam."

"I see..." Conrad nodded. "If I saw the figure of a Gundam on the battlefield, I'd certainly feel reassured too."

"Commander Murphy was also skilled. He was a renowned pilot who made his debut in the Battle of Solomon during the One Year War and distinguished himself in the Delaz Conflict. Both Carl and Audrey present here were excellent pilots."

Carl shrugged his shoulders.

"I didn't get to pilot a Gundam until much later, though..."

"That's because Carl was in charge of rear support," Hendrick explained. "He often piloted mobile suits equipped with long-range weapons. Anyway, there were many talented young people in the Titans at that time. They believed in the future, convinced their mission was to restore safety and order in the Earth Sphere."

Conrad reminisced.

Indeed, following the Delaz Conflict, the Titans were formed to counter the terrorism of the Zeon remnants.

Eliard, Carl, and Audrey, who were here, fought with fiery ideals, not knowing about the Colony 30 Incident.

"A turning point occurred that day, which would lead to changes in the Gundam development at Confeito," Hendrick said.

"That day?"

"The event that became the catalyst for the full-scale conflict with the AEUG. When the AEUG stole the Gundam that the Titans had created at Green Noa 1."

"Did you know that the Gundam was stolen by the AEUG?"

"No, we weren't informed at the time. But I'm sure those higher up knew. Now that I think about it, that event brought changes to the development at Confeito. The technicians at the Confeito arsenal must have been shocked by the development of a full-fledged next-generation Gundam at Gryps. Tech folks are like that. Moreover, the AEUG began to use that Gundam. Its white body looked even more like a Gundam than when it had the Titans' colors."

"It was called the Mk-II, right?"

"And then, the AEUG kept introducing more Gundam types. Like the golden, shining machine and the transformable mobile suit Gundam. It was as if they had stolen the symbolic Gundam from us."

"But the development of the Gundam continued at Confeito, didn't it?"

"Yes, it was carried out secretly. The policy changed. Until then, the focus had been on how to efficiently operate existing machines. But the technicians at the Confeito arsenal were shocked by the Gundam at Gryps. And they were inspired by the AEUG's Gundams. Somehow, they poured a massive budget into developing a new Gundam. They were chasing a dream. A legend from the One Year War, when a single machine changed the course of the battle. A dream to recreate that legend."

"Compared to the One Year War, the mobile suit's performance had greatly advanced by the time of the Gryps War. Changing the course of the battle with a single machine would be impossible. It's more like a delusion than a dream."

"But they chased that dream. That's why it's a Gundam. A machine called Gundam must inherit that legend without exception."

"What kind of Gundam was being developed at Confeito?"

As Hendrick was about to answer, Joanna's cell phone rang.

"Excuse me."

Joanna said and answered the call, "It's not safe on a mobile phone. Can you call back on the Commander's home phone?"

Joanna hung up the phone, and Conrad asked, "What's going on? Who was that call from?"

"It's from the people investigating the intruders who broke in here. It seems they've identified who they are."

Conrad's home phone rang. He told Joanna, "Please answer."

Joanna stood up and picked up the living room receiver. She listened silently to the caller. After a while, she hung up and said to Conrad, "The names and identities of the two intruders have been discovered. Kelly Brown and Thomas Tyner. Both are soldiers of the Earth Federation Forces. Their rank is sergeant, and they are stationed here at the Nevada base..."

"Who are their commanding officers?"

"Commander Jeffrey Portman."

"Him, huh..."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, I do. He was in a unit on Luna for a while. He leaned more toward the Spacenoids and detested the Titans. And before being stationed on Luna, Portman was under Commodore Milkov."

"Really?"

Carl said, "So it's like this, huh? The attackers were actually Earth Federation soldiers, and if we trace it back, it leads to the chief judge at the court-martial... And those two soldiers tried to silence Audrey and Hendrick..."

Conrad spoke cautiously, "I believe their target was Audrey and Hendrick, without a doubt. However, whether it was on the orders of their superiors, I don't know."

"But soldiers under the chief judge tried to eliminate the witnesses, right? Do we stand a chance in a trial like that?"

"It's like I said, right? We can't miss out on such a juicy story."

"What are we going to do? Confront the two and demand they tell the truth? Whole lotta good that'll do."

Conrad shifted his gaze from Carl to Joanna.

"How's the leak to the journalists going?"

"I've already informed several trustworthy journalists about the attack. I believe they're investigating on their own."

"The ones with actual backbone?"

"Yes. They're a bunch of rebels."

"Good. Next, leak the names of the two sergeants to them. If they know specific names, they'll be more eager to cover the story."

"Understood."

Hendrick said anxiously, "The Earth Federation Forces' checks are quite strict. It's a quasi-wartime footing, after all. Can those journalists actually report on it?"

Joanna smiled, "Even if they can't report it on Earth or on Luna, they can broadcast it from the colonies. They can also distribute it online. No matter how strict the Earth Federation Forces' censorship is, it's impossible to control all information."

"You're also an Earth Federation officer, aren't you, young lady? You're talking as if the Earth Federation Forces is the enemy."

"Commander Morris's enemies are my enemies. Right now, Commander Morris is fighting against a faction of the Earth Federation Forces that's trying to sentence Lieutenant Eliard Hunter to death."

Hendrick raised one eyebrow in surprise.

"Damn, It's like two Audreys in one."

Joanna said to Conrad, "I'd like to borrow your computer in the study again if that's okay..."

"Use it anytime."

Joanna headed to the study. She'd likely start the information leak right away.

Carl said, "If the journalists leak the source of the information to the Earth Federation Forces, we're done for."

Conrad wasn't worried at all.

"We can trust Joanna. With this, we won't need to expose the truth ourselves. Instead, the journalists will do it for us."

Carl pondered and asked Conrad, "Do you think Commodore Milkov was pulling the strings behind the scenes?"

Conrad thought for a moment and shook his head, "No, that's unlikely. It was probably Portman who thought he was doing it for Commodore Milkov. Portman is the type to make such a misunderstanding."

"So the truth about the attack will work to our advantage?"

Conrad nodded, "Yes. I'll use anything to win."

February 0086

Satellite Orbit Around Earth

"Test Team, capture the Galbaldy β. I repeat, capture the Galbaldy β."

The order came from Aswan.

Eliard instinctively fired the primary thrusters of his Hazel II. He could tell that Carl's Hi-Zack Cannon was right behind him.

"Should I stop it dead for you?"

Carl's voice came through. "With the Hizack Cannon, I can get a clear shot from this position."

"We're ordered to capture, not to shoot it down."

Eliard said while accelerating Hazel II. In terms of thrust alone, his Hazel II should far surpass the Galbaldy β. Physically speaking, there's no reason not to catch up.

The problem was where the Galbaldy β was heading. A mobile suit's operational time is limited due to the extreme restrictions of oxygen and propellant payloads due to its humanoid shape.

A mobile suit alone can't reach Luna or a colony from Earth's orbit. Launching a mobile suit aimlessly from a ship is tantamount to suicide.

Then, a transmission came in from Aswan.

"Unidentified vessel, seven minutes until the closest approach to the Aswan."

So that's it.

Eliard realized the Galbaldy β was trying to flee to the unidentified vessel. But who and for what purpose is someone heading to the unidentified vessel? And to which fleet does the unidentified vessel belong?

Right now, Eliard and his team were on the same orbit as Aswan. So was the Galbaldy β. To board the unidentified vessel approaching on an intersecting orbit, they must change to the same orbit as the ship. This would require a large amount of propellant. Most likely, the Galbaldy β would use almost all its propellant to change its orbit.

On the other hand, Eliard and his team were only accelerating slightly on the same orbit as Aswan. Therefore, their propellant consumption was not that significant. Eliard believed capturing the Galbaldy β, according to Aswan's orders, wouldn't be too difficult.

While tracking the target, Eliard opened the communication line.

"Who is the pilot of the Galbaldy β?"

There was no reply. Eliard asked the same question again, using the standard frequency assigned to Aswan's mobile suits. With no response, he

also tried calling on the frequencies commonly used by Earth Federation mobile suits, as well as emergency frequencies.

Is the pilot not listening to the radio?

Eliard wondered.

That shouldn't be the case. The pilot must want to know our intentions since they're trying to escape. Depending on whether we're attacking or attempting to capture, their response would differ.

Just as he was about to call out once more, a sudden response came.

"Oh, you're that happy little fella who's been chasing me?"

The voice and tone were strikingly familiar.

"Lieutenant Maxim Gunar?"

"I've got no qualms with you. Bring me Wes Murphy."

"I don't intend to fight. Please return to Aswan with me."

"I have no intention of going back to a Titans-controlled Earth Federation Forces."

Eliard was at a loss for words.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

As the two communicated, Carl interrupted.

"The unidentified ship approaching; it's an AEUG vessel, isn't it?"

Gunar's voice, laced with laughter, responded.

"What if it is? Then what?"

"It means you've turned traitor to the terrorists. I'll attack."

"If you don't value your life, then try it."

Gunar's voice was confident. He had fought alongside Commander Murphy during the "Delaz Conflict," so there was no doubt he was a veteran pilot.

Gunar's voice continued.

"If I can take down a Gundam, it'll boost the morale of the AEUG and Zeon remnants. It'll make a great war story."

Eliard clenched his teeth.

"I have no intention of fighting. Please return to Aswan with me."

"I've already told you I won't."

Gunar's Galbaldi β halted its acceleration, beginning constant velocity motion, appearing stationary in orbit.

He seemed ready for a dogfight at any moment.

"Locked on."

Carl's voice was heard. "I can fire the cannon anytime."

"Wait."

Eliard spoke up. "We haven't received orders to attack."

"Are Murphy's subordinates cowards?"

Gunar's voice rang out. "If so, I'll make the first move."

But Gunar didn't move.

Eliard thought he was stalling for time. If he mistimed an orbit change, he'd vanish like flotsam in the ocean of space. No matter how massive a warship, it couldn't save anything that strayed off course and disappeared into the depths of space. All space-faring vessels were constrained by the extremely tight routes of their orbits.

Eliard approached, thinking Gunar wouldn't fire the Galbaldy β's rifle. But Gunar shot it casually.

It wasn't a bluff. He had clearly aimed for Eliard's Hazel II. Eliard had evaded the moment the rifle pointed his way.

Otherwise, it would've been a direct hit.

A beam fired from behind. It was Carl's cannon.

Gunar dodged with minimal movement. He was accustomed to battle. But that wasn't all. He didn't want to use any more propellant than necessary, preparing for an orbit change.

"Hold your fire, Carl," Eliard said.

"We were attacked. It's only natural we have the right to counterattack."

Carl fired again. Gunar's Galbaldy β displayed astonishing mobility. With a single thrust from its thrusters, it effortlessly changed its position and orientation. And with impeccable timing, it returned fire from its rifle. The combination of the suit's performance and the pilot's skill created a synergistic effect.

Eliard realized he couldn't just keep evading forever. If he kept running, he would eventually be taken down.

For now, he needed to stop Gunar's movement.

The moment Eliard opened the target scope of his rifle, an alarm sounded inside the cockpit.

"What the..."

Eliard looked around.

What seemed to be a large-caliber beam had just passed right in front of him. It must have been a battleship's main cannon.

Eliard visually confirmed the approach of a battleship-like silhouette.

"An AEUG vessel..."

Suddenly, his Hazel II was jolted. The Galbaldy β appeared abruptly on the monitor. While Eliard had been distracted by the AEUG battleship, Gunar had closed in.

Gunar's voice came through.

"Turn off your radio. Use the contact channel."

"Why...?"

"The Titans are rotten to the core. They'll collapse with a loud crash before long."

"Is it true that you've turned traitor to the terrorists, Lieutenant Gunar?"

"AEUG isn't a terrorist organization. It's the Titans that are a group of terrorists."

"You can't be serious..."

"I've experienced it myself."

"Experienced... What exactly...?"

"It's time."

Gunar spoke. "Value your life and your pride."

The Galbaldy β distanced itself from Hazel II and ignited its main thrusters. It was at maximum output. The orbit change had begun.

To avoid being caught in the fierce exhaust of the high-temperature gas, Eliard had to retreat.

He couldn't pursue the orbit-changing Galbaldy β.

Eliard stared intently at the Galbaldi β , gradually shrinking within his target scope. He couldn't bring himself to shoot.

Gunar's parting words wouldn't leave his ears.

"Value your life and your pride."

What had Gunar experienced? What was Gunar's pride? Eliard couldn't help but ponder.

February 0086

Satellite Orbit Around Earth

The night Joanna made contact with the journalist via email, reports of an attack on Conrad's home appeared on several websites.

When Joanna reported the news, everyone moved to Conrad's study and peered at the computer monitor. The posts were, of course, anonymous. Conrad suspected that the sender must be concealing their identity by routing the messages through multiple servers, making it difficult for even the Earth Federation Forces to track them.

Otherwise, the sender would immediately be targeted by the Earth Federation Forces' military police. As Hendrick had said, they were currently in a quasi-war footing, and the surveillance of ordinary citizens by the Earth Federation Forces was quite strict.

"Now, let's see how this Jeffrey Portman guy reacts..." Conrad said, following the messages on the monitor with his eyes.

"He'll probably try to maintain silence," Joanna said.

"Of course, he would. But we can't let that happen. We have to put pressure on him, make it so he can't sit still."

"Tonight, the names of Kelly Brown and Thomas Tyner will be find their way online."

As Joanna spoke, Carl raised an eyebrow.

"Are we sure those two are the ones responsible for the attack?"

Joanna nodded. "Most likely..."

"But we don't have any actual proof, do we?"

"At this stage, we don't need proof. It's important that rumors start circulating. By tomorrow morning, the entire Nevada base will be whispering about the online posts. Rumors like this spread quickly."

"I see... So, what's the next move?"

"The journalists will take action. They'll request to cover the story about the online posts."

Carl pondered and said, "Naturally, the base will refuse to grant the journalists access."

"The journalists will then report on the fact that they were denied access, or perhaps even air it on television."

"The media will be under military pressure. Most of the current media outlets are spineless. Both TV and newspapers are constantly concerned about the military's reaction."

"That's not always the case," Conrad countered, "There are some tabloid newspapers that have real backbone."

Joanna nodded in agreement. "The journalist I've been in contact with will definitely find a media outlet that will run the story. And they'll do it quickly..."

"I wonder if it'll be in time..." Audrey said. "The court-martial is moving rapidly. Even if the journalist you mentioned works hard, by the time the incident comes to light, the verdict for Eliard might already be handed down..."

"We'll make it in time," Conrad said confidently. "No matter how fast the military wants to reach a conclusion, I'll find a way to delay it."

"But..." Hendrick said with concern, "it took you a long time to find us on Luna."

"It's true that some higher-ups might think that this court-martial is taking too long," Conrad said. "Court-martials are supposed to be swift. Suspects are usually executed by firing squad in no time. However, the way trials are conducted varies from country to country. When the Earth Federation government was established, they decided to adopt the standards of the country that valued human rights the most. The Earth Federation Forces follow this policy, so even in court-martials, sufficient examination is required."

"But the military is still the military," Carl said. "We were stripped of our military ranks, forced to live on the bottom rung, and constantly monitored by military personnel."

"The Judicial Bureau is not a joke. I'll prove that," Conrad declared firmly.

"Why..." Audrey asked, "Why are you so confident, Commander?"

Conrad smiled faintly. "If I lose confidence, who can the defendant rely on?"

Ryou Kirishima finished his work online and made a call to the editor-in-chief of a certain tabloid newspaper. The editor, named Michael Chang, responded with a clearly annoyed tone.

"Calling my home at this hour?"

"A journalist has no time or place, you know that."

Ryou Kirishima retorted.

"Hmph," Michael Chang said sarcastically, "No wonder your wife left you."

"She didn't leave me; I grew tired of her."

"And you called me in the middle of the night for this conversation?"

"Are you aware of the recent buzz online? Two intruders broke into the home of an Earth Federation Forces officer named Conrad Morris. They turned out to be sergeants in the Earth Federation Ground Forces."

"What idiotic officer is he?" Michael remarked.

"Conrad Morris is with the Justice Bureau and is a practicing attorney. Currently, he's representing someone being court-martialed."

"So, what's your point?"

"It's unconfirmed information, merely a rumor at this point, but..."

"Out with it already."

"It seems the defendant in the military tribunal was a Gundam pilot."

"Wh-what...?"

Michael Chang's tone shifted.

As expected, Ryou Kirishima thought smugly. For a tabloid paper, nothing is more important than sales. Sensationalism over journalism, and scoops over facts.

War stories are popular, and the military often uses these newspapers to boost morale. There's no shortage of military mouthpieces.

However, Michael Chang took a slightly different stance. He never criticized the military, but he wasn't afraid to mock them. Like a resourceful Chinese merchant descendant, he never offended, yet never submitted.

Above all, he was a man who valued money. No matter how good the articles, a newspaper that doesn't sell is meaningless. Already, the rise of the internet has hurt newspaper sales. Tabloid papers have long been said to be in fierce competition.

Still, articles about Gundams sell newspapers. The general public craves heroes and symbols, yearning for a noble cause in war.

Gundams were both heroes and symbols of justice. Ryou Kirishima thought there was no justice in war, and any sensible person would agree. But wars continue, and people need a cause and a sense of justice for them. Michael Chang knew this too.

"Who is this Gundam pilot?"

"I heard they were from the Titans..."

"The Titans, huh..." Michael Chang's voice dropped a notch. "The Titans are not well-liked..."

"Not all members of the Titans are bad."

"That's not the issue. The fact is that the public hates the Titans."

"If the trial is related to Gundam, I'm sure the article would sell."

There was a pause.

"You said that two sergeants from the Ground Forces barged into the home of a Judicial Bureau officer, right? So, they were trying to obstruct the defense?"

"That's what I think. The two opened fire inside Conrad Morris's home. At that time, there were two important witnesses with him."

"What do you mean by the trial being related to a Gundam?"

"I don't know. The court-martial is closed to the public. But I have connections. Connections that will leak information..."

"Can we rely on that?"

"Yes. They probably have more accurate information than anyone else."

"Tell me your what you know."

"The Earth Federation Forces want to eliminate the Titans' Gundam pilot. The Gundam should be the symbol of the Earth Federation Forces. They want to erase the fact that the Titans created and operated the Gundam. They want to erase the memory of the disgraceful past when the Earth Federation Forces were controlled by the Titans."

"AEUG also operated Gundams. Won't the Earth Federation Forces consider that?"

"Anaheim Electronics is behind it all."

Michael Chang's eyes lit up. The huge military industry was a perfect target for tabloid newspapers.

"What do you mean?"

"After the One Year War, Anaheim's influence had become too significant for the military to ignore. They even outsourced mobile suit development to Anaheim. However, the Titans developed Gundams while ignoring Anaheim."

Anaheim, which saw the Titans' reorganization of the military as dangerous, decided to support AEUG."

"So...?"

"Through the so-called mobile suit exhibition known as the Gryps War, Anaheim's power grew even greater. Now, it could be said that without Anaheim, the Earth Federation Forces couldn't even exist. Listen, the new Gundam models that AEUG operated were prototypes developed by Anaheim. On the other hand, the Titans operated Gundams developed at the military arsenal from the Confeito Theater Forces. Anaheim wants to seal the history itself. The Earth Federation Forces cannot oppose that."

"So, the Earth Federation Forces' attempt to eliminate the Titans' Gundam pilot isn't just about saving face, but also considering their relationship with Anaheim Electronics?"

"The circumstances are slightly different this time, but something similar happened at the end of the "Delaz Conflict". Although it wasn't made public, the Earth Federation Forces erased the Gundam development project altogether, pretending it never happened."

"I've heard that rumor. I couldn't make an article out of it, though..."

"This time, I'll write the article."

"Can you?"

"First, I'll pick up some topics on the net. The subject is Gundam. Then, the scandal of the Earth Federation Forces and their collusion with Anaheim... The public will be hooked. This article will sell."

There was another pause, during which they thought. Eventually, Michael Chang spoke.

"Submit the first report in an hour. We'll squeeze it into tomorrow's morning edition."

"Then I'll start by sending an article about the attack on Conrad Morris's home."

Ryou Kirishima had a smile on his face.

The matter of Lieutenant Maxim Gunar smoldered onboard the Aswan and Confeito for a while. Rumors were flying.

Some said that Gunar wanted to join the Titans but was unable to do so, which led him to sympathize with the anti-Federation movement.

However, Eliard found that strange. Lieutenant Gunar had mentioned that he had joined the Titans once and participated in an operation under Captain Bask.

It was probably a rumor spread by those unaware of that fact. But there were quite a few who took the rumor at face value.

There was also a theory that Gunar was a spy for hostile forces. Still, Eliard felt that this lacked credibility as well.

Until now, the only forces that could oppose the Titans were the remnants of Zeon. The fleet from Axis had left the Earth Sphere for the distant main belt. Since the end of the Delaz Conflict, there had yet to be a force capable of infiltrating spies.

Eliard was aware that the AEUG was gaining considerable power. However, the AEUG was still a new force. There shouldn't have been enough time for them to groom Gunar as a spy.

It was true that Gunar had escaped to an AEUG ship. Some argued that this was evidence of his spying activities, but Eliard didn't think so. However, if Gunar were to leak information about the Titans to the AEUG, it would have the same effect as if he had been a spy. So, Eliard thought it was pointless to discuss whether he had been a spy or not.

The real issue was how much information Gunar could provide to the AEUG. They probably wouldn't have accepted him so readily.

The fact that he brought the new Galbaldi β as a gift couldn't be ignored, but Eliard questioned whether that alone would make the AEUG accept Gunar.

Speculation bred more speculation, and the atmosphere within the ship was restless. Commander Murphy, the squad leader, remained silent on the matter of Gunar. They were comrades who had fought together during the Delaz Conflict. Murphy should have been more bitter about Gunar's betrayal than anyone else.

Murphy's silence seemed to speak for the frustration Eliard and the rest of the test team felt.

Since the Gunar incident, Eliard had become increasingly aware of the existence of the AEUG. However, a year had passed, and the opportunities to hear the name of the AEUG had only grown.

Many colonies were said to have rallied to support the AEUG. Now, the AEUG was emerging as an unmistakable enemy of the Titans, a network of terrorists.

It was on one fateful day that everything became clear.

"Eliard, come. There's quite a commotion happening."

Carl arrived while Eliard was resting in his cabin aboard the ship.

"What's all the fuss about?"

"Never mind that just hurry up."

Carl seemed impatient, a stark contrast to his usual smirking demeanor. Something significant must have happened.

Eliard left his room and followed Carl. A crowd had gathered in front of the television in the recreation room. They were watching a civilian news broadcast. The ship was receiving signals intended for the colony.

"Look there..."

Carl gestured towards the television screen with his chin. It showed footage of a battle. From the mobile suits being used, it was evident that the Titans were engaged in combat.

The announcer was repeating something. Eliard focused on the sound.

"...we have confirmation of combat inside Side 7 within Luna II's area. It is believed to be an act of terror by the AEUG against the Titans, but the cause and details have not been released. I repeat, within Side 7 in the Luna II area..."

Eliard couldn't help but look at Carl's face.

"A battle...?"

Carl nodded.

"It's been smoldering for a while now, but it seems we've finally entered a full-scale combat state."

"Full-scale combat between the Titans and the AEUG...?"

"They should just crush them."

Carl spoke. "The AEUG is a terrorist network aiming to cause political chaos. It's said that conglomerates and corporate entities on Luna are backing them. In other words, the AEUG is a pawn for giant corporations trying to control not only the Earth Sphere's economy but also its politics and military amidst the chaos."

Eliard knew this as well. The AEUG sought to destroy the post-One Year War order that the Titans had painstakingly built through acts of terror. They were an inexcusable network of terrorists.

If they allowed the AEUG's terrorism to continue, remnants of Zeon and anti-Earth Federation Forces would rise again, potentially sparking another war on the scale of the One Year War. Eliard believed this wholeheartedly.

"What's the cause?"

Eliard asked Carl, "What caused this battle...?"

"The news says it's unknown. So someone must have imposed a gag order."

"Who?"

Carl shrugged.

"Either the Earth Federation Forces or the higher-ups in the Titans..."

A voice came from behind them.

"Hey, the officer briefing has started."

It was likely a briefing in response to the news of the battle. The ship was enveloped in a tension that hadn't been felt before.

Eliard's eyes remained glued to the images of the Titans and AEUG being televised over and over again.

Following the officer briefing, squadron-specific briefings were held. Eliard and his Test Team were called to the mobile suit company briefing. If it came to war, this mobile suit unit would be sent to the front lines. It was clear that every pilot was tense.

Veteran pilots tried to show off their composure by making jokes, but Eliard could feel that this was just a facade to mask their own tension.

"The Titans have entered a state of combat with the AEUG," said Captain Pedersen, addressing the pilots. "We Titans will never tolerate terrorism. The AEUG has been organizing various guerrillas and challenging the Earth Federation government with acts of terror. This battle is a war against terror. There is no justice in terrorism. Justice lies with the Titans, who fight for peace and order. Now, it's time for you to carry out justice. Work to your fullest."

Eliard felt invigorated by Pedersen's unusually passionate tone.

"Furthermore, this ship will now leave Confeito and head towards Earth's satellite orbit. There, we will receive parts for the new mobile armor and, after completing assembly, fortify Earth's security. Be prepared for atmospheric entry, as battles within the atmosphere are possible. At the same time, the Gryps' forces will deploy on Luna II's orbit and fortify their defenses."

It seemed that Aswan would be entering full-scale combat operations. The mobile suit units on the front lines would be forced into even more intense battles than before.

Captain Pedersen's message was enough to motivate Eliard, but a lingering question remained.

What was the direct reason for the Titans and the AEUG to start fighting? Unfortunately, Captain Pedersen did not provide an answer to that immediate question.

A Hi-Zack and a green-colored GM II were fighting on the TV screen. The Hi-Zack belonged to the Titans, while the repainted green GM II was an AEUG mobile suit.

Eliard and Carl stared at the screen, showing a battle in Luna II's orbital path. Gryps' main force and AEUG's flagship had clashed.

"Do you know?" Audrey's voice came from behind them, and Eliard and Carl turned around.

"What are you talking about?" Carl asked. Audrey looked around and lowered her voice.

"The cause of the Gryps incident."

Eliard frowned. "Another online rumor?"

"Just because it's from the internet doesn't mean it's all fake news."

"So?" Carl asked, "What's the cause?"

"They say the AEUG stole a new mobile suit being developed at Gryps..."

"Hmph," Carl said. "Terrorism and now theft... The AEUG is really something."

"It's the stolen mobile suit that's the problem."

"Don't beat around the bush," Eliard said. "What is this mobile suit?"

"A Gundam."

Eliard was at a loss for words. When he thought of a Gundam, he thought of the Hazel. But now he learned that even Gryps had been developing a Gundam.

The symbol of the Earth Federation had been stolen by an anti-Earth Federation force. So it was only natural that the Titans could not remain silent.

Eliard suddenly remembered Lieutenant Gunar's defection to the AEUG a year ago. Not only the Galbaldi β, but he must have needed something more substantial as a gift. Maybe, Lieutenant Gunar knew about the Gundam development at Gryps. He might have provided that information to the AEUG.

It was a plausible possibility, but there was no way to verify it now. So, like many other rumors, it was nothing more than speculation.

"This war..." Carl muttered as if talking to himself. "It'll probably turn into a full-scale battle like the One Year War..."

Aboard the Aswan's mobile suit deck, which had entered orbit towards Earth, pilots were busy adjusting their suits, installing new operation data, and other tasks. They had to be ready for deployment at any time.

These tasks were carried out in collaboration with the mechanics, but there were also many tasks that pilots had to do themselves.

Eliard was reading a mechanical report created at the Confeito arsenal inside his cockpit. This report was the fruit of the Test Team's hard work.

It was a detailed report on every machine that Eliard and his team had tested so far. It could be said to be proof of the Test Team's existence.

It was the data that Eliard and his team had collected, even risking their lives in real battles. As full-scale combat approached, such data would prove even more vital.

Even as a Test Team, they might have more chances to encounter real battles.

Real battles. That's what they desired.

Eliard thought if it was a battle for justice against the AEUG's terrorism, then all the more reason to be eager.

Eventually, the Aswan entered Earth's satellite orbit.

Eliard and his team were receiving a briefing from Commander Murphy.

"Our mission to protect Earth with the Aswan includes our new tests. This is a test for an entirely new ground suppression strategy."

According to Murphy, it was an operation using a new model called the TR-5 Fiver and existing mobile suits. First, the Fiver would be launched like an intercontinental ballistic missile. Then, after flying outside the atmosphere, the Fiver would re-enter the atmosphere. At that stage, support units like the Hazel would be deployed.

The Fiver would launch large missiles from the air, and the support units would land on the ground, rapidly capturing enemy bases.

"Where do the support units come from?"

Carl asked.

Without changing his expression, Murphy replied, "They're mounted on the Fiver."

Eliard didn't quite understand the answer. He had never seen a weapon that could carry mobile suits and fly on a ballistic missile-like course.

"What exactly is the Fiver?" Audrey asked. "Until now, the TR numbers were assigned only to mobile suits or mobile armors..."

Murphy smiled faintly.

"Well, you'll see when you look at it."

Eliard, Carl, and Audrey exchanged glances, intrigued.

Then, the full picture of the experimental machine was revealed. A massive propulsion unit designed for aerial combat was attached to the Hazel. The TR-5 in question couldn't fit in the mobile suit deck, so assembly work was being done outside the Aswan.

Eliard was amazed at the sight. It appeared to be a huge mobile armor, but it was clearly more than just a mobile armor.

July 0088

Repercussions

When Conrad woke up and went to the living room in the morning, Hendrick, Audrey, Carl, and Joanna were already watching the TV screen. Conrad spoke to them.

"Is there an MBA game on this early in the morning?"

Hendrick looked at Conrad.

"It's more than that."

Conrad peeked at the TV screen from behind them. It was a morning news show. Apparently, there had been some military raid on a newspaper company. So, naturally, the TV was harshly criticizing the military's actions.

Even under a quasi-war footing, the Earth Federation government differs from a totalitarian state. In principle, they don't impose censorship on speech. That's why the news anchor could openly criticize the military's actions.

The newspaper company inspected by the military was a tabloid, and it was hard to call it an authoritative newspaper. A plump Asian man was being interviewed.

A credit with the name Michael Chang appeared. He seemed to be the editor-in-chief of the newspaper. He was furious. Thirty minutes after the military inspection, the federal court issued an order banning the sale of today's morning edition and to collect the distributed copies.

"This is clear suppression of speech."

Michael Chang snarled at the TV reporter. "Has the Earth Federation government forgotten democracy? We can't run a newspaper if every article about the military is banned. First of all, does the military have the authority to conduct inspections? This is clearly the military going rogue. They're ignoring civilian control."

Conrad asked Joanna.

"What kind of article did this man, Michael Chang, put in the newspaper?"

Joanna smiled.

"Why don't you see for yourself?"

"Is there a copy?"

"Since I got a call from the person who wrote the article, I bought it at a nearby gas station first thing in the morning. I fully anticipated it to be banned and recalled."

"It's an article full of you-are-there feelings."

Hendrick said, "It's as if the reporter really saw it. But there's no way they actually did, right?"

Conrad looked over the article. It was about two Earth Federation soldiers breaking into Conrad's house. Indeed, as Hendrick said, the writing was quite compelling. Of course, being a tabloid paper, it tended to be overly sensational, but the facts were solid.

Surprisingly, even the names of Kelly Brown and Thomas Tyner were mentioned. They were the sergeants who had broken into Conrad's home. Although their names were treated as rumors circulating on the internet, the fact that they appeared in the newspaper was significant.

The military probably took issue with that point. The higher-ups in the military had influenced the federal court to issue a ban and collection order on the grounds of human rights violations. However, the court's response was too quick.

Conrad felt a fire burning in the pit of his stomach. The military had interfered with the judiciary, and the judiciary had complied. This should never happen. If allowed even a little, it would quickly revert to totalitarianism and a reign of terror.

The Earth Federation government would suffer a significant blow by banning Michael Chang's newspaper. However, the media's criticism would likely focus on the military's rampage and the politicians who can't control them.

"So...?" Carl said. "How determined is this guy, Michael Chang? Do you think he still has the will to fight even after being banned?"

Conrad said, "He doesn't seem like the kind of guy to let such an opportunity slip by. The next issue of the newspaper will probably sell explosively. To increase sales, he has to keep writing about us; otherwise, he'll lose readers."

Joanna nodded.

"According to the journalist who wrote the article, this man values making money more than anything else. So, he might be more trustworthy than a top-tier newspaper that brandishes social justice."

"I see..." Carl said. "So, he won't choose the means as long as it sells?"

"Well..." Conrad said. "Joanna and I will go to the Justice Bureau. We have another hearing in the afternoon. The uproar will likely grow as time goes on. It'll be interesting to see how the prosecution behaves in today's hearing..."

"Aren't we crossing a really dangerous bridge?"

Carl said, "If the journalist who wrote the article gets caught by the military and it's revealed that we leaked the information, we won't be able to help Eliard anymore."

Conrad said with a stern expression, "We must not forget that the military is trying to execute Eliard. At first, the higher-ups must have thought the court-martial was just a formality."

"So, you mean it was a battle with no chance of winning?"

"To be honest, yes. Even now, the situation hasn't improved much. But we have to win. Otherwise, Eliard will be killed. Understand? It's either win or lose. There's no middle ground."

"Are you saying we should be prepared for the risks?"

"I've said it many times..." Conrad said. "To save Eliard, I'll use any means necessary. Otherwise, we can't win."

Carl nodded. "I got it. I just wanted to confirm our position."

Conrad said with a stern expression, "It may be a dangerous gamble. That's why we need to be even more cautious."

"Hmph. The military will use dirty tactics too." Hendrick said, "So we have to do something about it as well..."

Ideally, Conrad would like to win with a straightforward approach. That's why he went to Luna to bring Hendrick and Audrey back and asked King George to help him find Carl.

However, the situation changed the moment the two Earth Federation soldiers tried to snuff out Hendrick and Audrey. Conrad didn't want to admit what Hendrick said.

There is resistance to the logic that it's okay to do something dirty because the opponent does it. But there are times when it's necessary. Conrad believed that's what a battle is like.

The atmosphere in the court-martial was clearly different from the previous day. The prosecution seemed uneasy.

Even Commodore Milkov, the chief judge, appeared to be faltering. It was evident that the influence of Michael Chang's tabloid was taking effect.

"Do you see?" Conrad whispered to Eliard. "The prosecution and the chief judge are unsettled."

"I thought something was different. Did something happen?"

"There was an incident where burglars broke into my house and fired shots."

Eliard furrowed his brow.

"When did this happen?"

"It was the day I brought Audrey and Hendrick back to my house."

"Do you mean the burglars were targeting those two?"

"Clearly. And it turned out that the two burglars were actually Earth Federation Forces sergeants. Their names appeared in a newspaper article this morning..."

Eliard blinked, remaining silent.

Conrad thought he was a perceptive young man.

Eliard probably realized that Conrad and his team had the article written. That's why he didn't say anything.

Conrad continued.

"Those two sergeants are under the command of Commander Jeffrey Portman. And Portman once served under Commodore Milkov and was stationed on Luna, making him more inclined toward the Spacenoids. He dislikes the Titans."

Eliard nodded and looked at the prosecution. Captain John Gordon glanced briefly at Conrad and his group. He seemed unable to help but be curious about what they were discussing.

Eventually, the trial began.

Captain Gordon continued to ask Eliard nitpicking questions about the two charges he had already been tried for – involvement in the "Colony 30 Incident" and the alleged dangerous actions with the Asshimar.

Eliard patiently answered the questions, never falling for the provocations. Conrad remembered how Eliard had almost given in to despair. If he had continued like that, there might have been no chance of winning. But Eliard had bounced back.

As expected of a Titans pilot, Conrad thought.

The Titans' rampage was not something to be condoned. However, the guilt lay with the higher-ups, not the soldiers.

After the Gryps War, the media portrayed the Titans as a group of outlaws, but in reality, highly talented soldiers like Eliard were selected to join.

Many of the young soldiers and officers continued to fight with pride and a sense of duty, regardless of the intentions of their superiors. They needed an indomitable spirit. And now, Eliard was embodying that indomitable spirit.

Captain Gordon's questions dragged on and on.

Finally, Commodore Milkov banged his gavel. Gordon looked at him, startled.

Commodore Milkov spoke with irritation.

"The prosecution is requested to clearly state the purpose of their questions."

Gordon directed his cold eyes at Commodore Milkov and replied.

"I am trying to clarify the facts."

"Repeating similar questions is a waste of time. If there is no need to ask questions about new facts, the prosecution should finish their questions promptly."

Gordon was about to argue but seemed to realize it was futile. He stared at Eliard and said, "No further questions."

Gordon sat down with a bitter expression.

Commodore Milkov asked Conrad, "Does the defense have any questions?"

Conrad shook his head. "No, we don't."

Commodore Milkov declared, "Let me make this clear to both the prosecution and the defense: I will not tolerate any further unnecessary prolonging of the trial. With that said, the court is adjourned for the day."

Commodore Milkov's words seemed to blame Gordon. However, it was clear that wasn't the case. Instead, Milkov simply wanted to expedite the trial and swiftly deal with Eliard.

Conrad whispered to himself, "We won't let that happen."

March 0087

Aswan

All was quiet.

The Aswan orbited Earth, and Eliard and the others remained on level two combat alert for several days. The Hazel Custom was equipped with an air combat unit designed for use under gravity, and the Fiver, assembled on the outside of the Aswan, was also completed.

Eliard had thought they would sortie from the Aswan as they were, but suddenly, the test team was summoned by Captain Pedersen.

"From Gryps, a Salamis Kai-class light cruiser will join us as the Aswan's sister ship."

Captain Pedersen explained.

"After rendezvous in Earth's orbit, the ship will become part of the Confeito unit. The ship's name is the Izmir. However, the mobile suit deck on the ship is empty. They're giving us the ship, but we must provide our own mobile suits. So, I've decided to transfer you, the test team, to the Izmir."

Transfers were a standard part of military life. However, leaving the Aswan was undeniably sad. Eliard felt as if he were leaving his home.

"The Izmir has already received orders to attack a secret base belonging to the Karaba, the Earth's terrorist organization. As soon as you transfer, you will be assigned to this mission. Good luck. In addition, the Izmir will rendezvous with this ship in its current orbit in forty-eight hours. So prepare for the transfer."

Commander Murphy asked,

"What will happen to the Hazel Custom's air combat unit and the Fiver, which were scheduled for testing?"

"You've already been registered as pilots. You'll take them to the Izmir as a sort of giant welcome present. Then, you'll likely use these new weapons in the ground-based attack on Karaba. That's all."

The test team saluted and dispersed.

"It's no joke,"

Carl said as he left the bridge. "Deploying experimental units into actual combat all of a sudden..."

Murphy, who had overheard, said,

"It's not like we haven't experienced this before. Don't whine."

"Captain Pedersen said the Izmir is a Salamis Kai-class, which means it can carry six mobile suits, right?"

Eliard spoke up. "What exactly are we taking with us? Our test team is equipped with the Hazel Custom, Hazel II, and the Rosette. That would be fine, but there's also the Fiver."

"Don't be stupid,"

Carl retorted. "The Fiver doesn't even fit in the Aswan's mobile suit deck, let alone on a Salamis Kai-class. We'll have to attach it to the exterior and launch it from there."

"So, we're taking everything?"

Murphy nodded.

"It seems that way."

"So we'll be taking down Karaba, right...?"

Eliard asked Murphy.

"That's how things are looking."

"Karaba supports AEUG, doesn't it?"

"Yes. You can think of them as the Earth-based support organization for the AEUG."

In other words, we've finally been drawn into a full-scale war with the AEUG, Eliard thought. Of course, he was well aware that the Titans were already locked in combat with the AEUG. However, he hadn't truly grasped the reality of them actually going out to fight the AEUG.

Murphy said,

"A real war is on the horizon. It's completely different from the skirmishes we've had with Zeon remnants. Be prepared."

The Aswan raised its orbit and slowed its orbital speed to await the Izmir. Soon, the Izmir approached from a lower orbit. The Aswan lowered its orbit further, gradually reducing its relative speed to the Izmir. Finally, the relative speed became zero, and the rendezvous was successful.

Immediately, the process of transferring the mobile suits began. Murphy's Hazel Custom, Eliard's Hazel II, and Carl's Rosette carried out the task of securing the Fiver. Audrey was piloting the Fiver with a smooth, untroubled touch.

Suddenly, the alarm sounded. A message came in from the Aswan.

"Three mobile suits approaching rapidly from the 12 o'clock direction."

"AEUG, huh..."

Carl's voice could be heard. "They must have been waiting for this moment..."

Murphy said,

"Protect the Izmir and the Fiver. Don't let them catch us off guard."

"Don't worry about the Fiver,"

Audrey's voice chimed in. "Just focus on the battle."

The monitor captured the approaching trio of GM IIs. Carl began firing his beam rifle. Under cover of Carl's suppressive fire, the Hazel Custom advanced, with Eliard closely following.

In no time, they were engaged in a dogfight.

"Why do I have to shoot at GMs?"

Eliard muttered as he fired his rifle in rapid succession. One of the GM IIs, distracted by Carl's covering fire, was hit directly by Murphy's rifle.

Eliard had also inflicted damage on the second GM II in a swift exchange.

The battle ended quickly. A warship approached from the front. As it passed by the Aswan at a close distance of about a thousand meters, it continued on its way along its orbit. The remaining two GM IIs returned to the AEUG warship. It had been a brief orbital encounter.

"I suppose that was a sort of greeting..."

Murphy's murmuring voice could be heard.

March 0087

Zanzibar, An Orbit Around Luna

"Am I really meant to live?"

Kazak Larson said, "I've already lost a leg, and I can't fight in a mobile suit anymore."

Gabriel Zola answered without looking at Larson. Larson had lost one of his legs in a battle against the Titans' new mobile suit model.

"As long as you're alive, that's enough,"

Zola replied. "Our being alive is proof that we exist."

"The ideal of Zeon has become so distant."

Zola faintly smiled at Larson. Now, Larson was seated in the captain's chair of the Zanzibar.

"Look. The sea of stars."

Zola pointed at the outer space visible from the bridge. "As long as we live in this sea, the ideal will never disappear."

"But to join forces with the AEUG..."

Zola still wore his faint smile.

"There is a saying that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Besides, the AEUG is an anti-Earth Federation government organization and an ally of the Spacenoids. It's possible to reconcile with Zeon's ideals."

"Axis was supposed to be our hope."

Larson said in a heavy tone. Zola nodded.

"That's true. However, we still don't know which way Axis will lean. We can't wait forever. Even if we want to fight, we don't have decent mobile suits."

The navigator informed them.

"We've entered lunar orbit."

Larson promptly asked.

"How long until we make contact with the AEUG's warship?"

"It's scheduled to rendezvous in ten minutes. The AEUG ship should be coming from a slightly lower orbit behind us."

"Understood. Don't let your guard down. We don't know what could happen. Stay alert."

"Aye, sir."

Larson sighed and then said to Zola.

"The times are changing. Your decision might be the right one."

"The AEUG and Titans are finally fighting one another. We can't just stand by and watch. Continuing to fight is our mission, isn't it?"

"You're right. To fight is to live. I will follow your judgment."

Larson gazed at Zola's profile. He knew full well that Zola wasn't overjoyed to join the AEUG's forces. Even though they were an anti-Earth Federation government movement, many of its soldiers were former Earth Federation military personnel.

The options for the remnants of Zeon were limited. Indeed, Zola's decision might be the best one for now. Until now, they had managed to maintain the Zanzibar with the help of supplies from Zeon sympathizers in each colony. However, that was becoming less feasible.

Each colony was getting caught up in the war between the Titans and the AEUG. If they didn't belong to an organization with reliable supply capabilities, they would be doomed.

"It's here."

The navigator informed them. "It's an AEUG ship. It appears to be a Salamis Kai-class."

"Open a channel."

Larson said, "This is a historic negotiation for us. From now on, this Zanzibar will be affiliated with the AEUG."

March 0087

Memories

Tension gripped his entire body.

The tightness of the normal suit intensifies the tension, making him feel as if panic is creeping up on him.

The smell of sweat inside the helmet. Even with the visor raised, it's suffocating.

While waiting on the mobile suit deck, he had no idea about the situation in the battle. Somewhere, the ship takes a hit, and the entire ship shutters.

The unbearable tension while waiting to be deployed.

Heading out onto the battlefield is terrifying. However, waiting for his turn inside the deck is far more frightening.

Crew members scurry about. Mechanics and ship officers rush back and forth between the mobile suits.

The voice of the controller announcing deployment.

The lamp in front of him changes from red to blue. He's pressed against his seat. It's the acceleration from the catapult.

As soon as he enters the sea of stars, beams and bullets cross, and the incessant light of explosions comes into view. He can't hear the sound of the explosions. Only when a fragment hits the mobile suit's armor does a sharp metallic sound echo in the cockpit.

He was taught many times that when entering the sea of stars, he should use the mass of their arms and legs to control posture to conserve propellant. That's the advantage of a mobile suit.

However, as soon as he enters the heart of the battlefield, he forgets all about that. He must constantly change his position by firing his verniers, or else he will be hit directly.

The light of explosions, the reflection of sunlight on debris, crossing beams, and tracer rounds.

The battlefield is filled with light, light that can take a life in an instant.

Allied mobile suits are being destroyed one by one. Most of the pilots don't survive. The powerful weapon that is a mobile suit becomes a coffin the moment it's destroyed.

Eliard took a deep breath.

Even now, he can't forget the tension of battle. When he remembers the battlefield, the tension comes back vividly, making it hard to breathe.

The battlefield doesn't just have the glory that the military proclaims. Fear and despair swirl there. It's filled with the madness of accepting death and fighting to die.

Eliard knew that all too well.

Eliard took deep breaths, one after another.

Now, confined within the storage room, he felt more terrified about the battle than when he was actually in it.

He didn't remember the dogfights well because they were too frantic. Lights flashed incessantly around him. Voices on the radio overlapped. Everyone was excited, their voices loud and harsh.

He tried to chase enemies, attempting to lock on. Or he tried to escape from being locked on by enemies. That was all he thought about.

A moment of hesitation, doubt, or fear could lead directly to death in that world. However, there was no such awareness during a dogfight. The alternating positive and negative accelerations made it feel as if the blood in his body was being shaken.

Speed, light, and acceleration. These created a unique state of excitement. In fact, Eliard had once laughed uncontrollably because of the excitement. He didn't even realize he was laughing.

He was in a slightly abnormal mental state. To some extent, everyone on the battlefield becomes like that. That's why they can fight.

When he is alone in a quiet place like this, with plenty of time to think, it's hard to believe he was once on the battlefield.

It's hard to believe he killed people and was always close to death.

And he felt genuinely terrified of the battles.

Now, Eliard was tormented by memories of the battlefield. The excitement and fighting spirit that filled the battlefield had vanished, leaving only fear and tension.

In the trial, every time he was questioned, he remembered the battlefield. It was more of a feeling than an image. The vibrations, brightness, and impact came back vividly.

The trial was a battle against the tension of a single mistake potentially leading to a death sentence and a battle against the terror of war memories. Initially, Eliard thought he would be sentenced to death as soon as the trial started. That's how military trials are. It's not unusual to be sentenced to death after just one hearing.

He had given up before the trial even began. But Conrad gave him hope. Without Conrad, Eliard's death sentence might have already been confirmed.

He didn't feel the reality of facing a death sentence. Nobody would.

However, as soon as the trial started, he stopped thinking about his future.

As Conrad brought in witnesses one after another, putting the prosecution at a disadvantage and prolonging the trial, Eliard's mindset began to change.

He realized it one morning when he found himself thinking about what to do after the trial.

He was considering how to live after the trial.

The possibility of a death sentence still remained. Military courts are not meant to expose crimes. They are held to punish military personnel.

But Conrad didn't accept that. He knew Conrad was fighting seriously. Therefore, Eliard had to be serious as well. It was not the time to give up on his life.

Eliard started to feel the possibility of survival. That's why he began to think about the future.

Away from the battlefield, memories of the war became deeply terrifying.

Do I not want to go back to the battlefield?

Eliard asked himself.

Do I no longer wish to board a battleship and fight in a mobile suit?

He could leave the military and find some job. If he could pilot a combat mobile suit, operating a construction or civil engineering mobile suit would be easy. There would be plenty of jobs.

Would he want to live a peaceful life, working in such a job?

That's one way to live.

Eliard listened to the voice of his heart.

It seemed that he wouldn't be able to adjust to that kind of life. That was the answer.

The memories of war were terrifying. But Eliard thought that was because he was not on the battlefield. He knew that once he was in a mobile suit and on the battlefield, not only fear and tension but also fighting spirit and excitement would surge like a storm.

I want to go back to the battlefield.

Eliard realized that.

Even if he wasn't sentenced to death, there might be some penalty.

Dishonorable discharge could be a possibility.

If he can stay in the military, he would want to fight again as a mobile suit pilot.

Eliard finally became aware of his own desires.

I want to be in a mobile suit, after all. To do that, I must win the battle before me.

I must win this trial no matter what.

Ryou Kirishima watched with amusement as Michael Chang's furious face played across the television screen. But, of course, Chang's tirade wasn't born out of pure anger against censorship; it was a marketing ploy. And it worked. The sight of him on TV had undoubtedly boosted sales of his newspaper.

Kirishima was satisfied with the massive response to the article he had written. But he couldn't afford to revel in his success for long; it was clear that the military would soon take action.

Since his piece was a signed article in Chang's tabloid, the military would quickly track down Kirishima's whereabouts.

He couldn't waste time. He needed to disappear immediately. Having crossed dangerous bridges a few times before, he was no stranger to situations like this. So Ryou Kirishima packed a minimal amount of belongings into a backpack and left his house in the dead of night.

As he was about to pull his car out of the garage, he heard the screeching brakes of several vehicles outside. Peeking out cautiously, he saw three olive-drab military vehicles parked. Military police armed with automatic rifles were just beginning to pour out of them.

Their objective was clear even at this hour; they wanted to detain Ryou Kirishima and extract information about the sources of his article, Kelly Brown and Thomas Tyner.

In the worst-case scenario, they might execute Kirishima and bury him in the dark to preserve the Earth Federation Force's reputation. They wouldn't hesitate to do so.

This was no joke, Kirishima thought.

If he were arrested by the police, he could call a lawyer and try to make it work. But he would be utterly defenseless if the Earth Federation Forces captured him.

He had written the article for Joanna. Of course, part of his motivation was his anger at the military's actions, but more than anything, he wanted to impress Joanna and somehow score a date with her.

He had met Joanna at a press conference in the Justice Department. The moment he laid eyes on her, he couldn't forget her—her Russian beauty, intelligence, and military-like demeanor.

He had approached her countless times, but she had yet to agree to a date.

He knew he was being used but thought it was worth it. If he could be useful to Joanna, taking a few risks didn't matter.

Moreover, Kirishima was furious with the current state of the media. With the quasi-war-time footing, the military had become increasingly influential. The Earth Federation government still maintained civilian control in name, but since the One Year War, the military's clout had grown, and the media had become cautious, only reporting benign nothing news.

What a dull world that was.

Kirishima always thought so. That's why he was an outlier in the media world. Authoritarian newspapers all leaned towards the Earth Federation government and the Earth Federation Forces. So he didn't want to write for them.

In this kind of world, a seemingly commercial, third-rate paper like Michael Chang's tabloid could report the truth.

MPs were knocking on Kirishima's door. Three of them stood in front, their actions meticulously coordinated, with another three circling around to the back.

Technically, MPs had no authority to detain civilians. However, the military couldn't involve the police or other intelligence agencies. That's why they acted under the cover of night like this.

Kirishima quietly returned to the garage and got in his car. As soon as he closed the door, he started the engine. The MPs noticed and rushed towards him, rifles at the ready.

"Go ahead, shoot if you dare. It'll be a huge scandal," he taunted.

Kirishima floored the accelerator, and the car burst out of the garage and onto the street, scattering the MPs in its wake.

CHAPTER.05

May 0087

Izmir

"I'll cut to the chase. You'll be heading to Earth."

Lieutenant Murphy and the rest of the Test Team were deployed to the Izmir and arrived at their posts. Captain Thomas Schrader, the ship's captain, spoke, "You are to strike at a hidden base of a terrorist group backed by the AEUG. The details of the operation are in the orders. Commit it to memory."

"Understood," Murphy responded.

At the young age of 35, Schrader commanded an imposing presence. His closely cropped blond hair and cool blue eyes gave him an aura of maturity beyond his years.

As they left the bridge and headed towards the mobile suit deck, Audrey commented, "Do you know what they called the Captain back in his academy days?"

Carl was the first to bite. "What is it?"

"Icicle. Cold as ice and sharp as a spear..."

"Man, that doesn't bode well..."

"But then again..." Audrey continued, "Since seeing combat, his nickname 'Icicle' started being interpreted in a positive light. Never flustered, no matter what. Coldly rational like ice and resolute like a spear. They say he never let a single subordinate die..."

"At that age?" Carl interjected. "How many subordinates did he have during the One Year War?"

"Captain Schrader was already in command of a Salamis at the end of the One Year War," Lieutenant Murphy clarified. Eliard and the others looked surprised. "He was still in his twenties back then. The man is a living legend of the Earth Federation Forces. Didn't you know?"

Even Carl was left speechless.

Three mobile suits—the Hazel Custom, Hazel II, and Rosette—had already been transported to the mobile suit deck, where mechanics were peering curiously into the cockpits.

"Hey, hey," Carl addressed the mechanics over the radio, "These aren't toys, you know."

One mechanic floated down gently. "From our perspective, being able to lay our hands on the Test Team's suits is the highest honor. Oh, Captain Murphy, right? Welcome to the Izmir. Consider all your maintenance needs as good as handled, just like on the larger ships."

"Forgive my rudeness, but who who might you be?" Murphy inquired.

"I'm Jonathan Cohen, chief mechanic. Really, it's a great privilege for mechanics to be able to work on the test team's machines."

Eliard thought, this person is a true mechanic. Obsessed with mobile suits, it seemed.

"Hey, Rachel, come down. I'll introduce you."

Jonathan called out, and a small normal suit floated down. It was a female mechanic. Her visor revealed a charming face with a hint of innocence, more youthful than beautiful.

Jonathan introduced her, "This is Rachel Sand. Looks can be deceiving; her skills are top-notch. I've personally trained her."

Rachel saluted and said, "Nice to meet you."

Murphy nodded, "Our squad has a lot of demanding tasks. I'm counting on you."

"Leave it to me," Jonathan said happily.

"Seen the Fiver yet?" Murphy asked.

"Have I ever! Looked at it from every angle. Not only can it enter the atmosphere on its own, but it can also carry two mobile suits. That's beyond the scope of a mobile armor; it's a strategic weapon in its own right," Jonathan rattled on, his eyes behind the visor glowing brighter.

"We'll demonstrate that capability. We'll launch Fiver with the Hazel Custom and Rosette on board and make atmospheric entry."

Jonathan's eyes behind the visor sparkled even more.

"I'm all ears. I've never heard of such an operation in the history of mobile suit combat. It's exciting."

"Hey, are you sure about that guy..." Carl whispered softly to Eliard.

"You're in good hands," a confident female voice was heard. It was Rachel. Even if Carl spoke softly, everyone could hear him through the radio.

"I've never seen a tech officer as skilled and knowledgeable as Jonathan," Rachel added.

Carl looked surprised and glanced at Rachel. "This ship seems pretty amazing..."

Currently, the Izmir was in Earth's orbit alongside the Aswan. From there, the Fiver was launched and made its atmospheric entry. During that time, Aswan's mobile suit team and Audrey, aboard the modified Hazel II, were assigned to patrol the surroundings, as the Fiver would be defenseless.

The modified Hazel II was called "Advanced Hazel." This patrol mission also served as a test for the Advanced Hazel.

Eliard was inside the Hazel Custom loaded on the Fiver. Lieutenant Murphy was in its cockpit. The countdown from the Izmir's bridge had already begun.

"You'll experience comms blackout for a while," Captain Schrader's voice sounded. "Is there anything you want to say?"

Lieutenant Murphy's voice could be heard. "We will definitely return to the Izmir. I've taken a liking to this ship."

"Whether you like it or not, you better come back," Captain Schrader replied.

"Yes, sir."

"Alright, confirm the course. If you get the angle wrong, you'll be burnt to a crisp."

"Understood."

Now, it was all up to the computer. Soon, Eliard felt vibrations. The Fiver's main engine had ignited. Just as he felt a sense of weightlessness, the acceleration began abruptly.

Gravity. The Fiver was being pulled into a colossal gravitational well.

"We're all waiting for you to come back," Audrey's voice could be heard, and then the comms went silent.

June 0087

Urup Island, Kuril Islands

The hangar was unforgivingly cold. Despite it being June, the nights still brought a considerable chill. But for Gabriel Zola, this was of no concern.

Compared to space, Earth's climate was like a greenhouse. Those who live on Earth are ignorant of space.

Right now, he was gazing up at the Asshimar that the Earth-based AEUG forces had captured.

"I remember this mobile suit," Zola murmured, "This was the one Lieutenant Wes Murphy piloted."

He recalled that battle. Though its form was somewhat different due to its space specifications, it was undoubtedly the same mobile suit. In space, it was equipped with three leg thrusters that also acted as propellant tanks. Murphy had wielded them like weapons, smashing them against Larson's Gelgoog. Indeed, Lieutenant Murphy's battle prowess was impressive.

"But, I could handle it better..."

Zola was confident. He had fought in outdated mobile suits until now. If given a high-performance model, he'd prove himself even more.

"It's awfully cold..."

A voice came from behind him. It was an AEUG officer who had descended from space along with Zola. The officer looked at Zola, who turned around, and grimaced. He clearly held no affection for him.

The officer said, his voice icy, "To think I'd end up fighting alongside you lot..."

Zola remained silent. The AEUG officer went on.

"I was with the Earth Federation Forces. Many of my friends were killed by the Zeon forces."

Still, Zola remained silent.

"Hey, say something."

Zola stared at the other man.

"Some speak volubly, claiming to speak for those who are no more. Others, like those who are gone, have decided to remain wordless."

The officer looked at Zola, visibly startled and taken aback. Zola spoke again.,

"Do you think that my closest friends weren't killed by the Earth Federation Forces?"

Silence followed. After a while, the AEUG officer hung their head.

"I'm sorry."

"I heard the rumors on the Aswan. They say you might be the strongest in the test team," the voice rang out on the mobile suit deck of the Izmir, where Audrey was prepping for deployment. She looked bemused.

The voice belonged to her opponent in today's simulation battle, a newly assigned pilot to the Aswan. With Murphy's Team transferred to the Izmir, this new mobile suit squadron served as their reinforcements.

As of now, the only mobile suit team on board was Murphy's team. The conflict with the Titans had intensified, making the Aswan heavily prioritize real combat deployment. All experimentation had been entrusted to the Izmir.

The newly assigned pilot's name was Claude Libel, a motivated young ensign.

"There's no way that's true," Audrey replied. "No one can match Lieutenant Murphy. Both Eliard and Carl have honed their skills through real combat."

"But you've saved them in critical situations, haven't you?"

"Strength is relative. Even in a disadvantaged position, something can tip the balance in your favor."

"You're being modest. But don't you think this simulation battle is stacked against you?"

Audrey would be piloting the Advanced Hazel, a souped-up Hazel II, while Claude would be piloting the Hrududu, a power-boosted component of Hazel capable of independent operation.

"Mobile suits aren't the only weapons. The G-Fighter from the One Year War played its strategic role."

"No use making excuses before the simulation starts."

"Exactly. Let's get to it."

"Please go easy on me."

Claude floated off to his serviced Hrududu. Audrey settled into the cockpit of her Advanced Hazel, smiling. "Talkative, but he's clearly showing respect. That's flattering."

As soon as she deployed, Audrey realized what Eliard had told her was true. This Hazel II was more than a modified GM Quel with added thrusters. It was an unpredictable beast.

Furthermore, with the recent enhancements, it included thrust amplifiers on the legs and soles, a sub-arm unit on the waist armor, and the ability to attach

two shield boosters to the back boost pod. These were experimental additions they had tried with the Galbaldy β.

Sitting in the cockpit, the most noticeable difference from the previous version was the newly developed sensor unit on the head. Based on data from the GM Sniper III, this sensor enabled long-range sniping. In other words, it wasn't limited to assault or interception missions but could also support from the rear. In other words, this suit wasn't just for assault or intercept missions, it was also for rear support.

Through the sensor unit, Audrey's field of view expanded, and she could feel the increased maneuverability from the various enhanced thrusters.

She was certain that this wasn't just a next-generation mobile suit; it was something more.

The Aswan and Izmir were both on the same orbit, a satellite orbit around the Earth. From that direction, the Hrududu came into view, the enhanced sensors on the Hazel II detecting it quickly.

The enemy was equipped with a long blade rifle for long-range use. On the other hand, Audrey had a standard beam rifle. It was an attempt to bridge the gap in firepower.

When the enemy fired, Audrey had already taken evasive action. In that moment, she felt as if she had been struck by a giant hammer.

"Such incredible acceleration..."

Every thruster was both sensitive and powerful. The original reaction speed of the machine and the enhanced parts were imbalanced, making it the "uncontrollable beast" Eliard had warned about.

"The OS is updated, so I will master it," Audrey vowed, pushing the machine to its limits. She even tried using the sub-arm unit for an energy pack exchange.

The result left her utterly exhausted. Eventually, she was caught by the forceful thrust of Hrududu's long-blade rifle.

Claude commented as he retrieved Audrey, "You were right. Mobile suits aren't just weapons."

Exhausted, Audrey replied, "Don't say anything. Riding this beast is exhausting enough..."

Audrey reviewed the record of the simulated battle with Hrududu multiple times. As a result, she realized she had been moving too much. She had relied on thrust too much and overused the thrusters. Doing so would cause any machine to lose control like a balloon in the wind.

Not all vehicles always utilize a hundred percent of their specs. If she could balance the Hazel's OS with its powerful enhancements, it could rival the next-generation mobile suits.

That much, Audrey was certain of.

Suddenly, an alarm sounded throughout the ship. Audrey received orders to deploy.

Rushing to the mobile suit deck, Audrey was surprised by what she saw. The Advanced Hazel was already in its next experimental phase, equipped with the Hrududu. They were planning to test the enhanced Hazel, named the Hazel-Rah, with the full armor equipment. This was an extra step in testing the Hazel with the full armor parts attached.

"You haven't removed the Hrududu?"

"It's captain's orders to sortie like this."

"We haven't even tested it."

"Take it up with the captain," Jonathan retorted.

Cursing under her breath, Audrey jumped into the cockpit as communications from Captain Schröder came in.

"The enemy is three GM II's. They belong to the AEUG."

"What about reinforcements from the Aswan?"

"Denied. We've got to deal with about three mass-produced units ourselves. After all, we're wielding a Gundam."

"The Hazel-Rah hasn't even been fully tested yet."

"We'll collect data as we go. Think of this as the test."

The commander and Eliard had been forced into battles like this many times before. Audrey bit her lip before responding, "Understood."

Captain Schröder had a reputation for never losing a subordinate. With the Hazel-Rah's capabilities and Audrey's skills, he probably judged that overpowering the enemy would be easy. There was no choice but to trust his judgment.

"Audrey unit, Hazel-Rah, launching."

Currently, the Izmir was orbiting a few kilometers behind the Aswan on the same trajectory, a satellite orbit. Three GM II mobile suits were attempting to attack the Izmir.

The enemy noticed Audrey's unit and fired aggressively. Beams from rifles crossed paths. Audrey skillfully used the thrusters to evade.

"Don't overdo it," she muttered in her mind. Still, she gained enough acceleration.

As she had thought. A wild horse could be a splendid horse if handled correctly.

The enemy couldn't keep up with Hazel-Rah's agility. She tried the Hrududu's thrusters. The mobile suit rapidly accelerated upward to the left, feeling a diagonal torque.

"Is the center of gravity even calculated correctly?"

She had to use the leg thrusters to balance before the mobile suit began to rotate. Seeing the opening, one GM II tried to flank from behind.

"I see through your moves."

Audrey fired as she turned, the long blade rifle belching fire. The beam grazed the enemy unit.

The remaining GM II fired its rifle in that instant. Audrey had already unconsciously entered evasive action. The Hazel-Rah responded easily.

The three enemy mobile suits began to retreat. Maybe they reached the limit of their operation time or perhaps they realized the power difference with the Hazel-Rah.

Audrey switched her monitor to sniping mode, using the mono-eye sensor after opening its cover. She locked onto a GM II, now just a small speck. The beam from the long blade rifle pierced through the GM II. A direct hit.

The Hazel-Rah is useful after all, Audrey thought. But it needs some adjustments.

A siren wailed through the building—old-fashioned, something seldom heard these days. Karaba, the support organization of the AEUG, had secret bases scattered in various locations on Earth, and Kamchatka Base was one of them. Built on an abandoned mining site, derelict excavation machinery lay rusting above ground. But within the hangars disguised as old warehouses, rows of Mobile Suits stood at the ready.

There were units supplied by the AEUG, as well as ones seized in battles against the Titans. The Asshimar, undergoing repairs at the Torrington Base, was also scheduled to arrive here soon.

Gabriel Zola had been assigned to the Kamchatka base ahead of time, waiting for the arrival of the Asshimar. The residential area was located underground, and Zola sprinted through the sirens towards the storage hangar.

"What's going on?" Zola asked a nearby mechanic.

"It's an air raid. Titans' mobile suits."

"An airstrike with mobile suits?"

"They're riding Base Jabbers."

Zola couldn't believe that mobile suits were attacking from the sky on Earth. To him, mobile suits were weapons designed to be used in zero gravity. It seemed impossible to use them on Earth, bound by gravity, let alone to fly within the planet's atmosphere. Mobile suits were not originally designed for aerial combat. Nevertheless, recent developments had led to the use of support equipment like Base Jabbers for airborne battles and airstrikes.

Some units were even designed to fly within the atmosphere on their own. The Asshimar assigned to Zola was one of those. Times were changing.

"I'm going out as well."

"But the Asshimar hasn't arrived yet."

"How long are the repairs going to take?"

"Don't be unreasonable. We've salvaged damaged units from battles."

"Aren't there any deployable units?"

"Over there, the GM II..."

Pointing at a suit, the mechanic mentioned it to Zola, who muttered:

"Me, piloting a GM...?"

"For Karaba, mobile suits are incredibly valuable. Please don't break them."

"I understand."

When Zola exited the hangar in the GM II, the base's defense team of GMIIIs and Nemos were already engaged in combat against enemy forces.

Three Hi-Zacks and as many Marasai were the enemy. For a moment, Zola felt disoriented, as though the combatants were flipped. It looked as though a GM was fighting a Zaku.

"That form was once Zeon's pride," Zola said, aiming at a Hi-Zack's Base Jabber and firing. The enemy took evasive maneuvers and began firing from above.

Walking on two legs in a mobile suit was incredibly cumbersome. Just moving around caused the cockpit to shake intensely, making the ride more uncomfortable than any other vehicle on Earth.

Moreover, quick movements were out of the question. From the perspective of enemies freely flying through the air, mobile suits on the ground were no different than stationary targets.

"They're the same if we can just bring them down to the ground."

Zola kept targeting the Base Jabbers. A friendly Nemo got hit, exploding violently.

It turned into misfortune for the enemy. Hit by the blast, the Base Jabber lost control. Two Base Jabbers plummeted. The pilots of the Hizacks and Marasais on them used their backpack thrusters to land on the ground.

Zola sniped a Marasai as it landed. Another Hi-Zack began a furious assault.

"That appearance... I can't forgive it."

Zola shot and disabled the sensor on the Hizack's head with his rifle.

Although Karaba's base defense team was somewhat on the defensive, Zola's intervention was quickly turning the tide in their favor. They might be able to push through.

Just as he thought that, his sensors detected something. Something approaching at high speed and high altitude.

"A ballistic missile...?"

Zola looked up at the monitor, which displayed the sky.

Staring at the monitor, Gabriel found himself looking up at the sky.

June 0087

Nevada Base, North America

About a month ago, the AEUG launched an assault on Jaburo in South America. The Titans, aware of this plan well in advance, had decided to vacate Jaburo. Many of its functions were transferred to Africa, while some were dispersed to various locations, including North America.

Nevada Base was one such location.

The members of Eliard's Test Team had been ordered to carry out a sortie that also served as a trial operation for the TR-5 Fiver. Murphy was piloting the Fiver while Eliard and Carl boarded the Hazel Custom and Rosette, respectively, which were attached to the Fiver.

In this setup, they were launched from Nevada Base using auxiliary rockets, similar to ballistic missiles. It was a full-on assault. Their target was Karaba's secret base in Kamchatka.

The Fiver's launch preparations were already complete. The three of them were securely strapped into their cockpits.

"We're about to break free from gravity and enter outer space. From there, we'll re-enter and launch a surprise attack on the enemy's facility."

Murphy's voice echoed.

"Understood, we will deploy within the enemy's airspace and provide cover for the squadron leader," Carl's voice chimed in.

"Roger that," Eliard gave a short reply. While Carl had already experienced engaging in combat right after atmospheric reentry during the Dandelion incident, Eliard had yet to go through such an experience.

"Prepare for extreme G-forces when we break from gravity; it's something all the old astronauts had to go through," Murphy advised. "For those of us usually stationed at Confeito, it's a valuable experience. Savor it."

The countdown soon began.

Launch countdowns were never good for the heart, Eliard mused.

The auxiliary rockets fired, and the force pinned them into their seats, momentarily immobilizing them. It felt like their insides were about to be flung outside.

Then, the weight that had been pressing them down vanished. Suddenly, they were in a weightless world. The monitor displayed stars in space. But it was fleeting. Soon, they noticed that the Fiver had begun freefalling.

Wrapped in the heat of atmospheric friction, the temperature of the craft rapidly rose. Violent turbulence rocked them, the craft quaking as they burned. They were trapped in this state.

Human beings have no business riding ballistic missiles, Eliard thought.

Finally, the blackout lifted. A message from Nevada Base came through: "Our first assault team is currently engaged with Karaba's base defense forces in Kamchatka. Capture it immediately."

"Understood," Murphy replied.

Eliard mentally replayed the tactical steps in his mind. Murphy issued a new command.

"Eliard, Carl, we're entering enemy-controlled airspace. Split and flank. And don't underestimate Earth's gravity."

The Hazel Custom and the Rosette detached from the Fiver. Eliard engaged the shield booster and main thrusters to slow down. However, their speed didn't decrease easily. The ground was rapidly getting closer.

The impact upon landing was massive. It was almost a miracle that the Hazel Custom remained intact. Eliard felt as though his body had shattered.

No time to wallow in the shock. Immediate cover for the Fiver was needed. Eliard regained control, and assessed the situation. The combat between the first assault team and Karaba's defense force seemed to be at a standstill. He unleashed his rifle.

The Fiver descended at high speed from the sky, transforming into mobile suit form just before landing, causing a storm of dust with its mighty thrusters.

With a large missile, the Fiver destroyed the base facilities. Amid the rising smoke, it touched down. The tides of battle shifted in their favor, and the enemy began to withdraw.

Earth Federation military vehicles pursued the car that Ryou Kirishima was driving. At least three sets of headlights were visible in the rearview mirror. It was late at night, and the residential neighborhood was desolate. Kirishima gunned the engine, zipping past silent homes, aiming for the highway.

Caught means killed. Or, at the least, brutal interrogation. Torture. That's what the military does.

"This is no joke," Kirishima thought.

He didn't want to become a puppet of the military, but he also didn't want to endure torture. His only option was to shake them off. The highway entrance was now in sight.

Suddenly, his left-side mirror exploded. A glance at the rearview revealed a flash of orange.

Muzzle fire.

The Earth Federation MPs had opened fire.

"You've got to be kidding me..." Kirishima muttered under his breath, shrinking back in his seat. Even though it was a clear overreach to pursue or attempt to capture a civilian, they were now actually firing shots at him. The impact on the mirror meant they weren't firing warning shots. They were shooting to kill.

What in God's name had happened to the Earth Federation? After the end of the Gryps conflict, the media demonized the Titans. And rightfully so; the upper echelons of the Titans had committed atrocious acts. Using tactics like poison gas and a Colony Laser, they terrorized and sought to dominate people. That's why, after the war, the Earth Federation military condemned former Titans personnel.

The Earth Federation's stance had been widely accepted by society, largely due to the overwhelmingly negative image of the Titans.

But now it seemed the Federation were no saints either. As he dodged bullets, swerving left and right, this thought gnawed at him.

He was almost at the highway entrance. Once he got onto the highway, the military wouldn't be able to act as recklessly with witnesses around.

Kirishima's heart was in his mouth, pleading silently to every god that ever was. If he got caught, Joanna would be endangered too. He had no faith that he could withstand torture without spilling secrets. He didn't want to be silenced by death either, so he floored the gas pedal.

Finally, Kirishima's car reached the highway. Despite the late hour, there was a decent amount of traffic. His car, a seemingly old-fashioned station

wagon, had a tuned-up engine and packed a wallop. He had confidence in its power. The roar of the engine was like that of a caged beast suddenly set free.

He kept overtaking other cars one by one. The military vehicles' headlights grew smaller and smaller in his rearview mirror.

Serves them right.

Just when Kirishima allowed himself a smirk, he noticed something odd. An eerie glow surrounded him. It felt as if his car was enveloped in light while everything else was dark.

What the...

He noticed an engine sound entirely different from his own. An explosion-like sound.

Damn, a helicopter... The MPs must have called for backup.

They're not playing. Kirishima checked his seatbelt. If they were pulling out all the stops, evading them wouldn't be easy. So he had to get a little reckless.

The helicopter shined its lights at him menacingly. As he looked through the windshield, he saw its military-grade body with rotors on either side, trying to get ahead. Possibly trying to cut him off.

Panicking and slowing down would allow the MPs' vehicles to catch up from behind. Kirishima never let up on the gas pedal.

The helicopter overtook Kirishima's car and descended, a battle of endurance. He kept his gaze fixed on the road ahead.

He didn't have any room left to think. All he could do was grip the steering wheel tightly. The cars ahead sensed something and made way. Kirishima raced through the gap at high speed.

The helicopter descended lower, its rotors churning the air so violently it almost wrenched the steering wheel from his grip. The car's body trembled violently.

The helicopter's rotors seemed to cover the upper half of his windshield. Suddenly, the helicopter jolted left and right. Just as he realized that, it seemed to lose balance, and one of its rotors dropped.

That rotor collided with the front end of Kirishima's car. It seemed like a minor impact, but the high-speed collision generated an unexpected force.

The car immediately spun around. The scenery outside the window flowed like a panorama. Lights streaked behind him.

He heard himself scream. There was a jarring impact. The roof above the rear seats caved in. Then, another blow from the side stopped the car's spin. For a fleeting moment, he felt weightless.

The car crashed through the guardrail and tumbled off the highway. Kirishima unconsciously unbuckled his seatbelt.

The car skidded down the embankment. Beyond it was a forest. Kirishima tried to open the door, but the twisted frame made it difficult to open.

Turning his body sideways, he kicked the door. On the third attempt, the driver's door finally opened. Kirishima's body was thrown out of the car. He rolled through the grass on the embankment, disoriented.

He eventually crashed into a thicket of bushes, finally stopping.

His beloved car burst into flames. His mind felt numb, unable to process what he was seeing.

Eventually, the flames spread to the forest. The highway above was in a worse state. Above, it was as if daylight had broken. The helicopter had crashed and was engulfed in flames.

I need to get away...

Kirishima finally snapped back to his senses. He tried to get up, but his body refused to cooperate. He crawled through the dense bushes and moved deeper into the woods.

Unable to stand, he continued forward while on all fours.

No way am I getting caught.

Kirishima repeated this phrase in his mind, gasping for breath.

July 0088

Retrospect

"In regard to Eliard's two charges, we can safely say that we've largely contradicted the prosecution's arguments," Conrad said.

They were conversing in the living room as they always did after dinner. Audrey, Carl, Hendrick, and Joanna were all present.

"Meaning..." Conrad continued, "The suspicion of involvement in the Colony 30 Incident and the charges concerning dangerous conduct at the Khartoum base."

Carl spoke up, "The issue lies with the remaining two..."

Conrad nodded, "Right. The prosecution also considers the remaining two as the main charges. Those two are related to the Colony Laser battle. They're doubling down, so I want to learn as much as possible about the circumstances back then."

Audrey, Carl, and Hendrick's expressions darkened suddenly.

Carl said, "It was a hellish battle. A three-way clash between the Titans, AEUG, and Axis. A chaotic fleet battle with friend and foe mixed up. After leaving the Izmir, we got separated, not knowing where anyone was."

Audrey nodded, "He's right. I didn't know where Carl or Eliard were either."

Conrad was surprised and asked Audrey, "You were in combat too, weren't you?"

"Of course. At that time, I wasn't in a mobile suit, though."

"But weren't you all test pilots?"

"As the conflict between the Titans and AEUG escalated, our squad was deployed into combat more frequently. Or rather, they began sending us into battle with new models to gather data recklessly."

"That's right..." Hendrick said in a reflective tone. "Things were fine when the Murphy Team was on the Aswan. But after they got transferred to the Izmir, the Aswan got sucked into the quagmire of war..."

Conrad felt the need to draw out their memories. "During the Colony Laser battle, you guys weren't sure of Eliard's whereabouts, correct?"

Audrey nodded. "No. Had no idea where he was."

"I eventually went to back him up," Carl said. "He said it was his mission but didn't elaborate."

"In that case, you can't testify about Eliard's remaining two charges," Conrad concluded.

Audrey and Carl exchanged looks as if trying to pry open sealed memories—memories probably kept at bay since the war, especially being hunted by the Earth Federation Forces or kept under surveillance.

Carl pondered, "The captain might know something."

"True," Hendrick added. "After the Izmir sank, the Aswan salvaged all Izmir-affiliated units."

Carl nodded, "I was also taken in by the Aswan."

"Eliard and Murphy got there before you. And then Eliard was slated to sortie in a new suit..."

Hendrick was trying to recall something intensely. "Before sortieing, Eliard was called over by Murphy. Murphy was injured."

Conrad thought this might be an important point, "Was there anyone who overheard their conversation?"

Hendrick shook his head, "I don't know. Maybe Captain Pedersen heard it over the ship's monitors, but he's gone now."

"Then Eliard, leaving the frontline in a new model, destroyed the very weapon he piloted..." Conrad muttered as if confirming for himself.

"There's one more who might know the circumstances when the new model was destroyed," Carl revealed. "The enemy who chased Eliard to the end—yeah, his name is Gabriel Zola."

"What in God's name is that?" Gabriel Zola muttered, his gaze glued to the monitor of his GM II.

What he had thought was a ballistic missile suddenly decelerated in the sky, shedding its heat shield, and out popped two mobile suits. One bore a resemblance to a Marasai but was painted in Titans colors. The other was unmistakably a Gundam. And the main body that released them appeared to be a mobile armor.

An enemy that arrived from outer space through a ballistic trajectory, firing and deploying mobile armors and mobile suits mid-flight—it was an unexpected assault that no one could have predicted.

The Karaba forces at the Kamchatka base were stunned by the enemy's unforeseen appearance, a nervous energy permeating the air. Within their ranks were veterans of the One Year War, driven by a lofty ambition to support the AEUG. However, they were still a hastily assembled force. Morale wavered when the tide of battle turned against them.

"Don't panic," Zola radioed to his allies. "Once they land, they'll be subject to the same conditions as us."

Words alone wouldn't suffice. Zola knew he had to lead by example. The surrounding area was cloaked in a thick haze of smoke and dust, thanks to the large missile launched by the enemy mobile armor. The smoke offered cover. Seizing this opportunity, Zola advanced his GM II. To regain lost ground, overwhelming firepower and sheer audacity were essential.

Though his beam rifle and GM II specs were not optimal for firepower, he would have to make do with audacity alone. If he didn't step forward, his retreating allies would be less likely to hold their ground. The incoming enemy's mobile armor transformed into mobile suit form in mid-air.

"What monstrosities had the Titans created?"

Beside it was the Gundam. Zola felt his blood boil at the sight of its head design. A Gundam on the battlefield was more than just another mobile suit. It was a legend, a symbol of victory since the One Year War, and an object of terror and hatred for Zola and his Zeon remnants.

The new model mobile armor was a threat, no doubt. But for Zola, the Gundam was of even greater significance.

While advancing, Zola took a shot at the Titan's Gundam. Eliminating it would surely boost Karaba morale.

Suddenly, a Marasai in Titans colors burst into the half-destroyed base. Hiding in the shadows were retreating Karaba forces in their GM IIs and Nemos.

This Titans-colored Marasai looked slightly different from a standard one.

"It must have some special purpose," Zola intuited.

"You're not going anywhere," Zola aimed his rifle at the Titans-colored Marasai and pulled the trigger. But nothing fired.

"Damn, out of energy..." With no ammunition, Zola was as good as a sitting duck. He saw the Gundam aim its rifle.

To die here, like this... I'd rather die fighting in space. That's the noble death for a Spacenoid.

Just as Zola braced himself for the inevitable, beams and missiles fired from behind him. Now it was the Gundam and the new model that were retreating. Karaba's GM IIs and Nemos had followed Zola's lead and turned the tide.

"Captain Zola, you're out of energy for your rifle, aren't you?" came a voice over the comms.

"Yes, I'm out. And stop calling me Captain."

"Please fall back. We'll take it from here..."

"Thank you," Zola retreated. The clash between Karaba's mobile suits and the Titans had reached another deadlock.

Rifles were available at the base, but it was half-destroyed, and entry looked improbable. If he needed a rifle, he'd have to dig through the rubble.

"Damn it all," Zola screamed into the comms. "Someone, give me a gun."

But it was a cry in vain. Every ally was overwhelmed by fighting the Titans. Their second wave of just three mobile suits, led by superior tech, was overpowering Karaba's suits.

I'll fight them with the rubble if I have to.

Zola gripped a chunk of reinforced concrete with his GM II's manipulator.

That's when a new communication came in.

"Gabriel Zola. I've brought you something better than a rifle."

It was a familiar voice, an ex-Federation pilot who had confronted him in the secret Urup base.

Zola scanned the monitor. Something was descending from high above. He zoomed in.

"Is that—"

"I've kept you waiting. It's your Asshimar. Take it."

"Something new coming in from one o'clock," Carl's voice rang out. "Hey, isn't that an Asshimar? Isn't that on our side...?"

Eliard, too, sensed its arrival. It seemed to land behind enemy lines without directly joining the fight.

"Stay alert," warned Commander Murphy. "It's not sending friendly identification signals."

"What... The enemy is already on the defensive," Carl spoke. He piloted the RX-107. It looked like a Marasai but was modified with the Dandelion's Core Unit, earning it the nickname "Rosette" in the Confeito Area Forces.

Carl's Rosette pushed forward, propelled by its thrust engines. As if to keep it in check, the Asshimar shot into the air in its mobile armor mode.

"If this is to be a dogfight, then we're far from beaten," came Murphy's voice as the Fiver jets—outfitted with thrusters on both sides—blasted hot gas, soaring lightly through the sky.

In mid-air, the Asshimar and Fiver crossed paths; their sonic boom rippled to the Hazel Custom, piloted by Eliard.

On the ground, Eliard had been holding back a GM II and Nemo near the base. He'd thought the Asshimar was engaging in aerial combat with Murphy's Fiver alone. But suddenly, the Asshimar transformed into its mobile suit form.

"What—" Eliard found himself flanked. The Fiver from above attacked Asshimar, who skillfully dodged while targeting the Hazel. A beam grazed Hazel's frame.

Trapped between the GM II and Nemo in the front and the Asshimar in the back, the Hazel had no choice but to use its backpack thrusters. Eliard made a decisive jump. In mid-air, he fired the rifle.

The Asshimar used its leg thrusters to glide across the ground as if skating.

The impact of landing assaulted Eliard.

"Damn this Earth gravity," he muttered, shaking his head and reassessing the battleground. His jump had enabled him to break free from the pincer attack.

"Nice maneuver, Gundam," said a voice on their frequency. It was the Asshimar's pilot.

"I recognize that voice," Murphy replied. "Gabriel Zola, right? Why are remnants of the Principality of Zeon fighting with Karaba?"

"For a just cause. Your voice is also unforgettable. Wes Murphy, isn't it? Are you the one piloting the Gundam?"

"I'm above you."

"The new model, eh? Then who's piloting the Gundam?"

Eliard interjected, "Lieutenant Eliard Hunter. I'm piloting the Hazel."

"Hazel? Is that another name for a Gundam? Very well, Lieutenant Hunter, I'll be the one to bury that Gundam of yours."

What an outdated way to speak, thought Eliard as he unleashed a barrage from his rifle. Murphy's Fiver dove from the sky to join the assault.

"Carl, secure the base quickly," Murphy commanded. "The tide has already turned."

Indeed, as Murphy had said, most of Karaba's mobile suits had been hit, and their rifles were out of energy.

The Asshimar's pilot seemed to have noticed this. Transforming back into its mobile armor mode, it flew off into the eastern sky.

"Do not pursue," Murphy cautioned. "He retreated after assessing the situation. He's a formidable opponent."

Soon after, Karaba's Kamchatka base was secured by Murphy's squadron.

Alarms reverberated through the ship.

Audrey, who was already on standby in the mobile suit deck, promptly vaulted into the cockpit of the Hazel-Rah.

Two Hrududu were equipped on the Hazel-Rah—a pair of thrusters were affixed to the joints of its backpack, and a claw-wing unit designated for weapon control and maintenance was attached to its waist. Thrusters were mounted here as well. This was known as Hazel-Rah's 'Second Form,' a configuration developed through intricate balance calculations, influenced by Audrey's own suggestions.

Last time the Hazel-Rah was deployed, they discovered that the Hrududu caused a vertical torque during acceleration. Although this could be counterbalanced by leg thrusters, the Second Form had improved upon this. Thrusters at the waist enhanced the acceleration while negating the torque.

However, this rendered the Hazel-Rah something barely recognizable as a mobile suit. They had struck a balance between thrust, operational range, and the inherent functionality of a mobile suit.

"A Zanzibar is trailing us on the same orbit," Captain Schrader's voice came through. "It's confirmed as an AEUG ship. They've launched three mobile suits: Nemos. Intercept them."

"Roger," Audrey acknowledged. "Hazel-Rah, moving out."

No need for a catapult. The thrust and propellant capacity of the twin Hrududu were more than sufficient for standard operational time.

As soon as she exited the Izmir, Audrey acquired his targets—three Nemos. She activated the sniping mode on her mono-eye, aimed her dual long-blade rifles. The enemies were not yet in rifle range.

Firing both long-blade rifles, the power was impeccable. One of the Nemos was hit directly.

A ball of fire erupted.

The remaining two Nemos spread out left and right. Thanks to Hazel-Rah's acceleration, the distance between them closed rapidly. They engaged in a dogfight.

Executive Officer Enrique Hammond was on the bridge of the Izmir, his eyes glued to the monitors, trying to get a handle on the situation.

He had a long history with Captain Schrader, both having fought together in mobile suits. He understood Schrader—who was called 'Icicle'—better than anyone else.

Against our one, they have three Nemos, Enrique thought.

It must be a tough battle for Audrey. And it's not just Audrey; Captain Schroeder seemed to be pushing everyone hard, including Murphy's Team. Maybe some resent him for it, but Enrique understood Schrader's intent.

The training was harsh because staying alive as a mobile suit pilot was harsh. That was the kind of man Thomas Schrader was—a man willing to play the villain to keep his subordinates alive.

"Hmm," Captain Schroeder murmured, pulling Enrique out of his thoughts.

"What is it, sir?"

"The way Audrey fights, it feels familiar."

"I thought so, too," Enrique nodded.

"Like the Dendrobium, perhaps?"

"Captain, the Dendrobium is supposed to have been erased from history."

"True. But when you push weapon development in a certain direction, similar constructs are bound to appear. And here we have young ones recreating those battles."

At that moment, Audrey successfully shot down all the enemy units.

Maybe Captain Schrader had even calculated that Audrey would awaken to this style of combat, Enrique thought.

July 0088

Retrospect II

"The enemy?" Conrad echoed, not quite masking his incredulity. "You're saying Gabriel Zola was once part of the AEUG?"

"He was a remnant of the Zeon forces when we first encountered him," Audrey confirmed.

"A Zeon remnant..."

"Yes, operating a lone Zanzibar-class cruiser. Our first engagement with them occurred during an escort mission for a transport vessel near Colony 30."

"So, are we saying..." Conrad selected his words with caution, "That they had prior knowledge of the Titans' intentions at Colony 30?"

"That's unlikely," Carl interjected. "They had no other choice but to fight. After losing the One Year War, and with the Delaz Fleet quelled, they were outcasts even among the remaining Zeon forces that had retreated to the asteroid belt. They survived while receiving sporadic supplies from anti-Earth Federation government movements and Spacenoid sympathizers, barely keeping the Zanzibar operational and piloting mobile suits on the verge of falling apart."

"I've heard there were quite a few such Zeon remnants," Conrad noted. "Most of the Zeon populace settled in the Republic of Zeon, but military men took exile. The Republic was, in essence, under Earth Federation control."

"I first heard Gabriel Zola's name when we clashed with them near Confeito in October of 0085," said April. Carl nodded his agreement.

"Gabriel Zola was obsessed," Carl revealed.

"Obsessed?" Conrad questioned. "With what?"

"With Confeito, or Solomon as they call it. And with Gundams. He engaged the Hazel obsessively."

Conrad understood. Gundams weren't just any mobile suits—they were the stuff of legend, a symbol. If you were a Zeon remnant, it would make sense to be fixated on Solomon, a major battleground during the One Year War, as well as the Gundam, a single unit that had dramatically shifted the course of battles. Conrad, once a mobile suit pilot himself, understood well.

Audrey continued, "Gabriel Zola's Zanzibar eventually joined the AEUG. We've also confirmed he had a brief stint with Karaba."

"I had occasionally heard of Zeon remnants joining the AEUG," Conrad acknowledged. "Given the Titans were gaining a stronghold within the Earth Federation forces, it's understandable they'd oppose them."

"Even afterwards, Gabriel Zola never stopped pursuing the Gundam. Defeating a Titan's Gundam was a matter of pride for a former Zeon soldier."

"The irony is," Carl quipped, "the Gundams that got media attention during the Gryps War were actually from the AEUG, which Zola had joined."

"For Zola, the Gundam had to remain the enemy," Audrey clarified. "That's why he continued to pursue our test team's Hazel, as well as the lost new Gundam model."

"Is it certain that this Gabriel Zola was chasing the phantom Gundam piloted by Eliard during the battle over the Colony Laser?" Conrad queried.

"Without a doubt," Hendrick assured. "I've seen battle monitor data. Eliard left the front lines. There was an enemy unit in pursuit. It was definitely Zola. What happened afterward is known only to Eliard and Zola."

Conrad had spoken with Erhard several times and listened to his accounts. However, he had never heard Gabriel Zola's name from Erhard's lips.

He pondered why. The reasons could only be known by Erhard himself.

Many of the soldiers with AEUG had later joined the Earth Federation Forces after the Gryps Conflict. In fact, the conflict between the Titans and AEUG had also been an internal power struggle within the Earth Federation Forces.

However, it was difficult to imagine that Zeon remnants had joined the Earth Federation Forces afterward. Even Char Aznable had followed a similar path.

Char Aznable, who played a key role in AEUG, disappeared after the Gryps Conflict. Various rumors circulated about him. There were rumors that he had already died or that he had joined Axis and was working to rebuild Zeon.

Similarly, it was unlikely that Gabriel Zola had joined the Earth Federation Forces afterward. The possibility of his death in battle also existed.

"First order of business then," Conrad concluded, locking eyes with Joanna, who nodded in agreement, "is to find out where Gabriel Zola is."

"We'll try every angle," Joanna assured.

"Will we have enough time?" Audrey expressed her apprehension.

"We'll make time," Conrad reassured her with a smile.

"I'll see if anyone I know has heard anything about Zola," said Carl.

"I'll ask around on Luna, too," Hendrick chimed in. "King George's intelligence network might have something."

"Report all information to Joanna," Conrad instructed. Carl and Hendrick nodded in acknowledgment.

"But what then?" Carl inquired. "The trial's already dragging on as it is. What are we going to do until Zola is found?"

"We have a few cards to play."

At that moment, Joanna's cellphone rang.

"Excuse me..."

Joanna exited the living room, likely to converse with someone she doesn't want overheard. She returns shortly, her face tightened.

"That was from Ryou Kirishima," Conrad states.

"Kirishima? Ah, the writer who contributed to Michael Chang's tabloid?"

"Yes. He says he was attacked by the military."

"Attacked?"

"Military MPs, apparently. They suddenly showed up at his residence. He managed to escape, and they even fired shots after him."

Conrad is stunned.

"Shots fired? You can't be serious."

"Furthermore, he was pursued by a military helicopter on the highway, resulting in a collision. The chopper crashed on the freeway, and Kirishima's car also got wrecked."

Conrad flips on the TV, tuning into a 24-hour news channel. After several news items, the helicopter crash on the highway is reported. A military spokesperson expresses regret for causing disruption to traffic.

"That's strangely light coverage for such an incident," Conrad says. "They're under the military's thumb, no question. It looks like Kirishima wasn't lying."

"He said he was very close to being killed."

"They probably intended to get rid of him for good."

"Do you think Commander Jeffrey Portman is behind this?"

"Who knows..." Conrad ponders. "There's no shortage of factions within the military who'd be happy to silence a critical journalist."

"True," Hendrick chimes in. "Being under military surveillance in the moon's lowest levels, it's quite plausible to us."

"Kirishima mentioned that we'll likely be in danger sooner or later."

"Let them try," Conrad realizes he's smiling. "They'd be digging their own graves. Now, time's of the essence. We need to find Gabriel Zola as soon as possible."

"I have concerns," Joanna interjects.

"What is it?"

"The movements of Axis."

Conrad thinks deeply. As Joanna has indicated, the military has already sensed the activities of Axis, who have recently sent an advance team in June to Earth. Their activities are getting noticeably more active.

Joanna continues. "There's intel that Axis has started calling themselves Neo Zeon. They might be gearing up for a serious move toward the revival of Zeon."

"I see... In that case, naturally, the inhabitants of the former Principality will flock to Axis. Which means, Gabriel Zola also..."

"The likelihood is high. If so, finding Zola becomes exponentially more difficult."

"Right. However, there's also the possibility that not everyone in the former Principality of Zeon military holds a favorable view of Haman Khan. But let's not fret over things we can't resolve yet. For now, we focus on finding Gabriel Zola."

Joanna got to work immediately. Carl, Audrey, and Hendrick also begin collecting information, making phone calls and sending emails.

Phone calls and emails carried the risk of being intercepted by the Earth Federation Forces, so everyone was cautious about the content of their communications. Joanna is well-versed in this kind of work, and Carl and the others, under Earth Federation Forces' surveillance, have learned to be equally careful.

Although it was already well past midnight, nobody had any intention of sleeping. Conrad needed to consider his next moves carefully. The prosecution is keen on raising the two primary charges against him as soon as possible. But doing so will be a double-edged sword for them. If they pursued Erhard's

act of desertion during the Colony Laser Conflict, they would inevitably have to reveal the reasons behind it.

And if the reason was the unauthorized destruction of a new weapon, they would have to touch upon what that new weapon was.

The Earth Federation Forces' goal was to erase anything connected to the Titans, which included the Gundam. The prosecution understood this well, so for now, they were being cautious. However, they wouldn't procrastinate forever.

Commodore Milkhov, who acted as the presiding officer similar to a judge in a regular trial, seemed to be rushing the verdict.

It's time, Conrad thought. He needed to buy more time. He was contemplating his strategies.

July 0086

Kamchatka Base

"Do you have the plan down?"

Captain Murphy's voice pierced the air.

"Acknowledged," Carl responded, "We just wait inside the space shuttle, right?"

"Exactly. Stay put, and you'll be back in space before you know it."

Eliard and Carl were in the process of boarding the space shuttle. The Hazel Custom and Rosette, with their atmospheric combat equipment removed, had already been loaded into the shuttle's cargo bay.

The assault on the Kamchatka base had gone well up until this point with the Fiver, Hazel Custom, and Rosette trio. However, the operation had a significant flaw. If they failed to secure the base, they had nowhere to retreat to. Even though the mobile suits had dramatically improved operational time compared to older generations, they weren't designed for standalone deployment.

Being stranded was as tragic as aircraft unable to return to their carriers.

Even after securing the base, they were forced to remain. The launched Fivers couldn't return to their original base on their own.

To bring back the Fiver and its wingmen required extensive transportation means, leaving no option but to dispatch something on the level of a Garuda-class transporter.

Such a move would be costly, and specialized teams would be essential for retrieval. Carl, ever the cynic, dubbed this ballistic missile strategy as the "kamikaze attack." It seemed like the ultimate tactic if one considered a suicide mission.

If one plans not to retrieve, it's inevitably a tactic assuming a kamikaze approach. Upon hearing Carl's joke, Eliard felt uneasy.

Thus, having taken the Kamchatka base, Carl and the rest were stranded there. Moving the mobile suits to the Nevada base would be grossly inefficient.

In the end, Murphy's team was set to return to space from the Kamchatka base. Surprisingly, a hidden facility for launching shuttles was found. Without it, they would've had to call a Garuda-class transport or return to space using a shuttle attached to the Garuda.

"The enemy must know our moves by now," Murphy continued. "A shuttle is entirely vulnerable when launching into space. It's plausible they'll target that."

The Fiver could exit the atmosphere on its own and wasn't aboard the shuttle. Initially, the plan was to load the Fiver onto the shuttle, but

Commander Murphy vehemently objected. He insisted they couldn't launch unarmed.

"It might be Murphy's intuition," Eliard pondered, the intuition of a warrior who'd survived countless battles.

Suddenly, alarms blared.

"What's happening?" Murphy asked the control officer.

"An Asshimar and three Nemos are approaching. Probably a Karaba unit from the Kamchatka base trying to retake it."

As expected. Just as Lieutenant Murphy predicted.

"Commander, I'm going out," Eliard impulsively declared, heading to the cargo bay where Hazel Custom was loaded.

"Hold on," Murphy instructed. "I'll buy time. In the meantime, launch into space."

"But..."

"Protect the vital machinery. Go ahead and wait back at the Izmir."

The moment Commander Murphy sortied, enemy gunfire erupted.

The shuttle launch facility used a rail system, somewhat like a scaled-down mass driver built into a mountainside, to launch shuttles via catapult, leaving the shuttle exposed on the ground, vulnerable to enemy beams at any moment.

The pilots had turned pale. They might be Earth Federation soldiers, but they likely only had experience in transport missions.

The Fiver stood between the enemy and the shuttle. Eliard could see its I-field visibly deflected the enemy beams.

"We can't launch yet?" Carl impatiently asked the pilot.

"Just thirty more seconds, please."

Eliard, trying to keep track of Murphy's moves, was craning his neck to gaze outside.

"What immense power..."

Gabriel Zola watched the enemy's actions, utterly astounded by the mobile weapon the Titans referred to as "Fiver." It was something between a mobile suit and a mobile armor.

It might appear an intermediary weapon, but its thrust was off the charts.

"However," Gabriel Zola murmured, "In dogfights, that power would become a hindrance."

The Asshimar's flight performance within the atmosphere was extremely high, primarily its agility. From his experience, Zola believed agility should be prioritized over power in battle.

He firmly believed they had the upper hand in aerial combat compared to those aboard the Base Jabber, piloted by Nemo and his team. While space battles had their nuances, they were gradually adapting to skirmishes within the earth's atmosphere.

"We will reclaim the Kamchatka base," Zola declared, a steely resolve in his eyes. "We won't let the Titans have their way."

The movements of the Karaba's Nemo unit were not entirely unfavorable. Within Karaba's ranks were seasoned warriors, and rumors whispered that

several members from the famed White Base crew had joined their forces. As this thought simmered, a shuttle catapult ignited in the distance, a harbinger of the battle that lay ahead.

"Think they can just leave?"

Zola maneuvered to block their path with swift determination, firing a few rounds from his rifle as a distraction before transforming his Asshimar into mobile suit mode.

"Damn it, we're outnumbered..." Eliard muttered, assessing the fragmentary view of the battle unfolding before him through the small cockpit window.

"And the Asshimar, it has a smaller turning radius," Carl analyzed, "Being in the atmosphere means we're at the mercy of aerodynamics. Our Fiver, which relies heavily on sheer power, might be at a disadvantage here."

"If it comes to it, I'm going in," Eliard declared, his voice echoing with a tone of finality.

Carl shook his head vehemently, "Leave it to the Commander. He's fighting to get us into space."

"But that's exactly why I have to help..."

"The commander told us to protect these valuable machines at all costs," Carl reminded him, his voice firm and unyielding. "We're a test team. Our priority is the data stored in these machines' computers. Remember that."

Eliard's voice caught in his throat, the weight of Carl's words bearing down on him. Indeed, their mission was paramount, and Murphy was risking his life fighting fiercely on the battlefield. The Asshimar managed to flank the Fiver, zooming towards the shuttle. In a swift movement, it transformed into a mobile suit in mid-air, displaying agility and prowess.

"The catapult's thrust is increasing," the pilot reported urgently, the situation escalating with each passing second. "We'll skip the countdown. We'll launch at the controller's signal."

"Do it right," Carl urged, his voice steady amidst the chaos. "Don't worry about the enemy."

"Hmph, if you thought Fiver's power was this limited, you're sorely mistaken," Murphy retaliated, forcefully ejecting the Fiver unit. Explosives obliterated the outer casing, revealing its true form - the Gaplant Hrairoo.

"This machine was created thanks to the experiments with the Hazel and Shield Booster," Murphy mused to himself, effortlessly piloting the Gaplant Hrairoo with a seasoned grace. "They are sibling units, machines I'm thoroughly acquainted with."

As the Gaplant Hrairoo showcased its agility, the movements of the Nemos atop the Base Jabber lagged in comparison. Murphy struck them down with his beam rifle or sent them crashing to the ground with a body blow. The Asshimar, in its mobile suit form, engaged in a fierce dogfight, and Murphy responded in kind, showcasing his prowess and dominance.

Suddenly, orange flames and white smoke burst forth from the catapult cradling the shuttle, mirroring the flames and smoke billowing from the

shuttle's boosters. The shuttle surged along the steep rails of the catapult, quickly ascending and disappearing into the sky, leaving a trail of white smoke in its wake.

"I'll follow soon with this Hrairoo. Just wait."

The Ashimar swiftly retreated.

Murphy watched its movements on his monitor, murmuring to himself.

Having been ambushed by a military helicopter on the highway, Ryou Kirishima barely made it to the woods to take cover. He suspected they would be on his heels shortly.

If the military's special units come after him, hiding in the forest would be futile. Armed with night vision scopes and infrared sensors, they'd easily track him down. Living near the base and having the military as a source of his journalistic endeavors, Kirishima was all too familiar with such tactics. While the mobile suit units often overshadowed the Earth Federation Ground Forces special forces, they comprised some of the best soldiers.

With fewer localized battles and the shift of the conflict to space, the spotlight fell on space fleets and mobile suits. Yet, at its core, war always came back to the infantry. Kirishima knew this well, which is why he dared not make a move. Hunger gnawed at him, and thirst parched his throat, yet he remained hidden within the hollow of a large tree.

Military vehicles gave chase and opened fire, even deploying a helicopter for support on the highway. It seemed like a major accident had occurred. Fleeing was all Kirishima could manage, with no room to glance back. Still, the highway was alight as if it were day. Clearly, helicopter fuel had ignited.

"I'll stay put till that blaze dies down," Kirishima decided, clutching his knees, pondering his next move.

New Carson was a town dominated by the Nevada base. Almost everyone in the town was affiliated with the base. Many local businesses catered to the base residents, and craftsmen and workers for the base infrastructure formed a major part of the town's populace.

Escaping the military's grasp in New Carson seemed impossible. Perhaps relocating was the solution. Fortunately, he had his wallet and cards. Sparse as its contents were, he could afford a bus or train ticket to another town.

He was hesitant to use his card in this town, fearing military surveillance. The moment he used his credit card, his location might be compromised.

"Perhaps I should move to another town and lay low? Is that my only option?" Kirishima pondered.

It would be all too easy for the military to silence a freelance journalist like him. Soldiers are trained to kill, after all. He'd rather not be on the receiving end. He'd find work elsewhere. The Gryps War had just ended, and there was a shortage of young men for labor. Jobs would be aplenty if he wasn't picky.

Yet, living in constant fear of the military shadow?

This thought made him furious. What right did the Earth Federation Forces have? Are those engaged in war superior beings?

The Gryps War was originally an internal power struggle within the Earth Federation Forces. To ordinary citizens like him, the Titans and AEUG were just two sides of the same coin. The media portrayed the Titans as a gang of villains and the AEUG as a democratic independence movement fighting for Spacenoid rights.

But the reality was different. Even the AEUG had hidden motives tied to major corporations. Kirishima knew this well as a journalist. Indeed, during the Gryps Conflict, certain massive corporations, like those in the arms industry, profited greatly.

War required sacrifices. The Titans were being used as scapegoats, citing the excesses of their leadership as justification for their execution. While it was true that the higher echelons of the Titans were corrupt, not all of the Titans were the same.

They hunted down remnants of Zeon and suppressed movements against the Earth Federation government. Only the negative aspects were emphasized, but originally, they had been an elite force organized for post-One Year War order restoration, starting with the Delaz Conflict. The young officers should have been full of hope and ideals.

After the Gryps Conflict, the Earth Federation Forces' high command labeled the Titans as the bad guys. To maintain order, the scapegoat had to be executed. That was the reasoning of the current Earth Federation Forces.

He couldn't joke about this. Kirishima thought. It was a war, after all. Who was truly the villain? The side that killed the most was the righteous one. Justice was on the side of the victor. That was the essence of war, wasn't it? Then, the Titans fought the right kind of war.

Kirishima couldn't accept the way both the upper echelons of the Titans and the current Earth Federation Forces operated.

"Move to another town? Find a new job and live quietly? Live in fear while tiptoeing around the military?"

Ridiculous.

"No," Kirishima thought, "I didn't write that article to become a defeated dog. I knew the risks."

As time passed and the immediate fear subsided, his anger at the Earth Federation Forces grew. And it soon became clear what he had to do.

He dialed Joanna on his cell. The military might be monitoring, but he didn't care. Pinpointing his cell location would take time, and he intended to move swiftly.

Updating Joanna on his situation was reassuring. Just hearing her voice bolstered his resolve. She too was fighting her own battles. He couldn't back down now. Ending the call, he felt rejuvenated.

Dragging his aching body, Kirishima moved through the woods. It was an artificial one, originally planted around the Nevada base built in the desert. As the city of New Carson developed around it, roads expanded, highways connected, and an extensive afforestation project followed. Emerging from the woods, he saw arid land stretching ahead, with the town and the vast Nevada base looming in the distance.

Kirishima cautiously ventured into downtown. Every fiber of his being ached, and fatigue weighed him down heavily. Hunger gnawed at his insides, and his throat felt parched to extremes.

He entered a fast-food joint and ordered a mineral water. He drained the glass quickly, asking for another. After devouring a hamburger, he finally felt a semblance of humanity return.

Exiting the diner and moving to an alley, he dialed Michael Chang.

"Why do you always call at these ungodly hours?"

Michael Chang's voice betrayed his irritation, a common undertone.

"You're aware of the highway crash?"

"The one with the military chopper? Serves them right."

"It collided with my car."

A pregnant pause followed.

"Have you single-handedly declared war?"

"Something like that. But I can't say much; don't know who might be listening in."

"Don't underestimate the military. You should assume they've been listening to this conversation for a while now."

"I need to meet somewhere we can talk."

"Impossible. I've got the army tailing me, too. Just surveillance for now... but after that public spectacle, it's not surprising."

"Then, print my piece."

"You're asking me to tread even riskier waters?"

"It'll pay."

"Hmm. The papers are indeed selling like hotcakes. New Carson is a base town, and this proves just how fed up everyone in New Carson is with the Earth Federation Forces."

"I'll email the manuscript."

"If they get to me, I won't be able to publish it."

"Just stay alive. I intend to do the same."

"To tell you the truth..."

"What?"

"I've been waiting for your piece. A follow-up story will sell even more papers. Even the military can't censor that."

"I'll send it tonight."

With that, Kirishima hung up.

Ever since the army had knocked on his door, he had intended to document everything. Their modus operandi was akin to a raid in the dead of night. The truth behind the helicopter crash on the highway would be something the public would be eager to read.

He needed to lay low. He still had enough for a night at a cheap hotel. But caution was paramount. The military could be informed immediately by the hotel staff.

Instead, Kirishima headed towards a church in the city center. The church provided meals and temporary shelter for the homeless. That would be his safest bet.

Despite it being the middle of the night, the volunteers at the church were kind to Kirishima. A young man, appearing thin and timid, greeted him.

"We have some soup and bread," he offered.

Kirishima politely declined, stating only a place to sleep was needed. The young man smiled gently, "Right this way."

On the church grounds stood a prefab hut with bunk beds lined up, reminiscent of military barracks. The blankets were certainly military issue. They were probably surplus items from the military.

The young man led him to an available bed. After expressing his gratitude, Kirishima settled on the bottom bunk.

Taking out his cell phone, a smartphone doubling as a palm computer, he began drafting his manuscript. An integrated holographic keyboard projected onto his pillow. He began typing. His fingers moved faster than his thoughts. The fury against the Earth Federation Forces ignited once again. He wasn't writing to please Joanna anymore; he was writing for himself.

One shouldn't waver when pursuing justice. Doubting one's actions is not an option. For the first time, Kirishima felt genuinely allied with Joanna in their shared fight.

Despite his exhaustion, his mind was sharp. Passion coursed through his veins. In about two hours, he finished the manuscript, did a few revisions, and sent it to Michael Chang's mobile.

Neither Michael Chang's office nor home computers could be trusted. With the army as an adversary, even the internet wasn't safe. Although mobile phones weren't entirely secure, personal media felt somewhat more reliable.

Michael Chang was a crafty man. As long as he had his mobile, Kirishima believed he'd find a way. That was his only option.

Once the manuscript was sent, exhaustion consumed Kirishima as he slumped onto the bed. Pain coursed through his body. He whispered to himself, reassuring that this physical pain was nothing compared to the torment of his soul.