

GUNDAM SENTINEL

U.C.0088,the internal struggle within the Earth Federal Force ended with A.E.U.G.victorious,consequently resulting with the transition of leadership for the Federation Military from the TITANS to the A.E.U.G..Individual Titan units aligned themselves with,this change of command and so officially,their organization had disintegrated. Allthrough this change however,the number of Titan soldiers hearing resentment was not small.....

ガンダム・センチネル

A L I C E の 懺 悔

高 橋 昌 也

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This book is a fan translation.

This is a retranslation of the original novel that was released under the “Zeonic-Corps” group name, something that has been needed over the last two decades.

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

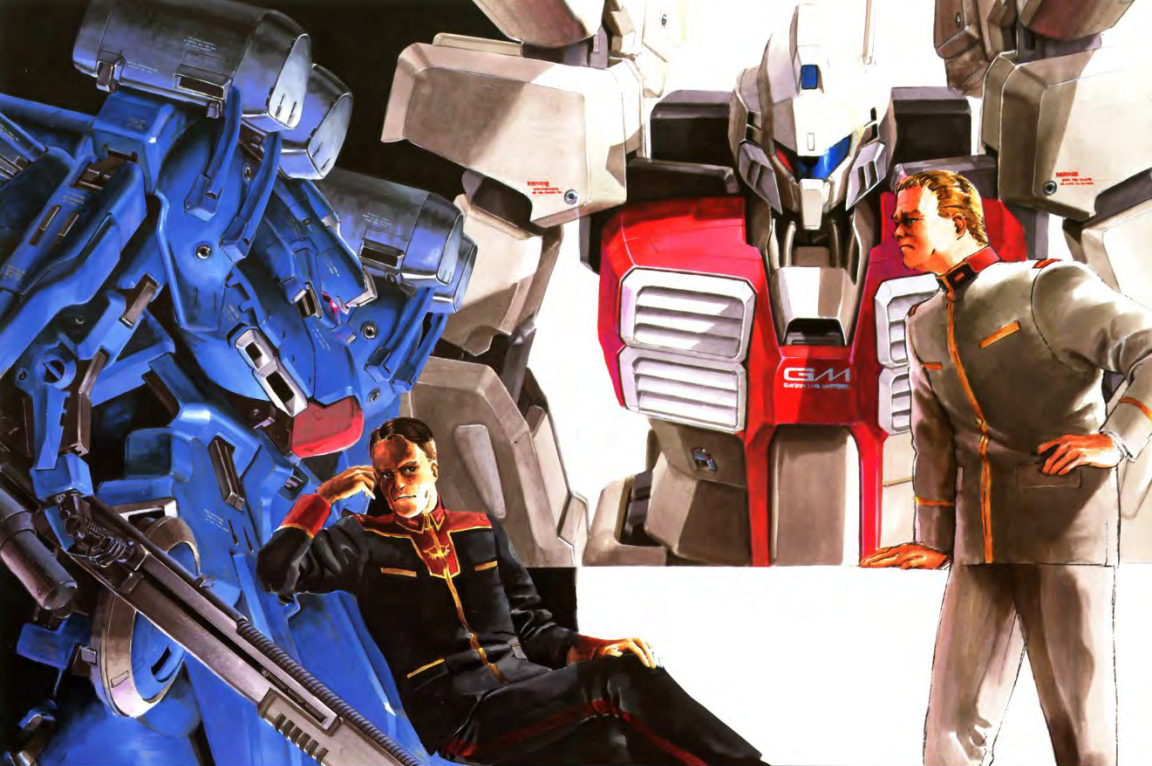
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*“Is the thought of being alone so terrifying?
Does the fear of being ignored gnaw at your
soul?
You're the only one who feels that way,
lost in a prison of your own making,
blind to the care and concern that surrounds
you.”*

PART.1 UPHEAVAL

Prologue The Guys

A half-century has passed since humanity began moving its burgeoning population into the artificial space cities known as space colonies. Here, sentiments in favor of independence from Earth arose, exploited by those who harbored ambitions of conquering the Earth Sphere, and thus ignited a great tragedy. The conflict, known as the One Year War, was the result of dealing with those twisted sentiments. Five years have passed since then.

It is now Universal Century 0085.

The unmistakable scent of fresh grass filled the air, a smell so authentic it couldn't be mistaken for the odorless, synthetic vinyl turf that so many people had come to mistake for the real deal. This verdant patch of earth boasted actual soil beneath its roots, a rich blend of brown and black that lent credence to its authenticity.

This particular patch of land sat nestled in the corner of a military installation, where two men, who appeared to be pilots of Earth Federation Forces' mobile suits, lay on the lush, green carpet. Their figures were silhouetted against the towering form of a GM, a massive humanoid combat machine, in the repair bay.

"Real soil and grass. It's amazing how much recovery has been achieved in just five years," marveled Stole Mannings, his sullen features betraying a hint of awe. Tearing up a tuft of the turf in his right hand, he held it over his companion's face, the expression upon the man's face a mirror of his own melancholy. Then, with an uncharacteristic gesture, he scattered the tuft of grass across the man's form.

"Ngh, Huh...?" The man with the upside-down triangular face brushed the grass off his face with his hand and then dramatically sat up, his rigid upper body moving with a flourish.

"Sorry, Tosh. Didn't mean to wake you," said Mannings, padding Tosh Cray's hip as he spoke. As he did, grass fell from Cray's pilot suit, tousling his brown hair.

"What's the big deal with real soil and grass?" Cray asked, yawning. He looked genuinely annoyed.

"Even if you have the real thing, it's still fake as hell here. This tin can will never be a real planet," he scoffed, gesturing toward the horizon. The horizon formed a gentle curve, a city beyond the artificial clouds forming a distant barrier.

A giant cylindrical structure floating in the cosmic sea, a space colony. It has been almost half a century since humanity began to live in such a place. This was a space island in the region of space known as Side 1.

"Tosh, you're always like that. You're never satisfied unless it's the real thing. Your upcoming transfer is so typical of you," Mannings remarked.

"The unit is for bonafide pilots. I thought you'd volunteer too."

"The Instructor Corps? I'm not qualified to be an instructor," Mannings said, glancing at his right leg.

"Right. I forgot you're still--"

"I can't shake the feeling that it's not my leg. It just doesn't feel right. But maybe one day, even this synthetic leg will become the real deal." he mused, causing Cray's expression to darken slightly.

"Don't worry. Nothing against you."

With synthetic organic components and a mechanical skeleton, his prosthetic leg appeared and functioned like a real human leg, but it wasn't Mannings'. Instead, painful memories of the One Year War seven years ago came flooding back.

"It's thanks to your right leg that I'm still here today. I won't forget that," he said, thinking to himself that his sentiments towards space colonies mirrored those towards Mannings' prosthetic leg. Cray felt guilty for Mannings, but he was convinced that imitations lack a soul and could never truly become the real thing.

"Stole, you plan on staying in the military, right?" Cray asked.

"Yeah, there's no other job for me. If they relegate me to a desk job, then I'll consider retiring. It's only a matter of time. I'm getting too old to be an active mobile suit pilot," he said with a weak smile.

"If you ever change your mind, apply for the Instructor Corps. There's still plenty of work there."

Just then, a shrill chirp chimed from the chest pocket of Cray's pilot suit.

"Damn it, I need to catch the shuttle. I've wasted precious downtime with your somber conversation!" he exclaimed.

He quickly stood up and, with a wry smile, gave Mannings a quick pat on the shoulder.

"See you around..."

He left Mannings alone and headed for the elevator to the spaceport. Their goodbyes were casual, just raising their hands lightly.

Neither of them had ever imagined that they would eventually find themselves on opposite sides or that this would be their final farewell.

Thmp thmp thmp

The electronic and synthetic sounds imitating getting shot up suddenly blared in the cockpit of the Wyvern space fighter, forcing Ryuu Roots' gaze to dart around the cockpit. But there was only the infinite expanse of space, as black as his own eyes.

"You've been shot down, Cadet Roots," came the instructor's voice over a mike garbled by interference. At the same time, the red text of "RETURN TO BASE" flashed across the display in front of him.

"How many times have I told you the cardinal rule of space combat is to *find the enemy first?! I swear you are dumber than dirt!*"

The ass chewing came from the instructor's craft as he came up from Roots' rear and brought himself in line to his right.

"Ah, piss off, Mr. high and mighty," Ryuu muttered the curse under his breath. He could see the instructor's calm demeanor through the canopy, and that made him feel like he was being mocked.

"It's not like I died anyway. This ain't no real freakin' battle, man!"

With a jerk to the Wyvern's control stick, Roots forced his fighter into a climb, rolling to the right to take up a position behind the instructor's own. Despite being outside the Earth's atmosphere, the space fighter's maneuver training was modeled after being in the atmosphere.

"*Pew pew pew pew!*" He mimicked the sound of gunfire like he was shooting the instructor's fighter down.

"You shouldn't let your guard down, Mr. Instructor! What would you do if the enemy had better ballistic resistance and just pretended to be shot down?!"

With his entirely unconvincing rhetoric, Roots rocketed right over the instructor's fighter, nearly clipping it.

"Ya jackass, someone like you is gonna end up—"

But Roots' Wyvern had made a steep dive down for the Earth's ecliptic plane, not even bothering to hear the last of his instructor's curses.

"Ya damn well better believe I'm not gonna let anyone beat me!"

"That's certainly some confidence you have there, Cadet Ryuu Roots."

Following their mock space battle, Roots had been summoned by the base commander. The Commander plopped down in a leather chair and glared up at him from beneath furrowed brows, looking up at him like he was every little bit a violent, small-time thug.

They were at the Federation Forces 3rd Training Base on the moon.

"Look. Every society has rules. That's doubly so for an organization like the military, and those rules are what govern it."

"Yes, sir!" was his reply, but the sixteen-year-old boy from a remote space colony at Side 7 thought that those rules were more often than not the result of the selfish logic of adults, or rather, by Earthnoids.

The Commander tossed a stack of papers onto the oak table, causing them to land with a *thwack* before he continued.

"These are your *distinguished*' achievements' from over the last year. We have six counts of disobeying a superior officer, two incidents involving injury, nine counts of disobeying orders, and as many as fourteen counts of disciplinary infractions. If we weren't so short on men everywhere, I would've discharged your ass long ago. The trouble is, your marks from combat training aren't all that bad, damn near excellent if I'm being honest."

The base commander ran a hand over his thinning gray hair.

"You're... how do I put this? Ah, yes, you're too damn much for one and not enough for two. The military is an organization that is built on teamwork. You'd best remember that."

Teamwork? My ass! What have you Earthnoids ever done for the pioneering Spacenoids? The only ones we can trust are ourselves. My ass is outta here just as soon as I master mobile suit piloting skills.

"Begging your pardon, Commander, but I'm aware of at least one instance where a single pilot and a mobile suit influenced the course of a war. I'm confident I could become that good of a pilot and—"

"What it boils down to is you wanting to become a hero even though you lack the ability," the Commander interrupted him before continuing, "Confidence and a thirst for fame are all well and good, but that alone isn't enough for you to survive a war."

Roots felt a tinge of anger after realizing that he'd been seen through.

"Winning in combat is all that matters. WINNING. To hell with being friendly with Earthnoids! As long as I'm freaking strong, we're golden! Real wars don't even exist nowadays, ya fucking balding bastard!"

The base commander delivered a swift slap to the defiant Roots, his black hair flailing about wildly.

"What the hell?" Roots asked, recovering and bracing himself as the base commander held out a document to him.

"Transfer orders. They may say, 'A little nonsense now and then is relished by the wisest men,' but I hate every last thing about your rotten disposition. At any rate, you've been assigned to a new post. I just wanted to congratulate you."

"Oh?" Roots let out, snatching the letter from the Commander's hand. "Experimental mobile suit squad? What's this?" It was the first he'd heard of it.

"Door. Now." the Commander stated bluntly, pointing toward the door of the command room.

Annoyed that he wasn't assigned to a combat unit, Roots gives a token salute and walks out of the room.

"I wanna go to war! None of this sim crap! What's wrong with wanting to be a hero?!" he ranted and raved.

As he listened to the profane outbursts through the door, the Commander let out a deep sigh.

"Why in God's name was that man selected? I'll be damned if I know how the top brass thinks."

North America, California

Federation Forces 1st Training Base

As Josh Offshore thrust his sword forward, he felt a sure sense of connection. As he sensed, the third light lit up.

"Nicely done," his opponent acknowledged, taking a step back.

Despite the merciless efficiency of guns that fired bullets one after another with the power of gunpowder, Offshore felt a profound allure in swordsmanship. Through the sword, people not only engage in combat, but their personalities collide as well.

This, he thought, was a true contest. In life, some aspects should not be forsaken based solely on efficiency, he thought. It was an indescribable feeling. Offshore was unaware that this was the emotion known as "longing."

"Thank you."

Removing the insect-like white mask and cradling it under his arm, Offshore bowed deeply to his opponent. A bead of sweat trickled down from his forehead.

"You truly are a prodigy. They say heaven doesn't bestow two gifts, but it seems different for you. You're certainly different from us mere mortals. It's the blood of the prestigious Offshore family."

His opponent was a martial arts instructor.

"You've come a long way."

Prodigy, genius, good kid... Offshore had grown up surrounded by such praise from adults since his childhood. His decision to enlist in the Federation Forces was not an act of defiance against that environment. On the contrary, experience in military service was an indispensable "qualification" for entering the political world in the future.

Being a member of the Federation Assembly like his father was just one ornament to ensure smooth progress along the path his father had laid out, leading to the ultimate destination of becoming an assemblyman. For sixteen years since his birth, Offshore had never questioned following that path.

Even when topics like his father, family, and lineage were brought up, as was the case with today's martial arts instructor, he didn't feel resentful. When he was surrounded by adults, such discussions were customary and inevitable. He merely held the notion that "this is how it is." In that sense, his sensitivity had become dulled.

"I'd like to challenge you again," Offshore said to the instructor before heading towards the locker room.

At first glance, the locker room appeared clean, but it was filled with a distinct odor characteristic of youth. Despite the air conditioning, the smell produced by young people could not be eliminated. Inhaling the unpleasant scent created by sweat, dirt, and various secretions, Offshore started changing in front of his locker. A boy from the same group of recruits approached him and, standing next to him, quickly began changing as well.

"Josh, have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"They're going to announce our assignments tomorrow."

"Oh, I know," Offshore replied, slipping his arm through the sleeve of his uniform.

"You're so unphased. I guess it's no big deal when your ideal assignment is pretty much in the bag, thanks to your background."

The boy tightened the belt of his uniform pants and carried on,

"I mean, it's a different story for you, right? Coming from a wealthy family and all. Your dad will take care of everything, right?"

Offshore fixed his hair in the tiny mirror on his locker door, contemplating the boy's candid words. The boy probably came from a space colony, likely a lower social tier. Offshore could empathize with their ambition and drive to move up. However, he thought it wasn't fair to focus that resentment on him or the Offshore family's influence instead of everyone in higher social circles.

Even the wealthy have their own logic. Not understanding that was simply envy.

Realizing that Offshore had suddenly gone silent, the boy asked, "Did I upset you?"

"No, not really." Offshore, who had been raised to genuinely listen to others and never show anger, had no other choice but to answer that way.

"Josh, are you aiming for a desk job at Jaburo? Or maybe--"

"It's the Instructor Corps."

"Really?! The Instructor Corps is not just a training institution for mobile suit combat instructors. It's a full-fledged combat unit! It's the military's pride and joy! You know that, right?"

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Don't you think you should reconsider? I mean, you... Haha, nevermind! What made you change your mind?"

"My mind hasn't changed. There might be a change when I get there. That's all I can say for now."

The following day, Offshore received his orders appointing him to the Instructor Corps.

"Student Representative, Eton Heathrow!"

The dean of students standing next to the podium called his name out loudly.

Heathrow rose from his front-row seat with perfect posture and calmly made his way to the stairs leading to the stage.

All eyes were on the young man, said to be the top student since the establishment of the Federation Forces High-Level Military Academy. Heathrow climbed the stairs, each step filled with determination. More than half of the candidates who enrolled at the same time as him had dropped out of this advanced education course.

Unlike ordinary military academies, the High-Level Military Academy is a school for training senior officers of the Federation Forces. Those who cannot keep up with the demanding educational curriculum are mercilessly weeded out. Naturally, applicants are required to have at least three years of military experience as Federation Forces officers.

Having cleared such a narrow path at the top, Heathrow undoubtedly has a bright future awaiting him in the Federation Forces.

On the stage stood the esteemed headmaster of the military academy, Brian Aeno. Known as the "Vulture Admiral," he demanded unconditional surrender from Side 3, the space colonies that attacked the Earth Federation government

under the name of "Principality of Zeon" during the One Year War. He was known as an ultra-hawkish soldier who advocated for the mobilization of the entire Federation Forces fleet that had been kept in reserve due to the intentions of high-ranking officials within the Federation government and for the thorough destruction of their enemy.

Even without being told, the admiral's distinct features were apparent in his face: sunken eyes, aquiline nose, tightly knit mouth, bushy eyebrows, and deep furrows between them, reminiscent of a bird of prey. His appointment as the academy's headmaster was a thinly veiled demotion, a result of the Federation government's post-war efforts to purge warmongers from active-duty units.

However, Aeno was no warmonger. He had merely made the natural argument as a soldier during wartime. Those who knew him and his former subordinates still hoped for his return to an active-duty unit. The usually stoic man wore a smile today, wrinkles and all.

Heathrow arrived in front of Aeno, turned sharply at a right angle, and offered a crisp salute.

"Congratulations, Commander Heathrow. I never imagined a green ensign like you would come this far."

"That green ensign" referred to when Heathrow first served on a ship as a Federation Forces officer on the battleship *Bull Run*, where Aeno was captain. Undoubtedly, Aeno held special feelings for Heathrow, emphasizing the word "Commander."

"Thank you, Admiral. With this, I can finally have my own ship."

As Heathrow received his diploma from the smiling admiral, he realized for the first time how tense and stoic his face had become. When he attempted to force a smile, his face contorted even further. This, in turn, made the admiral's smile grow even wider. Heathrow felt a touch of awkwardness as he descended the stage, but his heart was already soaring toward a brilliant future.

After all, there should be nothing left to hinder his future success.

The green mobile suit, known as the Hi-Zack, pierced the inky darkness, spewing a bluish-white flame from its thruster nozzles. Two more Hi-Zack trailed closely behind their leader. The Hi-Zack, an evolution of the versatile Zaku mobile suit employed by the Principality of Zeon during the One Year War, had been reimagined for the dawn of a new era.

Although the mobile suit belonged to the Republic of Zeon, the Federation Forces also deployed a small number as simulated enemy "aggressor" units. Bearing a striking resemblance to the Zaku, seeing the Federation's emblem on the Hi-Zack seemed somewhat out of place.

Lieutenant Brave Cod, who was in the cockpit of the lead Hi-Zack, deftly rolled the suit to the right, maneuvering its limbs to home in on a colossal floating rock lost in the vacuum. The limbs moved to enable natural attitude control through active mass transfer. In simpler terms, most mobile suits have a humanoid form because the parts corresponding to the arms and legs serve as convenient "rudders" for controlling the posture of the entire unit by utilizing

the property that a part of the unit moves in the opposite direction due to the reaction force.

The asteroid Pezun was once home to a secret research facility of the Principality of Zeon. However, it was seized by the Earth Federation Forces at the end of the One Year War, and now a small Federation Forces unit was stationed there. Zeon's trailblazing mobile suit technology, considered nothing short of miraculous, was still a focus of study and research by the Federation Forces' technical research units, even five years after the war's end.

"Second Squadron, returning from Combat Space Patrol. Requesting landing instructions."

What combat patrol? With no enemies left to fight, the word "combat" felt empty to Cod. He toggled the laser communication circuit to Scale 1 (short-range mode), requested instructions from the base, and configured the Integrated Maneuver Propulsion Control, or IMPC, to landing mode.

The IMPC was a system that automatically controlled the five basic maneuvers and propulsion for launch, cruise, space combat, landing, and walking. The pilot merely needed to switch between these modes depending on the situation, and the mobile suit would automatically move and adjust its attitude. The Federation Forces had a significant advantage in such control systems thanks to their learning-type computer technology. Inputting the experience data of a skilled pilot was enough for the mobile suit itself to remember and apply it, evolving over time. It was not an exaggeration to call it a "skilled pilot mass-produced system."

However, pilots still had to independently respond to actions not found in the data and correct their movements if they were unsatisfied with the data-driven behavior. As a result, the importance of pilots remained unchanged, but the number of things they "had to do" significantly decreased.

Nevertheless, skilled pilots still needed to supply new data to this system. Those same pilots referred to this system as "Imp," a nod to the system's acronym and the name of a mythical fairy known to corrupt humans. They often regarded it with disdain. Lieutenant Cod was among them.

"Confirmed. Second Squadron, all units. You are cleared for entry from Bay E3."

The Hi-Zack circled around to the eastern side of Pezun, using the ecliptic plane as a reference. Approach towers, akin to lighthouses flanking the port entrance, emitted guide lasers. Naturally, these beams were indiscernible to the naked eye. With precision, the mobile suit adhered to this unseen approach vector, automatically adjusting its attitude as it commenced its entry into the port.

IMPC IMPC IMPC IMPC IMPC IMPC IM

-- ROLLING 000 degrees

-- YAWING 000 degrees

-- PITCHING 000 degrees

IMPC IMPC IMPC IMPC IMPC IMPC IM

The indicators on the display before him whirled in rapid succession before finally settling on zero. The once-red circles on the side transformed into a vibrant green. As the reverse thrusters emitted a soft hiss, the mobile suit's speed gradually diminished to a standstill while nearing the port. Slowly raising both hands in a seated-like posture, the mobile suit grasped the braking cables stretched overhead at the entrance of the port, pulling itself in while killing its speed, and the landing was completed.

As if on cue, maintenance crew scurried over, and the cooling process for the mobile suit began immediately. Cod hardly had to do anything. Glancing back, he saw the braking cable retracting. The second unit was already entering the landing approach phase.

"Faster with the cooling! The others are waiting!" Cod growled impatiently into the microphone of his normal suit helmet. Naturally, it was set to a general frequency for conversation within the base.

The cooling process was as slow as ever, he thought. However, cooling the mobile suit was a crucial issue. In due course, the cockpit panel's indicator lights flickered to life, signaling that it was safe to open the hatch. With a hiss of compressed air, the Hi-Zack's chest hatch swung open, and the external noise vanished. The cockpit was pressurized, and the helmet had a mechanism to pick up external sounds, but the spaceport was open to vacuum.

Cod leaned out of the cockpit and kicked the edge of the hatch to jump out, floating in midair as he drifted toward the catwalk on the second-floor wall. On his way, he caught sight of an unfamiliar mobile suit in the maintenance area of the technical research facility on the other side. When he reached the catwalk, Cod roughly grabbed one of the maintenance crew members, pressing his helmet against theirs to ask about the mobile suit.

"Hey, what's that mobile suit over there? Is it one of those things that the technical division made from Zeon's designs again?"

"It seems to be partly based on those, but it's apparently a new model that integrates our own technology," the maintenance worker replied, a hint of apprehension in their voice.

"From Anaheim?"

Anaheim referred to Anaheim Electronics, a company that emerged during the One Year War when Zeonic, the primary mobile suit manufacturer for the Zeon forces, was incorporated into the Federation. It had since become the largest mobile suit manufacturer. Typically, after the technical research facility had assessed the old Zeon mobile suit research data obtained at Pezun, it was forwarded to Anaheim Electronics.

"No, I heard that the tech guys here made it. They said it's based on a plan for Zeon's next-generation mainstay mobile suit that the technical research facility modified. They're calling it the X-series..."

"X-series?"

"Yeah..."

Unbeknownst to Cod, the new mobile suit was christened XEQU-1. As a pilot, Cod was naturally drawn to any new mobile suit he encountered, an

inclination similar to that of a young automobile enthusiast eager to try out a new car or motorcycle upon sighting one.

Cod roughly let go of the maintenance worker and headed for the airlock. After completing the pressurization sequence and entering the living quarters, he removed his helmet. Grasping a handle in the corridor, he headed towards the briefing room. A tall man soon appeared from the opposite end of the corridor, whom Cod recognized as Captain Burt, the base commander at Pezun. Cod offered a brief salute and tried to proceed, but the Captain unexpectedly halted him.

"Lieutenant Brave Cod, I have your transfer orders."

Captain Burt handed him a document. It contained the order to transfer him to a newly established unit, the Earth Federation Forces Instructor Corps.

"The newly established training unit will be stationed at Pezun as their base."

"Still stuck in space, huh?" thought Cod, clicking his tongue in frustration.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant Cod. I'll be returning to Earth before you. After five years, I can finally reunite with my wife and children. The new base commander should arrive sometime this week," said the captain, who was originally assigned as the research and development unit commander.

"So, does that mean the investigation of Zeon's mobile suit technology is complete? Congratulations. But, what a bummer. I'll be stuck here for who knows how many more years in this desolate place with nothing around. I doubt I'll ever have a family like you, Captain."

Though Pezun had recreational facilities, it paled in comparison to the cities on Earth, the moon, or the colonies. There was a glaring absence of women. During the war, the Women's Reserve (WAVES) had been utilized, but their numbers had significantly dwindled, with not even female desk workers assigned to frontier garrisons or combat units.

Women were expected to bear and raise children—a fundamental truth for humanity, especially in a post-war society that had lost so many lives. This reality remained unaltered, even now.

"Haha, don't be like that. We've left a little something for the Instructor Corps. A new mobile suit, the--"

"The X-series, is it?"

"You're well-informed."

Cod thought, if they're giving me a new toy, maybe I can endure this a bit longer. It'll be a brief hardship. Just a little while longer... really.

"Dr. Carroll, the selection of the 'Cheshire Cat' has been successfully completed with the cooperation of all parties involved," said the middle-aged technician to his older colleague as they walked side by side. The two men hurried towards the hangar area where various mobile suits were lined up, their half-mirrored sunglasses gleaming in the harsh Nevada sunlight.

"Who would've thought Mizu Roots' son would be among the chosen? Perhaps fate is at play with ALICE," mused the older technician known as Carroll.

His thoughts drifted to the female technician who died in an explosion accident. She had given her life protecting the "system" as if it were her own child in the blast, the cause of which was still unknown. In a sense, the "system" was her child, brought all the way from a remote space colony to Earth for research, and it wasn't an exaggeration to say that it was an extension of her. The "system" occupied an indispensable position in the Federation Forces' new force enhancement plan. She had devoted herself to the "system's" education, even at the expense of her family life.

The "system" in question was a machine with the ability to think independently. After losing numerous human resources in the One Year War, the Federation Forces planned to introduce a system built on the IMPC system to fill the gap left by lost pilots. The advanced logic and non-logic recognizing device called ALICE (Advanced Logistic & Inconsequence Cognizing Equipment) enabled the full automation of mobile suits. By connecting this device to a "core" of standard learning computers, it could perform all combat and mobility tasks autonomously. This would allow for the formation of unmanned mobile suit units, leading to a reduction in personnel.

In order to adapt ALICE to human logic, someone needed to teach her first. That was her role in providing basic education, which was similar to educating a naive child. Human children, too, rely heavily on their mothers for early education. Fathers become truly essential when children reach adolescence. Consequently, a woman was necessary. ALICE was trained as an artificial intelligence for combat. Once she completed her basic education, ALICE was, in human terms, entering adolescence. Yes, ALICE required a father figure, but not just any father. He had to serve as ALICE's lover, brother, and younger sibling and an irrational entity that couldn't be judged by common sense. In other words, he needed to be a dangerous man, far from the stereotypical male.

In simpler terms, ALICE needed to become a "fine woman" capable of understanding a man's whims and offering advice accordingly. Otherwise, she would either become a promiscuous woman who obeys everything the man says or a self-centered woman who insists only on her own opinions. The irrational man who would bring "adolescence" to ALICE was given the code name "Cheshire Cat" after a fictional character that appeared in a certain fantasy novel, known for disappearing with a sly grin.

Young girls often don't end up with their first loves. ALICE was destined from the start to "marry" the data of expert pilots. Having been nurtured as a "fine woman," she was meant to be fed combat experience data from skilled pilots and eventually transforming into a Valkyrie (the goddesses of battle in Norse mythology, said to guide the souls of warriors to Valhalla). However, when ALICE reached completion and unmanned weaponry was introduced, massive personnel reductions took place, creating a highly unfavorable situation for high-ranking government and military officials with private armies.

ALICE had loyalty to the Federation government but not to individuals. As a result of these personnel reductions, those who relied on the military as the foundation of their political power risked losing everything at once. Various acts of sabotage had been perpetrated against this plan from the beginning.



Although the explosion incident was believed to have been orchestrated by them, it was treated as an unknown cause due to insufficient evidence. After all, they skillfully used their political power to prevent being caught.

Now, these irrational men had been selected through a mental test conducted throughout the entire Federation Forces and assembled here. The group that gathered in front of the hangar looked like nothing more than a bunch of hooligans to Carroll. There were twelve of them.

Despite the presence of a drill sergeant, a fight had already broken out at the end of the line.

"Are you two cocksuckers done?"

The drill sergeant stepped between the two brawling young men and punched them both.

"What're your names?!"

As he wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth with the back of his right hand, the black-haired young man replied in a defiant tone, "Ryuu Roots."

"Shin Crypt," said the other.

"Hmph, listen up. This place is different from the units and training camps you were in before. This is a mental hospital and a correctional facility. Some of you sad sacks might have thought that the "Experimental MS Squad" was a practical evaluation unit for new mobile suits, but let me clarify: MS doesn't stand for Mobile Suit. It stands for Mad Sanatorium. The military has no intention of wasting resources on the likes of you, so you better work to earn your keep. Consider yourselves guinea pigs for human experimentation..."

Seeing this scene, Carroll was truly disappointed. Could they really entrust her to this group of unsavory miscreants? He couldn't believe that the son of Mizu Roots was such a person. Was it because he had no mother when he was young? Carroll had heard that his father had died in the One Year War. It couldn't be ruled out that he had grown up hating the Federation that had taken everything from him. After all, to him, the Federation was the enemy that took everything away.

The sergeant continued, "Roots, Crypt! You've disrupted the discipline. Soldiers must maintain discipline. If a superior officer says die, you die. If they say fly, you fly. So, you boys get to spend three days in the brig!"

The pair struggled and tried to escape but were eventually subdued by the military police, summoned by the sergeant, and taken away. Of course, they didn't forget to shower the sergeant with insults.

"The rest of you worthless smegma heads, get back to your cells like good sheeple. In an hour, I'll hold a mission briefing even idiots like you can understand. Dismissed!"

ALICE's future seemed fraught with difficulties.

Two years have passed since then.

Chapter.01

Revolt at Pezun

Universal Century 0083. Commodore Jamitov Hymen of the Earth Federation Forces established the security force known as the Titans to hunt down the increasingly active remnants from the former Principality of Zeon. These forces gradually became the embodiment of the "elite" under a pennant of Earth supremacy as their actions pivoted from hunting remnants to suppressing Spacenoids, all under the guise of such a hunt. Their campaign of oppression culminated in the so-called "Colony 30 Incident" in July U.C. 0085. Under the pretext of quelling an armed uprising against the Earth Federation government by Spacenoids opposed to such oppressive actions, an active duty unit of Titans injected poison gas into Colony 30, one of the space colonies at Side 2, slaughtering its inhabitants.

In reality, an organization against the Earth Federation's political measures of oppression known as the AEUG had formed around this time, taking the first steps towards resistance across the Earth Sphere. Nonetheless, many Federation officers and men believed that the Titans' advocacy for Earth supremacy was a just cause.

It is now Universal Century 0087.

The cosmos is once again engulfed in the flames of war.

The Earth Federation Forces Instructor Corps.

These forces are a unit that researches and develops combat techniques for mobile suit combat. Results from their combat research are, in turn, coded and loaded into the Integrated Maneuver Propulsion Control (IMPC) system of all Federation Forces mobile suits, constantly updating their combat capabilities. For this reason, members selected were those with exceptionally superior mobile suit combat skills, which was necessitated to be qualified over those of regular mobile suit instructors.

The Gryps War, which intensified into a confrontation between the Titans and the AEUG, was, so to speak, a war between the Earth Federation's own, one involving all of the Forces units. The Instructor Corps was no exception to this. Members of the Instructor Corps were the "elite" of the Federation Forces in a different sense from the Titans, so it was easy to conform to the principle of Earth supremacy, the pennant the Titans publicly advocated.

With the moon to their backs, two blue mobile suits now made their way back to Pezun after completing their combat space patrol.

"Lieutenant Cray. Is it true what they're saying about that incident? Rumors have been making their rounds on base, and some of the boys are pretty upset about it."

Ensign Offshore, the baby-faced pilot of one of the blue mobile suits following--an RMS-141 Xeku-Eins--opens a mid-range laser comms channel as

he maintains an eye on their rear. He questioned the validity of the "unfounded rumors" propagating through all the units that followed the Titans.

"According to word from the envoy the other day, there's probably some truth that His Excellency Jamitov has been lost. AEUG assassins may have even taken him out. And that's why Brave, Drake, and all of us made the decision. Our Federation Forces, and by extension, Mother Earth, cannot be at the mercy of the Spacenoids. Wouldn't you agree?"

It was roughly two months ago. At the Earth Federation Assembly in Dakar, Africa, Casval Deikun suddenly appeared and issued the Dakar Declaration, denouncing the atrocities of the Titans to the entire world. As a result, this declaration was the first step that would later jeopardize the political position of the Titans, legitimizing the AEUG to take action against them, forcing them to wage an armed struggle against the AEUG with only their own forces and no support from the Earth Federation Forces.

During the One Year War, the asteroid known as A Baoa Qu by the Principality of Zeon and used as a space fortress was refortified and christened the Gate of Zedan by the Titans during this conflict. Until just recently, Titans Supreme Commander Jamitov died under mysterious circumstances in the battle over this fortress, but this fact was kept under wraps. Despite that, rumors about this incident quickly started making their way to all the officers and men of the Titans and all the units under their control. This was the "rumor" that Offshore asked Cray about.

Following the loss of their Supreme Commander, the Titans seemed to be on the brink of collapse, though in reality this was not the case. While the Titans were ultimately Jamitov's private army, their banner of "Earth Supremacy" still had the support of many soldiers. Therefore, when the Earth Federation government issued an order for the Instructor Corps stationed at Pezun to return back under the Federation Forces, the discussion among the soldiers was divided over whether to return and watch the struggle between the two sides or to act as Titans. For Earth supremacists, the Earth Federation government's attitude of standing by in the fight against the Titans was seen as pro-AEUG, which meant pro-Spacenoid. Cray's calling the AEUG "aliens" stemmed from this misunderstanding, and this misunderstanding would later lead to a great tragedy.

January 25. Universal Century 0088.

Dissatisfied with the top-level decision of the Instructors Corps submission to the Earth Federation government, a group of young Earth supremacist officers staged an armed uprising, took control of Pezun, and called for total resistance against the Earth Federation government and the AEUG. This event took place a week after the battle at the "Gate of Zedan" and just three days prior to the current events.

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ALARM ALARM ALARM

"Damn it!"

Ryuu Roots slammed his fist against the simulator's panel.

"Today marks the seventh time you've been reported dead in battle, Spaceman Roots."

The cold voice of the training sergeant echoed inside the simulator through the microphone.

"Shut up! You God damn sadist!"

In the Nevada-based Earth Federation Forces Nellis Base, intense day and night training was taking place for the experimental mobile suit unit, striving to develop new and practical mobile suits. Although these new mobile suits were rumored to carry the "Gundam" title, their true nature remained a secret even to the unit members. Due to their practical evaluation tests being carried out exclusively through simulators and the alternative Zeta Plus B-type mobile suit, there were whispers among the team that "such mobile suits don't really exist." Roots unlocked the simulator door, kicked it open, and took a deep breath.

"Hey, bossman. Heard you bit it in combat again, huh?"

Crypt, with a helmet hanging from his shoulder, grinned as he slapped Roots on the back and slipped into the simulator for his turn.

"Asshole... thinks he's so damn cute," grumbled Roots, as he kicked the door of the simulator Crypt entered and left the training room.

At the same time, a crucial decision was being made in the base's conference room.

"I can't believe ALICE chose him," Carroll sighed deeply, facing the twelve personnel files.

"It might be fate after all. Ryuu Roots is..."

The man in the Earth Federation Forces officer's uniform continued, peering out the window through a gap in the blinds.

"What about the backup personnel?"

"Shin Crypt. However, he's the main operating member for different equipment," replied the young experimental unit commander with a background in technology.

"The experimental ZZ, huh? No offense, but on paper, it's not much more than a decoy."

"Harsh, aren't you, Mannings? But this operation isn't primarily about combat. It's a demonstration. A decoy is fine. It's to intimidate that lot on Pezun..."

"This is war! Demonstrations never end just like that. If our adversaries would be easily subdued by deploying a fleet of Gundam-type mobile suits and a mothership, then fine. But I'm talking about people, not equipment. The enemy has a team of elite instructors, and we have a ragtag group with rookies. Exposing the bluff could backfire!" Mannings turned away from the window and raised his voice in reply.

"With the current uncertainty around Axis, or rather, the Neo Zeon, we have no choice but to use decoys or anything else at our disposal. In fact, the S

Gundam, a model whose official adoption was halted, still has soldiers training for its operation. We can't let them sit idle."

"So, we're talking about the military's budget issues. Fine. But these guys can hardly be called 'soldiers.'"

"Can't you compensate for the lack of personnel quality with equipment? Isn't it your mission to improve the quality of your personnel? It should be an easy task for you. There's no need to be so serious. Any further objections will be considered insubordination."

"As you say, but..."

"The operation begins in one month. No more objections."

Mannings bit his lip. It was always like this. A superior's orders were absolute. However, he couldn't shake the feeling that this operation wouldn't end as a simple demonstration. On the other side was Tosh Cray. One way or another, everything would begin on February 25th, one month from now.

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In front of Crypt, the warning lights lit up all at once, and ominous text scrolled across the monitor display.

Terrifying. Utterly terrifying. Whenever Cray saw the raw images of space projected onto the cockpit of his mobile suit, he couldn't help but feel this way, and he was ashamed of it. Then, without meaning to, his feelings spilled into words.

"Offshore, do you like space?"

"Uh, well, its existence, I suppose... I think of space as a place that embodies the state of 'nothingness' in a serious duel. Amidst this vast 'nothingness,' there are places like Earth and colonies where 'life' breathes. When I'm drifting in the 'nothingness' of space, I feel like I can directly sense that 'life' and re-appreciate the importance of it."

Offshore stammered in response to the sudden question from his superior officer.

"Huh, 'nothingness,' you say? That's an awfully old-fashioned notion. Do you like space or not?"

"I said I appreciate its existence, Lieutenant Cray."

"Then what is it?"

"I think there's no place as unnatural as space for humans to live. I believe that humans are meant to stand on solid ground with two legs."

"Indeed. By your logic, the extraterrestrial beings who do not stand on the ground are not human. We, who have made enemies of these beings for the sake of Earth's future, are at least human. When we die, we want to do so on the very ground of our mother Earth."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

Cray would never admit that his logic was mere sophistry against his own incomprehensible fear of the unknown—the universe.

The two blue mobile suits captured the guide lasers from Pezun, and as they entered the approach course, they began to decelerate using intermittent bursts from their vernier rockets and AMBAC.

As they entered the forest of seemingly irregularly protruding mooring angles from Pezun, two other blue Xeku-Eins, which were heading out for their combat space patrol shifts, brushed past Lieutenant Cray's suit with a faint trail of white light.

Ever since they had taken control of Pezun, the patrols had been strengthened to guard against the approach of AEUG and Earth Federation fleets. Not only that but various defense mechanisms were being steadily prepared around Pezun.

"CSP First Team, prepare for return."

The laser communication from Pezun rang in Cray's normal suit helmet speaker.

"We'll leave the deceleration timing to you. We've set the IMPC autopilot."

"Understood. We'll guide you from here."

The Xeku-Eins slowly began their entrance into Pezun's port, grabbing the ceiling brake grips and sliding to a stop about thirty meters in.

With no time to waste, Cray headed straight for the Pezun base commander's office. Brave Cod was waiting for him there.

"Good work. Now, take a look at this."

Cod pointed to the monitor on his desk.

The high-res video seemed to be a hidden recording of someone. It showed an officer operating a computer terminal. Cray immediately understood the significance.

"He's one of the technical officers scheduled for return to Earth. Right now, he's desperately trying to download our latest combat data."

"Caught a rat, huh? Pitiful. Those who rely on machines for combat must really need our combat data."

"Don't act like it's someone else's business. Weren't you the one who came up with this plan?"

"Heh, by the way, Brave. When is the scheduled transfer of the ones we rounded up back to Earth?"

"At 1600 Earth Standard Time today. We've only managed to load just over a hundred onto the transport ship so far."

"Busy times ahead. What about the statement?"

"I released it under the name New Desides. A declaration of relentless resistance."

"Shouldn't it be 'Decision' if it means a new determination?"

"It's a neologism. 'Dis-side' also implies opposition, you see."

"I see. Well, you're the leader."



February 22, Universal Century 0088.

The AEUG's Operation Maelstrom, followed by the Colony Laser defense battle, resulted in the Titans' defeat, ending the first phase of the Gryps War.

However, the Earth Federation government still faced a significant threat in the form of Axis and the Neo Zeon, even though their forces had been somewhat depleted. Although an early war was unlikely, unifying the intentions within the Earth Federation Forces, which still had remnants of AEUG and Titans, was the top priority.

If the Federation Forces were attacked by Axis during a period of internal chaos, they would be helpless, regardless of their superior strength. The most significant obstacle in this regard was the existence of Titans remnants and the lunar autonomous city sympathetic to the Titans. To be precise, they were Earth supremacists who misunderstood the Earth Federation government's attitude towards the AEUG.

Among them, the group that staged a rebellion and holed up in the asteroid Pezun, with an elite Instructor Corps as its core and equipped with production facilities and a certain level of military power, was considered the most dangerous, and plans for their early elimination were made. This decision was made within the Federation Forces at the same time as the execution of Operation Maelstrom.

The Earth Federation Forces had to quickly organize a taskforce to suppress the rebels, now calling themselves the New Desides. However, they could not afford to allocate a large force in anticipation of the battle against Axis. Therefore, the Federation Forces' High Command had no choice but to organize the Task Force as a small elite unit.

The newly built *Argama*-class assault space cruiser *Pegasus III* was assigned as the flagship of the mobile fleet for this mission, and four available modified *Salamis*-class space cruisers were also organized into a vanguard fleet.

This vanguard fleet was called Task Force Alpha and was under the command of the Earth's Home Fleet, which was on standby at the low-orbit station for the cleanup in the aftermath of the colony laser defense battle.

Depending on the progress of Task Force Alpha's operations, the home fleet might join the suppression operation.

Task Force Alpha appeared to be an elite unit from the outside. However, in reality, it was a paper tiger made up of an inexperienced ship commanded by a newly appointed captain and a collection of mobile suits deemed unsuitable for adoption.

At the Earth Federation Forces Baikonur launch base in the Russian region, on February 25th, under a sky dyed red by the setting sun, five spaceships, including the *Pegasus III*, were waiting for launch time with enormous booster rockets attached.

Each spaceship was also equipped with a huge conical fairing, making them appear like five pyramids.

Eventually, the sky changed from red to blue, then to pitch black, and the countdown was transmitted from the launch control center. The emotionless voice monotonously counted down the numbers.

COUNTDOWN COUNTDOWN COUNTDOWN

...60 59 58 57 56 55 54 53...

COUNTDOWN COUNTDOWN COUNTDOWN

On the bridge of *Pegasus III*, newly appointed captain Commander Eaton Heathrow stared blankly at the rapidly changing digital counter on the LCD display. His body was already secured to a seat that had become like a bed.

The rest of the bridge crew was in a similar position. There was little to do during the launch, as most of it was automated. The majority of the crew would join at the low-orbit station. The five pyramids began to prepare for the moment of launch, releasing billows of white steam.

COUNTDOWN COUNTDOWN COUNTDOWN

...10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01...

COUNTDOWN COUNTDOWN COUNTDOWN

As the metallic voice announced the countdown reaching zero, the LCD display in front of Heathrow flashed to zero. For a moment, the world was dominated by dazzling light and earth-shattering noise.

The five conical pyramids slowly and heavily defied gravity, gradually increasing their force. The massive group of pyramids reached Earth's satellite orbit. Eventually, the booster rockets detached, and the conical fairings were discarded, revealing the original forms of the *Pegasus III* and the modified *Salamis*-class cruisers, their pale gray hulls against the dark blue of outer space, illuminated by Earth's light.

Unaware of the difficult mission awaiting them, the "paper tiger" fleet took their first step into the vast sea of space.

Chapter.02

Skirmish

In a sector near the vicinity of the asteroid Pezun.

A blazing red light, sprawling across the monitor screen, was the last spectacle that greeted the pilot of the GM III.

Far in its wake, a single mobile suit bearing an enormous electronic equipment container lurked unnoticed. Motionless, it seemed like a derelict, devoid of a pilot, but this mobile suit known as an EWAC Nero was all ears to the various pulses of the cosmos, meticulously probing its surroundings with unseen hands in the gaps of silence.

The EWAC Nero's electronic warfare officer, scrunched in a dark, cramped cockpit, impassively stared at his tactical control display. Light from the display painted his helmet visor a spectral rainbow.

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From the display, one by one, the green luminescent dots indicating friendly units began to fade away. Now, the last friendly dot vanished, leaving only two red luminescent dots marking enemy units.

"Wiped out, then... Not even five minutes..." muttered a voice.

"Time to make our exit?" the pilot questioned, his words barely above a whisper.

Like a giant's corpse, the thrusters at the back of the EWAC Nero began to glow a pale, firefly-like blue.

"Shit, they've noticed us!"

The two red dots on the display accelerated, heading directly toward their own suits. The EWAC Nero's pilot, following standard evasion protocol, spun the craft using AMBAC and initiated escape maneuvers.

From behind, a barrage of red beams came rushing in, their numbers increasing with each passing moment.

"This is bad..." The pilot murmured as the electronic warfare officer's gaze picked a command from an array of options on the display. The EWAC Nero's

databank released a torrent of tactical data, translated from the evolved Ada F programming language, itself derived from Ada.

"The data has been transferred to the pods!"

"Okay, here we go!"

The pilot thumped a switch on the right side of his console. Four data pods separated from the center of the EWAC Nero's backpack, disappearing into the void with a soft hiss of air escaping. In that instant, two streaks of red light pierced from the Nero's back to its belly, transforming into a pale blue explosion.

The two mobile suits responsible for the red streaks, existing only as sources of pink light from their mono-eyes, were briefly illuminated by the explosion, revealing their dull blue bodies against the black velvet backdrop of space.

"An electronic reconnaissance unit, new model, I presume. They've probably launched their data pods," stated Cray of the Xeku-Eins to his wingman Offshore, as they flew in tandem.

"Poor guys in the GM, thrown into combat ahead of us. Used as bait for aggressive reconnaissance, I guess," Offshore remarked.

"In the name of efficiency, individual lives are disregarded. This is war. Remember it well," Cray lectured.

With no real combat experience, Offshore could only nod in agreement to his superior's words. The fact that the beams he'd launched had taken human lives had yet to sink in - it felt strangely unreal. The difference between a sporting match and the reality of war was something he hadn't yet learned to distinguish.

In low Earth orbit, the floating dock and communication station known as "Penta" hung in space. It was affectionately named for its pentagonal shape. Five cylindrical structures radiated outward from its cylindrical central core, each attached to a two-kilometer-long spacecraft mooring boom that served as a pier. The station was typically home to the main fleet of the Earth Federation.

The five vessels of the Task Force Alpha rested at the end of these mooring booms, undergoing their final preparations. The majority of the Taskforce's crew, as well as equipment such as mobile suits, were due to be loaded here.

Ryuu Roots was quite taken aback when suddenly assigned to a combat unit. The training sergeant had told them that their experimental mobile suit squad served as excellent guinea pigs for gathering data on the safety and maneuverability of the new mobile suits, all for the pilots of the combat units.

However, the base commander had told him that he would be the pilot of the new advanced mobile suit. The question of "Why was I chosen?" crossed his mind, but his characteristic overconfidence quickly swept it away. Assignment to a combat unit resulted in Roots gaining the rank of ensign.

Although he was promoted to the rank of Petty Officer Second Class, one must be an officer to become a mobile suit pilot. Therefore, he would be treated as an officer. To be precise, he was a Petty Officer acting as an Ensign, but there was no practical difference. This system is known as battlefield commissioning.

Upon arriving at Penta from Earth via shuttle, Roots searched for the room labeled with his assigned unit's name. When he told the microphone of the guidance terminal located at key points in Penta, "Task Force Alpha, Mobile Suit Squadron, Briefing Room," his current location was displayed. A yellow line, representing the shortest route to his destination, extended over the 3D holographic map displayed on the screen.

MAP MAP MAP MAP MAP MAP MAP MAP

Relevant Section:

Section: Gravity Block 1

Level: 23

Room Number: 1-23-1006

Usage Period: 1300 to 1600 GMT

Please follow the indicated route.



MAP MAP MAP MAP MAP MAP MAP MAP

When the display finished, a synthetic female voice asked, "Would you like a printout?"

"No, thank you!" Ryuu replied, hastening towards the room. Behind him, he heard the machine's voice dutifully saying, "Thank you very much."

"I am Lieutenant Stole Mannings, the commander of the mobile suit squadron for Task Force Alpha. Everyone, please take your seats." A man who climbed the podium addressed the roomful of mobile suit pilots with a clear, loud voice. His gaze was sharp, and his hair was neatly trimmed. His tightly fitted pilot suit and his upright posture oozed a meticulous military aura.

Ryuu spotted his classmate Shin Crypt in the briefing room and took a seat next to him. "Hey, Shin. What do you think of that old man?"

"He's a tough one to handle. He reeks of military stiffness..."

"I like him."

"You're into guys now?" Shin asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Idiot. I mean, he's a worthy opponent to punch. Those types have always been my specialty." Their whispered conversation seemed to reach Mannings. When Ryuu looked straight ahead, he met Mannings' glaring gaze. Ryuu decided it would be best to quiet down, reading the room. Such judgment was a natural talent of this cheeky boy.

"Silence. I will now explain the operation overview." As Mannings began the briefing with an attitude reminiscent of a mean-spirited foreign language teacher, the door at the front of the briefing room opened. A hulking pilot stood dumbfounded.

"Ah, I-I'm sorry," he stammered, closing the door and trying to make his way to another.

"Are you in this unit?!" Mannings asked, to which the man nodded affirmatively.

"Then sit down quickly!"

"Y-Yes... But, there is no seat..." he looked around the room.

"Then sit on the floor! Your rank and name, now!" Mannings was clearly annoyed by the giant man's slow movements.

"Ensign Tex West, sir."

Mannings glanced at the roster on the podium and said, "Ah, a Karaba veteran..." in a deflated tone.

At the mention of Karaba, snickers leaked from the other pilots. Karaba was the support organization for AEUG on Earth during the Gryps War. As such, their activities were largely limited to within the Earth's atmosphere. What was to be faced by the Task Force Alpha was space combat. What could a man who had only crawled around on the ground do in the vast expanse of space? This sentiment was what made the pilots laugh.

Once West plopped down on the floor at the front, Mannings regained his composure and started the mission briefing. The screen in the briefing room projected the asteroid Pezun and its orbit moving a day apart.

"A month ago, pro-Titans members in the instructor corps stationed in Pezun rebelled and occupied it. They are moving Pezun via nuclear pulse propulsion and currently have it stationed at L4. Their intentions are unclear, but it is likely an anti-AEUG appeal to the Earth Federation government. Based on their declarations, it's unlikely they will crash Pezun into Earth."

The image on the screen behind him changed.

"This is a week ago when the 127th Squadron stationed at Side 2, sent for forced reconnaissance to Pezun, was annihilated. Unfortunately, only one data pod could be recovered."

On the screen, two glowing red points approached six green ones, eliminating them one after another. The movements of each mobile suit were vividly depicted through polygonal processing in a window opened on the right side of the screen.

The images being displayed painted a vivid, albeit grim, picture of the task ahead. It was evident from the footage that the enemy they were about to face was formidable and had the capacity to obliterate an entire squadron. The room fell into a tense silence as the pilots processed this information, the weight of their task becoming all too real.

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Time : 00:04:35:51



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The image froze where the last green glowing point vanished.

"Huh, four minutes and thirty-five seconds! You've got to be kidding!"

Roots leaned forward and exclaimed. It seemed the other pilots shared his sentiments, as several of them nodded in agreement.

"It would be good if it were a joke, but unfortunately, this is the truth. I want each of you to engrave this in your minds - this is the power of the enemy we must confront," Manning said.

The image behind Mannings was split into six, replaying the movements of the mobile suits they just saw.

"They were the data suppliers for our IMPC system, as you all know.

Therefore, they have the advantage of understanding our IMPC data. But there is a silver lining: miraculously, a member of the instructor corps who was sent back to Earth managed to bring back their latest data for our IMPC system."

"So, we're not going to be wiped out like the squad we just saw, right?"

Roots cracked a joke. At this point, no one could have anticipated the impending severity of the data.

The mission briefing then moved on to specific tactical instructions and lasted for three hours.

"At 0300 Earth Standard Time, Task Force Alpha will depart from Penta. All personnel are to board their designated ships by 2200. Dismissed."

At 0300 Earth Standard Time, five space vessels centered around the *Pegasus III* set off from Penta, carrying mobile suits and their pilots, trailing tails of blue-white propellant light.

"Damn, the old man is with us," Roots commented. After meeting the crew of the *Pegasus III*, he was killing time in the dining area with Crypt, sucking on tubes of coffee.

"No helping it. It's the flagship of the fleet. It's natural that the mobile suit squadron commander is on board," Crypt responded.

"But why are you the only one treated as a lieutenant jg?"

"I'm the commander of the FAZZ squadron. You don't have any subordinates because you're directly under the squadron commander," Crypt explained.

"I'm not convinced. Swap places with me." Roots was not pleased with Crypt being treated as a rank higher.

"That's the military for you," Crypt said.

"Guess so..." Roots responded, just as the large figure of West hurried over. He, too, had been assigned to the same ship as a pilot for the Zeta Plus.

"Both of you, Lieutenant Mannings is starting training. He wants us to gather at the mobile suit pilot pit immediately," West relayed.

"Training? I haven't even sorted out my personal belongings yet! Tell that to Lieutenant Mannings," Roots waved dismissively.

"But..."

"God, you're so slow. No 'but,' just tell him!" Roots impatiently threw his coffee tube at West. However, it hit a man walking behind West straight in the face.

It was Mannings.

After a moment's glance at the dropped tube, he spoke.

"If you think sorting out your belongings is more important than your life, you don't have to participate in the training. But if you don't want to end up like this..." He lifted his trouser leg to reveal a large, ugly scar. His leg, though appearing human due to artificial organic parts, was visibly prosthetic to Roots

and the others. "I lost it in the One Year War. It was the price of my naivety. Thanks to training, it was just my leg. What about you? It seems the ensign here has more confidence than I do, but I hope he doesn't drag others down with him."

Mannings' words, stemming from his own experience, weighed heavily on Roots.

"You lost it because of your mistake! I'll show you I'm better! Shin, let's go!" Unable to hide his agitation, Roots stormed out of the dining area.

"Arrogant kid. If you weren't suited for the S Gundam, I would strangle you right now," Mannings thought as he watched Roots leave.

If Newtypes were all like this, he felt he would get a headache. The terrifying thought that these might be true Newtypes crossed his mind, causing him to frown.

While conducting mobile suit familiarization and tactical training, the fleet reached the visible area of Pezun. Naturally, this movement was also detected by the New Desides.

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Ship Types: Argama-class x 1

Salamis (Kai)-class x 5

Relative Strength: 1:0.987



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"We've confirmed five Federation ships," a young operator reported to Cod. Work was ongoing around the clock at Pezun to ensure full preparedness, but there was still some tightening up to do.

"At this critical juncture... Can you get the commander's data?"

"I'll try, but it may be a bit outdated. We're disconnected from the Federation's main computer link," the operator responded.

PROFILE PROFILE PROFILE PROFILE

Ship Name: Argama-class, Pegasus III

Captain: Eaton F. Heathrow

Rank: Lieutenant Commander

Evaluation: Green

For evaluations during enrollment at the Advanced Officer School and previous service appraisals, please refer to File 0083-014863.



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"Hmph, a fledgling straight from the senior officer's academy. He can probably only manage textbook attacks. If the captain is commanding the fleet, then it's either a temporary fleet or a decoy. Can you figure out the mobile suit squad's commander?"

"Since it's a new ship, we don't have any data. We also don't have data on the mobile suit forces."

"Alright. Well, they shouldn't have any experienced operators for something like this. A mobile suit squad alone should be enough. Let Offshore's team handle it. A diversionary attack is all we need."

At Cod's command, Offshore's First Assault Team started to prepare for departure in Pezun's mobile suit hangar. The Xeku-Eins equipment was swapped out for the Type-2 Long-Range Sniper, a long-range artillery type.

"Josh Offshore, First Assault Team, heading out!"

The Xeku-Eins fell into formation and headed toward Task Force Alpha.

"Just buy us some time. Just give them a little sting, that's all. Don't overdo it."

Cod's voice echoed in the cockpit. The blushing Offshore smiled inside his helmet. He liked being cared for by others.

"Lieutenant Crypt, Shin Crypt! To the mobile suit deck!"

At 0600 hours, the speaker next to his ear suddenly roared to life.

"A terrible wake-up call," Crypt said as he tousled his unkempt hair. He unbuckled his bed's restraint belt and pulled his body away from the Velcro sheets. He quickly changed from his ship work uniform into his pilot suit and rushed to the mobile suit deck's pilot pit. Manning was already there, looking somewhat tense.

"Lieutenant Crypt, this is a real battle," Manning bluntly informed him.

"What's the target?" asked Crypt timidly, tense from the news of live combat.

"Right now, our fleet has entered the visible range of Pezun, and mobile suits from Pezun has come out to intercept. Considering the amount of propellant, their mobile suits can't get close to our fleet from this distance. They are probably planning long-range sniping. Firing our ship's guns or missiles now would be a waste since the target is too small. That's why it's your FAZZ team's turn. You have high firepower and long-range capabilities."

"Understood," his voice was a bit high-pitched.

"Don't push yourself. Don't rush for results."

Crypt saluted and headed to the hangar, sliding into the cockpit of the FAZZ. When he switched on the laser communication monitor, the face of Lieutenant Grissom, a fellow pilot, appeared on the 360-degree monitor window. He was also a cohort from the experimental squadron.

"Wakey, wakey?"

"Yeah, I'm fully awake. Today's a real battle. It's different from the training we've had until yesterday. What about Aldrin?"

"He's on standby. He's on backup."

"OK," Crypt switched the monitor to the *Pegasus III's* control room. "Alright, FAZZ team, let's go!"

Two FAZZs, each armed with a massive beam weapon called a Hyper Mega Cannon, launched from the two electromagnetic catapults on the *Pegasus*.

The moment he entered the firing preparation area, Crypt felt an unpleasant sensation. It was as if there was a killing intent. At that moment, a red light



attacked him from the front, reflecting off tiny space dust.

"Evade! Extend sensors to maximum range," Crypt called out as he reversed his acceleration and moved his unit out of the predicted beam diameter, breaking the radio silence to alert Grissom.

"Do you know where they're shooting from?!"

As he spoke, Crypt focused on the data in the window opened at the front of the 360-degree monitor. The window was always located at the right corner of his field of vision, synchronized with the movement of the linear seat. He could see four faint red dots.

POSITION POSITION POSITION POSIT



ENEMY UNITS IN FIRING RANGE 4 ■

POSITION POSITION POSITION POSIT

"There are four within range! There might be more, be careful!"

"Our effective range is longer. That one just now was a bluff," Grissom replied calmly.

"Alright, Grissom. After I fire once, adjust within ±5 degrees and fire."

Crypt's FAZZ aimed and fired its Hyper Mega Cannon. A clear blue light gushed from the muzzle, becoming a solid beam of light traveling at an incredible speed, getting absorbed into the pitch-black darkness. One second, two seconds, three seconds...

"Damn it, I missed!"

Grissom's machine immediately corrected the firing line of Crypt's machine and fired. The Hyper Mega Cannon takes a while to charge, which is a drawback, but the alternating firing operation of the two machines was sufficient to cover this weakness, if not completely. The most powerful beam among the mobile suits onboard the Pegasus was fired repeatedly in a barrage.

"What's this beam! Is it ship gun fire?!"

Offshore could not hide his surprise at the blue light streak that flew overhead. The effect radius of that beam made it seem like it was from a battleship's main gun. It's impossible for a battleship to snipe a single mobile suit from a long distance. However, this beam was clearly aimed for precision shooting, and the shooting point changed significantly. There were two conclusions. Either the enemy had a large mobile armor or a mobile suit capable of operating heavy firepower.

"So, they're also planning a long-distance artillery battle..."

However, even in this era, combat on the order of tens of thousands of kilometers was still not assured. Red and blue beams crisscrossed in space, and each time space dust sparkled, producing this dangerous show. The artillery

battle of firing and dodging across a vast distance for mobile suits could not deliver a decisive blow to either side.

WEAPON WEAPON WEAPON WEAPON WEAP

Generator output decrease

Recognize key to changing the main weapon

Continued usage carries an 89.65788.9% probability of damage to the unit

Potential damage options expected during continued usage are as outlined in the following file. ■

WEAPON WEAPON WEAPON WEAPON WEAP

"Damn, I'm out of ammo," Crypt cursed at the emergency warning display on the window.

"Me too," Grissom replied.

"Should we request backup from Aldrin?"

"No, it doesn't seem to be necessary."

The search data on the monitor indicated that there were no enemies within effective range. They had withdrawn.

Meanwhile, Offshore had received an encrypted message from Cod saying, "The flower bed has been tended to," and led his unit back to Pezun. He was satisfied that his stall tactic, the task of buying time that had been assigned to him, had been successful.

Chapter.03

Sally Forth, S Gundam!

The Devil's Garden.

Amidst the tumult of the Second World War, in the heart of the 1940s, the German forces, entrenched in the North African sphere of conflict, birthed a formidable defensive structure. Its moniker was inspired by the treacherous minefield in Tobruk, a chilling testament to its deadly power.

The defensive mechanism was tripartite in structure. Encircling Pezun, the outermost layer consisted of satellite missiles, which had proven surprisingly effective when employed by the Zeon forces during the One Year War in the Battle of Solomon. These satellite missiles were a low-tech, energy-efficient weapon; these missiles were but masses fitted with propulsion systems—vestiges of asteroids or warships, designed to collide with the enemy in an unceremonious crash.

Floating within this orbital ring were gun turrets salvaged from the refit of the Salamis-class cruisers, repurposed onto improvised platforms that once served as space work aids. These cannons were set to serve as the fortress cannons of Pezun. Despite being reclaimed wreckage, these were the former primary guns of cruisers—thus, their might remained formidable. Each turret was tethered to SOL 7804, a power satellite supplying a steady stream of energy.

The cryptic directive "*The flower bed has been tended to,*" relayed from Cod to Offshore, signaled the completion of this vital connection.

In the wake of the One Year War, the space between Earth and the moon was a graveyard of derelict asteroids and colonies, the haunting remnants of devastation.

The power satellites that once breathed life into these colonies now languished in desolation. SOL 7804, designed to empower the space colonies of Side 2 nestled in the L4 Lagrange point, was fortuitously unscathed by the war, still teeming with life.

Recognizing its worth, New Desides eyed this derelict SOL 7804 to ensure a stable power supply to Pezun and bolster its defenses. Moving Pezun to L4 was a deliberate move calculated to exploit the high-output capacity of this satellite.

The last bastion of defense for Pezun was the New Desides fleet, manned by an elite cadre of mobile suit pilots. One would think Task Force Alpha, comprising a mere five vessels, would be easily wiped out.

Indeed, they were destined to bloom like flowers of light in the Devil's Garden...

"Damn it! A stall for time, after all?"

On the bridge of the *Pegasus III*, Mannings slammed his fist on the combat information console. As the FAZZ team returned and Crypt relayed the battle

details, unease began to nestle within Mannings. He hastily made his way to the bridge, a relic of an era when visual combat was the norm.

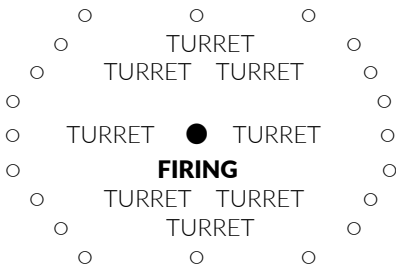
Old naval vessels had Combat Information Centers (CIC); a room dedicated to such functions. In space vessels, these functions had been shifted back to the bridge. Despite the existence of separate bridges for combat and general use, this merging of functionalities was a risk.

"Detail the situation, Lieutenant Mannings. What is this stall for time?" Commander Heathrow, the ship's captain, asked from his seat behind Mannings.

Thinking, 'This damn fool, what has he laid his eyes on,' Mannings switched the main monitor on the bridge to display combat information and said,

"We're projecting the free movement and orbit of the debris around Pezun. It's a veritable fortress..."

INFO INFO INFO INFO INFO INFO IN



INFO INFO INFO INFO INFO INFO IN

Heathrow's eyes widened at the 3D holographic display.

"W-why? Our reconnaissance drone didn't report anything like this before the FAZZ squadron's sortie..."

"Indeed, it seemed like nothing more than debris. You and the combat information evaluation staff assumed it was natural for there to be a large amount of debris floating around here since this place was hit first by Zeon during the previous war..."

"But it's not mere debris..." Heathrow trailed off.

"Exactly. They must have taken that into account. I suspect the rocks and debris they've deployed around Pezun have been turned into mass bombs. We made a grave misjudgment."

"But there's a chance they're not operational," Heathrow offered.

"The probability of that is extremely low, to say the least. The enemy mobile suit squadron engaged by the FAZZ squadron was likely stalling. The ease of their retreat indicates their defense network is active."

Hearing this, Heathrow ordered the comms officer to send an emergency transmission to Penta and the helmsman to alter course.

"Captain, evasive maneuvers are futile at this point. There's no point in struggling now. If those gun turrets are active, it's akin to having three cruisers on our tail. If we try to evade, we'll be shot from behind. Since we proceeded at a slow speed without any precaution, we were already well within their

effective firing range. It'll take about an hour for Penta to receive our laser transmission via relay satellite and about three days for the fleet to depart from Penta and reach this area. By then, we'll probably be space dust."

"In that case, do you have any better alternatives?"

"Well, there's one that's better than doing nothing..."

"Alright, let's hear it."

Taking a deep, resigned breath, Heathrow followed through on Mannings' grudgingly accepted strategy, one he'd dourly deemed "better than doing nothing." Evident reluctance etched in his movements, he ordered reverse acceleration across the entire fleet. Forward thrusters of each vessel roared into overdrive, pushing the armada into a backpedal, extricating themselves from the effective firing range of the gun emplacements. A necessary measure, albeit one that risked exposing their vulnerable rear to the enemy whilst bleeding propellant and slugging their pace. Overuse of the braking thrusters posed an additional threat, with potential overheating leading to catastrophic damage.

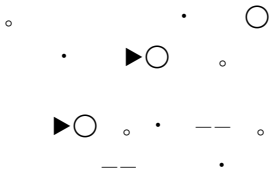
The harsh, ominous glow of emergency lights bathed the ship interiors in a surreal red hue. Commands echoed through each corridor, ordering all hands to don their normal suits. As the crew followed orders, their eyes never strayed from the detection monitors. Suddenly, a cry sliced through the nervous anticipation, delivered by an astrogation officer. "Captain! We have small, unidentified objects moving in our direction!"

"Don't panic. They shouldn't be performing random acceleration," Heathrow tried to maintain an air of calm.

"I am the one in command here, *Lieutenant* Mannings," he countered with a veneer of officer school pride. To him, it was a polite way of saying, "Don't overstep your bounds." Then, to his gunnery officer, he commanded, "Weapons free! Open fire within effective range," granting the green light for engagement.

The *Pegasus III's* main guns swiveled, zeroing in on the cluster of satellite missiles inching ever closer to the fleet.

TARGET TARGET TARGET TARGET TARG



TARGET TARGET TARGET TARGET TARG

To the naked eye, they were mere specks of light, not yet threatening in their distant silence. The gunnery officer aligned the targeting of one of the assigned satellite missiles within the fleet's space defense system and fired the

mega particle cannon. Lines of fire also extended from the Salamis Kai-class cruisers that were sailing in a level-one combat alert position in a spherical formation around the *Pegasus III*.

TARGET TARGET TARGET TARGET TARG

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TARGET TARGET TARGET TARGET TARG

Within seconds, the satellite missiles, the previously innocuous points of light, blossomed into incandescent orbs.

"First salvo successful! Six shots penetrated the barrage!"

"The accuracy has improved compared to before..." Mannings mused over the artillery officer's report, his mind flashing back to the desperate ship blasts during the One Year War. However, he knew that accuracy against targets with the mobility a mobile suit would still be significantly diminished. While the accuracy of ship cannons had indeed improved, the mobility and crisis management capabilities of mobile suit targets had also evolved.

"Prepare for the second volley from the main cannon, and prime our close-range defense missiles!" Heathrow commanded, but he was interrupted by the astrogation officer's urgent cry. "Confirmed beam emission from Pezun!"

"Shift focus! All ships engage anti-beam defenses!"

Under Heathrow's directive, the gunnery officer rapidly toggled the weapon system. This was an eye-tracking operation, where the operator merely needed to glance at the command displayed on the monitor for selection.

Streamlined unmanned drones rose from the weapon launchers of the *Pegasus III*, tracing an arc toward the aft of the ship before bursting into a cloud of high-polymer gas. This gas mushroomed into a protective sphere, with each retreating ship nesting within. Its function mirrored that of the beam dispersal screen used during the One Year War, attenuating incoming beams.

"All hands, brace for impact!"

No matter how effective the beam dispersal screen was, it couldn't completely negate the power of the beams. The attenuated beams still carried enough kinetic energy to shake the ships of the Task Force Alpha violently. Amidst the turmoil on the bridge, Heathrow maintained his composure, rapidly issuing orders.

"All blocks, report damage. Keep launching anti-beam projectiles. Send out close-range anti-space missiles!"

"Enemy is pulling back, sheltering behind a beam dispersal screen," an operator's voice echoed in the control room, eliciting a gratified nod from

Pezun's Cod. Beside him, Cray's eyes remained locked on the main monitor, tracking the unfolding battle.

"Tosh, this isn't as grave as it seems. Seems like there won't be any need for the mobile suits to enter the fray."

"Hmm, but the problem is what they might do once they retreat beyond effective range. I have a feeling they're planning something," Cray replied.

"Don't be foolish. We're both out of range. They'll likely hunker down and await their main force to arrive. If they intend to breach this defensive net and strike, they'll rely on mobile suits, but I've never heard of any mobile suit capable of monstrous acceleration. That fleet is a detachment of regular forces. It's unlikely that any ships carrying mobile armor are accompanying them."

"You're blissfully naive, Brave. I know of a mobile suit capable of high-speed strikes and swift retreat."

"The Zeta?! But that's not mass-produced. Plus, it's supposed to be on the Argama. And the last I heard, the Zeta sustained heavy damage during the Colony Laser battle..."

"Quite the contrary! There was a plan to mass-produce the Zeta. And I've heard rumors about the development of a successor model. If it had been deployed in combat without our knowledge..."

"Come to think of it, the enemy that Josh engaged had firepower equal to a battleship..."

"Imagine if a suit like that were to strike SOL. Our gun emplacements would be sitting ducks. We should consider upgrading SOL's defenses."

"Don't fret. You're borrowing trouble where there's likely none. Even if such a mobile suit is deployed, there would be only one at most. There's no need for alarm. Big firepower mobile suits are usually clumsy. That's a given."

"I hope you're right. But if we get hit, it'll be too late, Brave. Eight years have passed since then. In eight years, technology could advance tenfold. It wouldn't be surprising if there are high firepower and high mobility mobile suits."

"We have the Zwei, don't we? The only pilots who can handle such high-performance mobile suits are on our side. If such a mobile suit is deployed, we can just send in the Zwei!"

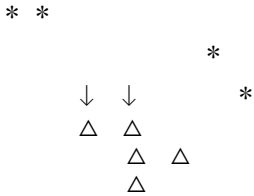
Once Cod took a stance, he was immovable, a trait that could be traced back to his days as a cocksure veteran pilot. In this respect, he was starkly contrasting to the more cautious Cray.

Meanwhile, Task Force Alpha continued their withdrawal from Pezun's effective artillery range, punctuated by the deployment of anti-beam projectiles. The high-polymer gas film of the anti-beam rounds reduced the effect of the enemy's beams but also neutralized their own beam weapons that took refuge within this dispersal screen. In this status quo, combat was whittled down to missile exchanges. The missiles of this era were essentially unguided bombs, their reliability questionable. Hence, missiles merely provided a barrage effect through explosions. Tiny, time-fused missiles, launched in great numbers,

created defensive lines around the ships and mobile suits through explosive blasts and shrapnel.

FLEET FLEET FLEET FLEET FLEET FL

TOP VIEW



FLEET FLEET FLEET FLEET FLEET FL

"Two mass projectiles have breached the missile barrage! They're heading for Takao and Long Beach!" The astrogation officer's voice cuts through the silence as they studied the monitor. These were two of the six satellite missiles that had evaded the ship's cannon fire moments before.

The *Takao* holds position, prow pointed ahead of the *Pegasus III*, while the *Long Beach* shelters in the left-rear-below.

"Prepare for the second salvo!" commands Heathrow. But time is against them.

"There's no time."

The artillery officers scramble on the bridges of the two targeted Salamis-class cruisers, *Takao* and *Long Beach*, desperately switching their weapons control system to individual ship anti-satellite systems. Anti-satellite guns swivel, honing in on the rapidly approaching satellite missiles. Evasive maneuvers are impossible now – spacecraft aren't as nimble as mobile suits. They have to stand their ground and fight.

"Give 'em hell..."

The crews of the non-targeted ships, including the *Pegasus III*, can do little more than offer silent prayers for the valiant efforts of their comrades on the two under-fire ships.

The anti-satellite guns open fire, striking the satellite missiles. Like an eerie silent film, the missiles start to fragment, but their mass is considerable – they won't just vanish.

"If only their trajectory would shift, even slightly..."

Despite the fleet crew's desperate wishes, the crumbling satellite missiles continue their relentless advance toward the two ships. The *Takao's* bridge is brutally shorn off, while the *Long Beach* takes a direct hit from a satellite missile, rocking from its port-side missile launcher towards the ship's long axis.

A sigh of disappointment whispers through the general frequency band of the *Pegasus III's* internal communication system, echoed by the personnel on the bridge.

A low rumbling sounds as the satellite missiles continue to burrow into the two ships. Even as 'cruisers,' their armor is little more than paper against the force of the incoming missiles. The defense of a spacecraft includes anti-beam shells and reflective paint to shield against beam weapons, along with anti-missile micro-missiles (AMMs) barrage against missiles.

If possible, random acceleration is used for evasive maneuvers. There is fundamentally no concept of absorbing damage with the structure of the ship itself. But these measures are useless against the intentional collision of large-mass objects. Incidentally, while the fleet tactics of spacecraft take their model from seagoing ships, their actual operation is closer to submarines.

"*Takao* and *Long Beach*... they're going down," the astrogation officer reported to Heathrow, voice strained with helpless desperation.

The two ships buckle under the relentless force, twisting into grotesque shapes. When the distortion reaches the engine compartment in the aft of the ships, the two ill-fated cruisers transform into spheres of fiery explosion.

"Check for survivors from the *Takao* and the *Long Beach*," comes the order.

"Captain, there likely aren't any survivors," mutters Mannings, his eyes narrowing behind the visor of his normal suit helmet.

"We've failed miserably. We let the crews of both ships die in vain..."

"No, your fleet command was more than adequate for a first real battle, Commander. Out of five, you only lost two ships."

"Only two?! It's two too many, Mannings. How many do you think have died? Is this how a veteran's nerves are supposed to be? As a human being..."

"Perhaps, Commander, you haven't yet accepted the reality that this is war. Or are you still credulously believing it was just a demonstration from the general command? You can't survive on the battlefield if you act with the nerves of an ordinary person. If a mass missile had directly hit this ship, the flagship of the fleet, we would have lost control of the fleet. Now, that would be a catastrophic failure."

Just then, the navigational officer interrupted, "We've broken out of the effective firing range."

"Captain, I'd like to execute the second phase of that 'better than doing nothing' strategy." Mannings voice was devoid of emotion.

"You intend to create more casualties?"

"On the contrary, it's to prevent them."

"No. We wait for the main force to arrive."

"Timing, Captain. The enemy should be relaxed now. Surprise and audacity make for a successful attack, remember?"

Having been decisively countered by Mannings, Heathrow feels his incompetence laid bare in front of his crew. His face reddens with rising anger. As the fleet commander, he can't back down in front of his subordinates.

"Alright. Lieutenant Mannings, execute the operation. But be aware, this operation is under your authority as the commander of the fleet's mobile suit squadron, and you are doing it on your own..."

Thinking of his self-preservation, Mannings thought, 'This 'kid' who lost two ships only sees his own future. If this operation fails, he'll likely pin all the blame

on me. But that's fine. I just won't get a measly pension. But I won't fail. If I do, then the Takao and the Long Beach crew would truly have died in vain...'

"Aye, aye, Sir. I, Lieutenant Stole Mannings, will execute the operation using the S Gundam, Z Plus, and FAZZ mobile suits under the direct control of the squadron commander."

Two hours later, an unusually shaped mobile suit emerges on the mobile suit deck of the *Pegasus III*. It was named the S Gundam, and the pilot was Ryuu Roots. The cutting-edge new machine incorporated various mechanisms and was now encased in a rugged booster unit on its lower half. This was the long-distance cruising and high-acceleration mode of the S Gundam. On both sides of the ship's catapult, mass-produced machines of the Z Gundam, called Z Plus, stand ready. Both were in the wave-rider form and hence not humanoid.

"You understand, don't you, Roots? Your only target is power satellite SOL7804. You needn't concern yourself with anything else," said Mannings.

"I get it. I've been itching to get into a real fight all this time. There were no chances for me in those boring fleet battles. I can't wait to experience real combat!" replied Roots, confidently addressing the image of Mannings' face reflected in the 360-degree monitor window.

"That's the spirit. Everything is riding on you."

Mannings decided that it was better to let this confident youth maintain his high spirits until the end of the operation.

"The controls are just like the simulator. I'm ready anytime," Roots continued.

While he was speaking, two Z Plus suits were smoothly launched together from the catapults on both sides.

"The vanguard Plus team will cover you. Enter high acceleration one minute after FAZZ team's preparatory bombardment," instructed Mannings.

"Understood. I've memorized the procedures. Hurry up and launch me."

As if in response to Roots' voice, the *Pegasus III's* linear catapult launching shuttle came back smoothly to the launch position. A light vibration transmitted a solid 'clank' into the cockpit as the catapult latch caught the S Gundam.

About ten thousand kilometers ahead of the *Pegasus III*, the vanguard FAZZ team, under the command of Crypt, was hidden behind a dummy asteroid, preparing for the attack. The time until the start of the operation was being counted down on the monitor window.

COUNTDOWN COUNTDOWN COUNTDOWN

• • • | 0004 • • • | 0003 • • • | 0002 • • • |

0001 • • • | 0000 • • •

COUNTDOWN COUNTDOWN COUNTDOWN

"Fire!"

Crypt's voice cut through the tense silence like a blade. At his command, the three mechanical beasts of the FAZZ team discharged their Hyper Mega Launchers in a flurry of light and energy.

"S Gundam, Ryuu Roots, let's do this!"

The command vibrated with anticipation. As the last echo of Crypt's voice faded into the abyss of space, the S Gundam was catapulted from the *Pegasus III*, hot on the trail of the two Z Plus machines.

COUNTUP COUNTUP COUNTUP

+0001 . . . +0002 . . . +0003 . . .

+0004 . . . +0005 . . .

COUNTUP COUNTUP COUNTUP

Propelled by the fusion of linear catapult acceleration and the raw force of normal cruising mode, the S Gundam and Z Plus machines sliced through the vacuum, assembling into a V-shaped formation as they darted towards the frontline where the FAZZ team held their ground.

"Alright, let's gooooo!"

As the Z Plus machines subtly adjusted their trajectories, branching off to the left and right, Roots threw the S Gundam's throttle into overdrive, into the realm of high acceleration.

The booster unit responded with a roar that would have shattered the silence if sound could travel in space. The ensuing acceleration was a maelstrom, relentlessly pressing Roots back into his seat. Almost instantly, the S Gundam outran the two Z Plus machines, and their formation morphed from a V into an inverted V.

COUNTUP COUNTUP COUNTUP

+0056 . . . +0057 . . . +0058 . . .

+0059 . . . +0100 . . .

COUNTUP COUNTUP COUNTUP

Bloody hell, he's off like a shooting star!"

"Is that really a mobile suit?!" Disbelief underscored Crypt and his team's voices as they watched the S Gundam blaze across the cosmic stage, a comet tail of propellant in its wake.

"D-d-damn it... What kind of ac-ce-le-ra-tion is this...?"

Roots' voice trembled, mirroring his body's struggle against the punishing force of acceleration. The emergency mode of the S Gundam was not a playground; it was a testing ground. Despite the state-of-the-art anti-G suit and linear seat, the intense gravity born from thrust acceleration was an unrelenting adversary. This was uncharted territory - a wild, untested beast of technology.

Ignoring Cod's optimism, Cray boarded the Xeku-Eins and headed toward SOL. On the way, laser comms crackled in the cockpit.

"Tosh! You were right. The long-range bombardment has started! There are three lines of fire!" It was Cod's voice.

"From where?"

"Measuring. No, wait. This can't be..."

"What's happening?"

"There's a suit coming at us with insane acceleration! A mobile armor... No way. It's mobile suit-sized?!"

Cray's suspicions were confirmed; the enemy fleet was packing an advanced mobile suit.

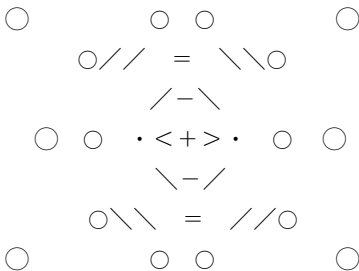
"Brave, launch the mobile suit team immediately for interception!" he commanded, pushing the Xeku-Eins to its limit as he rocketed toward SOL.

Following Cray's advice, Cod issued launch orders to Offshore's First Assault Team and the Fourth Assault Team led by Lieutenant Fast Side. Eighteen Xeku-Eins took off towards SOL, a metallic swarm ready to meet the mysterious enemy head-on.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, aaahhh!!"

In the meantime, the S Gundam was tearing a path through space, hell-bent on reaching SOL. Inside the cockpit, Roots was a picture of tension, his face glistening with cold sweat as he navigated through a minefield of drifting satellite missiles.

VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW



VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW

"It's no use. I can't keep up with the S Gundam's acceleration..." West gritted his teeth as he tried to track the S Gundam with his Z Plus.

"Do we really need to provide support?!" Ensign Sigman Shade, his wingman, growled.

The three mobile suits swiftly reached the airspace where Pezun's floating artillery platforms had been deployed.

"Wh-where's SOL...?"

Struggling against the overwhelming acceleration force, Roots managed to raise his head and read the data on the 360-degree monitor with great effort.

TARGET TARGET TARGET TARGET TARG

Target Position

Reference: Suit Propulsion Direction

Upward: '035 '19
Rightward: '012 '32

Autopilot: Set

Estimated Time of Target Arrival: 00:03:0057

■
TARGET TARGET TARGET TARGET TARG

The estimated time of reaching the target continued to count down moment by moment. Next, Roots called up the weapon control system and began selecting and setting up the weapons.

WEAPON WEAPON WEAPON WEAPON WEAP

Priority:

1. Beam Cannon

Target Selection: Set

Firing Range: 12,000

Firing Rate: Precision Shooting, Mode A ■

WEAPON WEAPON WEAPON WEAPON WEAP

"Al-right, I'm, going, in!"

A voice echoed with an eerie vibration, resounding deep in his bones. SOL—the target—it was now or never.

"No good! Can't lock on!"

Cod exclaimed, frustration edging his words. The floating gun emplacements faltered in their targeting, firing into the emptiness of space instead of striking the S Gundam.

"Enemy unit, breached the final defense line!"

The operator's voice lacked the calm typically inherent in such roles.

"I'm counting on you. There's no one else who can stop it!"

Cod yelled again into the command console mic. The team dispersed, forming a defensive line around SOL and unleashing a flurry of machine gun fire. The rounds traced trajectories towards the enemy, looking akin to icy flares against the void.

"...Eight seconds... Nine seconds..."

When Offshore silently counted to ten in his mind, he saw a pale blue object twinkling at a point in the void.

"Here it comes!"

Offshore intuitively fired a full magazine, the rounds spewing from his gun in full-auto mode as he steered his Xeku-Eins into a steep dive.

"Gooooooo!!!"

The S Gundam's targeting system located a point of light far away—SOL. This point of light should be properly recognized as SOL by the S Gundam's firing control system.

BAFOOM!

Light burst from the beam cannon in a rushing torrent, the Minovsky particles converting into kinetic energy and flying true towards the point in the void that was SOL. The two other Zeta Pluses followed in suit.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

"God damn iiiiiiiii!"

A moment later, enemy fire struck the S Gundam's armor. But the armor remained intact against this level of attack.

With an ethereal whoosh, beams of light slashed through the darkness, colliding with SOL. Two more beams followed, slightly delayed from each side. The first beam perfectly pierced SOL's dull gray outer shell, effectively severing SOL's internal mechanisms. A delayed beam grazed the void where Offshore's unit had hovered just seconds prior, its partner beam impaling a Xeku-Eins from the First Assault Team mid-assault. The pilot's screams echoed within Offshore's cockpit.

"Would've been me if I was slower..." He muttered, a cold shiver snaking down his spine. As the chill receded, it was replaced by a swell of anger—anger at the loss of a subordinate. This wasn't mourning; this was the resentment of losing a chess piece in a grand cosmic game. Unbeknownst to him, Cray had ingrained this feeling in him, making Offshore oblivious to the danger of being obedient.

"Don't let him escape!"

Regaining his composure, Offshore squared his sights, the harsh staccato of his machine gun resonating in a discordant rhythm.

DOK! DOK! DOK! DOK!

The once benign orbs of light morphed into the monstrous silhouette of a mobile suit, a behemoth sphere of illumination nestled on its back.

"This is a suicide attack, a kamikaze, isn't it?!" Roots cursed Mannings as he plunged into the barrage. He felt like he might wet himself. But he couldn't stop this high acceleration abruptly. Decelerating in this kill zone was suicide, a dance with death slower but no less fatal. An abrupt, sharp sound as something was blown away.

ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM AL

Armor Damage:

Head: 20.96% - Condition: Green

Left Arm: 40.53% - Condition: Yellow

Torso: 12.63% - Condition: Green

* * * * *

Left Upper Arm Armor – Blown Off

ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM AL

"The armor on the left arm!"

Trying to wear bravado like a cloak, Roots' body betrayed him. A warm tide began pooling in his groin. Each agonizing microsecond stretched into an eternity as the beam cannon charged. As soon as the charge was complete, the second shot fired by the S Gundam accurately targeted and brought down a single Xeku-Eins unit.

In front of Offshore, a Xeku bloomed into a fireball. The two remaining shafts of death wove through space, dissipating into the void. Among the survivors was Cray's suit, a silhouette against the cosmic backdrop.

BAGOOOOM!

Like specters, three mobile suit units streaked past the New Desides' formation, leaving a graveyard of wrecked mobile suits and a shot-up SOL remaining behind.

"Did... Did we accomplish *nothing?*"

Offshore stood in stunned silence. What kind of mobile suit was that? Was humanity's technological prowess just a charade against these monstrous machines?

"All commanders, check for surviving suits!"

Cray's command broke the silence, pulling Offshore back to reality.

The doubt Offshore held was a shared sentiment among all New Desides pilots who participated in this battle. The battle had chipped at their invincibility, their confidence now a cracked mirror.

One hour after forcibly decelerating with reverse thrust and leaving the combat zone, the S Gundam and two Z Plus units returned to the *Pegasus III* after a circuitous route around the battlefield.

"Well, we got pretty beat up, huh?"

Looking up at the battered upper body of the S Gundam, Roots muttered. But the two Z Plus units had sustained more damage due to differences in armor material. Given the high relative speed, the S Gundam should have sustained more damage if hit by the same mass of enemy fire. Roots couldn't help but feel a chill imagining the consequences if it had been a mass-produced machine like a GM III or Nero.

Roots jumped from the mobile suit deck and headed for the airlock, his groin uncomfortably cold and heavy.

"Hey, Boss. Looks like you had a tough time, didn't you?" Crypt's words caught Roots off guard in the pilot pit, delivered with a pinch of innocence.

"The operation was a success. Thanks to the destruction of SOL, their defense capabilities have definitely been halved," Mannings joined in, a consoling pat on Roots' shoulder.

"You say that so casually! That's like telling us to die, isn't it?!" Roots snapped back, but he lacked the vigor he had before the sortie. His behavior felt off.

Catching on, Mannings whispered, "Better clean up quickly, General Pisspants."

"Sh-Shut up! None of your business!"

"There's no need to be embarrassed. It's something that often happens in your first battle." Mannings quipped, a sly eyebrow raised.

Two days later, during this period, New Desides and Task Force Alpha only engaged in surveillance and reconnaissance actions, and no real combat occurred. On this day, two Salamis Kai-class cruisers from Side 5, the *Ulysses* and *Cumberland*, joined the Task Force in place of the lost *Takao* and *Long Beach*, bringing the fleet back to its original number when it departed from Earth. On the other hand, the Earth Federation Command finally made the decision to forcefully suppress Pezun and the New Desides.

It was the calm before the storm of the Battle of Pezun.

Chapter.04

Conquest of Pezun

The destruction of SOL led to a cut-off in the energy supply to the floating gun platforms, forcing a slight retreat in Pezun's defense line. But the New Desides weren't the type to remain passive in such circumstances. Determined to reverse this setback, new defensive strategies were being devised in Pezun, ready to be set in motion.

Meanwhile, upon receiving the report from Task Force Alpha stating, "Pezun has become a space fortress," the Federation Forces became determined to fully deploy the Earth's Home Fleet for the conquest of Pezun. Under the command of Admiral Brian Aeno, the Earth's Home Fleet, along with the X Detached Fleet, were set to lead the charge toward Pezun.

ORDER ORDER ORDER ORDER ORDER OR

Earth Federation Headquarters

└Earth Home Fleet

├Z Detached Fleet

└Y Detached Fleet

└X Detached Fleet * Aeno Fleet

└ | Task Force Alpha

ORDER ORDER ORDER ORDER ORDER OR

The formidable Aeno. Amongst his soldiers, due to both his demeanor and actions, he was fondly nicknamed the "Vulture Admiral." Though previously having withdrawn from active combat to serve as principal of the Earth Federation Forces Officer Academy, the unfolding events had recalled him to his role as a commander.

Despite his less-than-stellar reputation within the Federation government, underlying factors within the Federation Forces compelled his reappointment. While there was a determination to forcefully suppress Pezun and the New Desides, strong sentiments persisted within the Federation's ranks, hoping for a peaceful surrender. Placing the highly esteemed Aeno in command was an attempt at facilitating this negotiation till the end. Respect for a man isn't swayed by ideological differences.

Yet, no one had anticipated that this calculated move, using Aeno's influence to achieve a bloodless victory in Pezun, would spectacularly backfire.

Moreover, the Federation Forces had argued to the government that given the depleted military strength from the Gryps War and the shortage of experienced commanders, "Aeno was the only suitable candidate." The government had little choice but to accept this conclusion.

A young worker aboard a small maintenance vessel thought, "The word 'majesty' surely exists for this very sight."

At that moment, almost the entirety of the Earth's Home Fleet, including the vessels stationed at the space fortress Solomon, had assembled at the low-orbit liaison station Penta.

The tiny utility boat, dragging a conspicuously large container, headed toward the mooring boom where the vessels of the X Detached Fleet, set to depart in an hour, were docked. As the time for departure loomed, the young worker had been hastily instructed by his superiors to transport this baffling container to the flagship *Bull Run*.

Judging by its size, it must be a mobile suit or a large weapon. Loading such cargo just before departure seemed illogical; recalculations for propulsion would be needed, he mused. The shipping label simply read "New Equipment G." Presumably a code name. 'G' probably stood for Gun. His cursory thought was that it must be some new cannon, after which he didn't give it much more thought.

Dominating the scene were the *Bull Run* and *Marengo*, two modified Magellan-class space battleships, surrounded by eight modified *Salamis*-class space cruisers: *Pasadena*, *Volgograd*, *Panama*, *Kashima*, *Brasilia*, *Danang*, *Stockholm*, and *Dortmund*. Also present were two modified *Columbus*-class transport ships, *Iwo Jima* and *Ivan Rogov*, repurposed as mobile suit landing ships, and six regular *Columbus*-class transport ships. Numerous smaller utility boats darted around them.

The flagship of the New Desides suppression force, battleship *Bull Run*, proudly displayed a flag plate indicating the admiral's presence. This ship was a *Magellan*-class battleship retrofitted for mobile suit operation; in old naval terms, it would be an aviation battleship. Inside, Aeno, in his assigned officer's quarters, was immersed in the nostalgic mix of scents – a blend of rotten onions and a tangy aroma, a trademark of veteran space battleships.

Although the newer ships like the *Pegasus III* were filled with the fresh scents of paint, plastic, and metal, veteran ships exuded a peculiar smell that could be nauseating to the uninitiated. After all, they were surrounded by the vacuum of space; one couldn't just open a window to let the smell out. The ship's air-conditioning system wasn't always reliable.

These were military vessels, not luxury cruisers; human comfort was secondary.

Veteran crew members could recognize this scent on one another; deodorants were of little use. During extended battle voyages, the inability to shower meant the smell of the crew became even more pronounced.

"A seasoned space sailor is akin to a scavenger or beggar" was a joke older crew members often used on the rookies. It's even said that the only thing smelling worse is the helmet of a normal suit.

In the midst of this, Aeno's thoughts drifted back to a man who had sought him out on Earth about a month ago.

The man began by introducing himself as someone from Anaheim Electronics on Luna. His slim and somewhat elongated figure spoke of a life nurtured under lower gravity rather than a robust build.

The perpetual sunglasses, shielding against the harsh terrestrial sunlight, were yet another hallmark of those accustomed to life in the cosmos. His ill-fitting black jacket suggested he wasn't in a job that required stellar interpersonal skills.

Aeno perceived an air of the military about him. A glance at the man's feet revealed his ongoing struggle with Earth's gravitational pull. Fresh from orbit, perhaps. His features were nondescript, save for the somewhat angular contours of his face. Offering a chair, the man accepted with a formal nod, carefully settling into it.

"Can we keep this brief? I must return to space soon, and the preparations are quite taxing..."

"Forgive the directness, but are you, by any chance, a Spacenoid?"

"I fancy myself a humble Earthnoid, though one might question that claim nowadays. Is that the new greeting trend on Luna these days?"

With a wry smile, the man divulged his identity. He was Saotome, belonging to the very Instructor Corps that Aeno was preparing to face off against.

"Then might you convey to Cod, Cray, Pashley, and the others that they'd be wise to surrender? A mutual aversion to unnecessary bloodshed, especially of such esteemed soldiers as yours, would be desirable."

"I can't recommend a surrender on my end. I took the risk of being apprehended by the Federation Forces Military Police to come to Earth, just to let you in on our intent. We have no intention of losing. Few in the Federation Forces match the skills of our Instructor Corps. You, sir, of all people, should know that." Saotome passionately elaborated on why his Instructor Corps was compelled into their present course of action.

"We are ultimately prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for Earth and Earthnoids. I implore your understanding..."

Hara-kiri. An archaic reference.

Certainly, it alluded to the Samurai, warriors of the East. Aeno faintly discerned Eastern roots in the man. But Saotome's impassioned plea possessed an eerie fervor, and unbeknownst to him, Aeno found himself gravitating towards their cause.

Perhaps his own disillusionment with the current Federation Forces played a part. He had always seen the military as a noble institution. Not the vocational school it had become. He felt a sense of pride knowing individuals like Saotome still existed.

The military's purpose was to protect the nation. Not the present feeble Earth Federation government. He would lay down his life for the true essence

of the nation. The embers of romanticized heroism, characteristic of many a soldier, stirred within the old admiral. Before he knew it, he was all ears to their proposition.

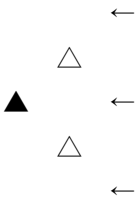
"Luna. Establishing a regime there... An audacious plan, even for Lieutenant Cray."

From a man from the Instructor Corps, Saotome glimpsed an ineffable excitement in Aeno's eyes and smirked. His true nature was unknown, even within the Corps...

Meanwhile, as they awaited the main fleet's arrival, Task Force Alpha's mobile suit squadron continued their combat training in shifts. The pilots of the Gundam mobile suit from the *Pegasus III*, while seasoned, fell short of Lieutenant Mannings' expectations. Ryuu Roots, in particular, showed no inkling of teamwork, and this became Mannings' primary focus.

"Roots! Next, team up with the FAZZ squad and Plus squad."

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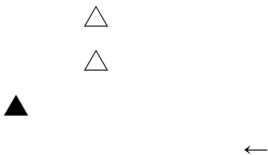
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Obedying Mannings's command, the S-Gundam positioned itself in front of the two Z-Plus units. Three FAZZs trailed in the last line, and together with the S-Gundam, six mobile suits formed a triangular formation.

"Switch to a vertical formation! A fingertip formation of three each!"

In his cockpit, the continuous flow of orders was beginning to grate on Roots. He detested being dictated to. The constant switching from high to low had gone on for an hour. "Damned Mannings," he cursed internally. "Roots! Ryuu Roots! Can you not hear me?"

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While Roots was absorbed in hurling silent insults at Mannings, the other five had already formed up. He quickly moved the S-Gundam to the front-left of West's Z-Plus.

"Quit piloting, you're fired, shit for brains! Thanks to your daydreaming, our formation has taken two or three direct hits from enemy beams. The enemy will not wait for you. If this was real combat, I wouldn't be penning a letter of your tragic demise to your family. Instead, I'd tell them how their useless son led our fleet to annihilation! Think about that!"

As he spoke, Mannings recalled Roots's family situation from his personnel file and instantly regretted his words.

Roots was livid. "Shove it, old man! It's too bad for you, both my parents have long passed away!"

He was aware of his mistake but felt the reprimand was excessive, especially coming from the very military organization responsible for his parent's death. As much as Mannings's words infuriated him, the suppressed laughter of his fellow pilots wounded his pride more.

"You're good at shouting orders from the bridge, but can you back it up? I don't like that attitude of yours! If you're so damn strong that you can act all high and mighty, then come and challenge me!"

"You think you can defeat me? Intriguing. Alright, Plus and FAZZ teams, return to base. If you beat me, Roots, I'll take back what I said. Just don't wet yourself."

"Don't patronize me!"

As the S-Gundam remained, the other five mobile suits reversed their course, leaving streaks of pale exhaust trails as they set their return path to the *Pegasus III*.

"Give it your best, darling," quipped Crypt from the FAZZ as he returned to the ship.

Meanwhile, Admiral Aeno's X Detached Fleet equipped with orbital altitude escape boosters launched as planned towards Pezun. The only unexpected occurrence was the last-minute inclusion of a container labeled "New Equipment G" aboard the mobile suit hangar of the flagship *Bull Run*.

Inside was a mobile suit, a Gundam, originally prepared for the Colony Laser battle but stored at Penta without seeing any action.

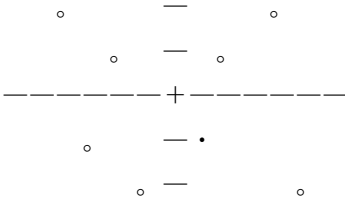
Due to the current crisis, its deployment was fast-tracked to join the *Pegasus III* and other Gundam-type mobile suits.

This decision stemmed from the dangerous curiosity of military personnel: the irresistible urge to use available weaponry.

"What's wrong? Can't you find me, Roots?"

Mannings's voice echoed in the cockpit, but the elusive machine was nowhere in sight. Frustration gripped Roots.

VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW VI



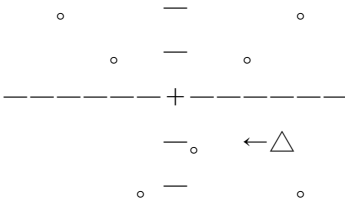
VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW VI

Just as he questioned Mannings's whereabouts, a slight impact jolted the S-Gundam's left leg. Damn, below?

"Turn off all power to your left leg. It's useless now."

Red paint from a marker pellet smeared the S-Gundam's left leg.

VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW VI



VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW VIEW VI

From below, the instructor's modified mobile suit, a special version of the Nero, rose, evading Roots's firing, making a series of barrel rolls before lining up a shot directly at the S-Gundam's cockpit.

"You'd be dead by now, Roots."

Roots was flabbergasted. On paper, the S-Gundam was superior, but it seemed pilot skill could easily upend mechanical advantages. Ironically, his realization mirrored what enemy pilots felt during an S-Gundam SOL attack.

"One more time! Give me another chance, Mannings!"

Without realizing it, Roots genuinely pleaded with a superior officer for the first time since joining the Federation Forces. This shift pleased Mannings.

"Alright, fair enough."

It seemed the boy had grown some backbone and was understanding the true nature of war. Mannings smirked, ready for the next round.

March 6, Universal Century 0088.

It's the second day since the X Detached Fleet departed from Penta. This event is five days after Task Force Alpha destroyed SOL.

Admiral Aeno, from his elevated seat on the bridge of the *Bull Run*, sent a knowing glance to the captain. The crew of the battleship *Bull Run* were mostly Aeno's former close subordinates; he already had full control of this ship. By this point, they were in a space where Penta's mobile suits and ships could no longer pursue. Furthermore, the Task Force Alpha was unable to move from Pezun.

"Admiral," the captain said firmly, passing the microphone to Aeno. They exchanged looks and nodded.

"To all officers and men of the Earth Federation Forces Home Fleet X Detached Fleet," Aeno began. "This is Brian Aeno speaking. As of now, we are changing our orders from the Federation's High Command. We are to rendezvous with the soldiers of the Instructor Corps, now calling themselves the New Desides. In light of recent events, I, as a minor functionary, perceive that our concept of 'justice' lies with the New Desides. They argue that the Earth Sphere is ultimately for Earth, with Earth being the core. We should not succumb to the Spacenoids, who have risen amidst the chaos of past conflicts, and to the puppet government that has become their pawn. I judge that the Earth Federation Forces should not follow such an order. If you have pride in being an Earthnoid, never comply. Therefore, this is not a rebellion against the Earth Federation government or its military. The Earth Federation Forces are an army fighting for Earth. Recall the One Year War. Where did justice lie, on Earth or in the colonies? Those who disagree with my decision should leave the fleet within twelve hours. Only those who truly hold pride as Earthnoids should stand with me. I await your wise decision. Long live the Earth Federation. That is all."

The broadcast concluded with applause and cheers from the bridge crew of the *Bull Run*.

As this broadcast aired, a sense of unease spread among the officers and crew. Has the Admiral gone mad? But they also understood the sentiment that the Earth Federation couldn't become a puppet to the Spacenoids. Questions poured into the *Bull Run*, but once they realized that the Admiral wasn't insane, the communications between other ships increased. They were all uncertain of what judgment to make.

"The *Pasadena* and *Danan* have reported their intent to leave the fleet," the Captain informed Aeno, reading from a note handed to him by a communications officer.

Aeno nodded and ordered, "Arrange for those who wish to leave each ship to transfer to the transport vessels."

The fact that only two ships desired to withdraw was a testament to the lengthy tenure Aeno had enjoyed as the principal of the Federation Military Academy; most of the fleet's captains and senior officers were his former students.



Twelve hours passed. The *Pasadena*, *Danan*, and two *Columbus*-class transport ships detached from the fleet. This event would later be known as "The Admiral's Rebellion."

From then on, the Aeno Fleet broke contact with Federation Command and vanished.

As news of Aeno's fleet defection arrived, the Earth Federation Command plunged into panic. This fleet had advanced into space where pursuit was now impossible. Moreover, with this powerful fleet raising a rebellion, the strategy to conquer Pezun was completely upended.

Presently, the Aeno Fleet is heading toward the rear of Task Force Alpha. If they clash, Task Force Alpha wouldn't stand a chance. News of "The Admiral's Rebellion" was swiftly communicated to Task Force Alpha.

"What? Does this mean that our main force has almost entirely gone over to the enemy?!" Heathrow felt his strength drain.

"What is High Command saying about this?"

"Task Force Alpha is to withdraw from the current sector and move to the confrontation space area immediately. The Lunar Orbital Fleet will pursue the Aeno Fleet," came the reply.

"The Lunar Orbital Fleet..."

The Lunar Orbital Fleet, a patrol fleet that orbits the moon, based in Von Braun City, is less powerful than the Earth Fleet but has strength comparable to Aeno's fleet. Command intends to pit this fleet, which was patrolling a neighboring sector, against Aeno's.

The Lunar Orbital Fleet is now set to take the Aeno Fleet's place as the primary force in the assault on Pezun.

Meanwhile, at Penta, preparations for Y and Z Detached Fleets of the Home Fleet to depart were hastened.

What had until now been treated as an 'incident' within the Federation Forces was suddenly taking on the appearance of a 'war.' This was the worst-case scenario that the Earth Federation Forces, already seen as an ineffective organization due to its inability to curb the strife between the Titans and AEUG during the Gryps War, desperately needed to avoid. Once more, they were at risk of losing their already tarnished authority.

"Let me organize a strike team," Drake Pashley pleaded with Cod, a request he had repeated several times. "All I ask is a single cruiser under my command."

"What do you think, Tosh?" Cod turned to Cray, who was standing at his side, to seek his opinion.

"It's an utterly futile request," Cray replied, casting a cold glance at Pashley. "What can one measly cruiser do against a massive fleet? In our current situation of inadequate fleet strength, the notion of solo operations is simply irrational." Pashley was one of the core members of the rebellion that had led to the formation of the New Desides.

"You're not getting cold feet, are you?" At Cod's inquiry, Pashley was taken aback. The New Desides, having lost track of the Federation Forces due to communication jamming and laser communication interference, had dispatched team member Saotome to Earth for preliminary operations with Aeno.

Unbeknownst to them, their commander had actually started a rebellion.

They had regarded these preliminary operations as merely buying time. Naturally, they believed this fleet, commanded by Aeno, to be the main force for the assault on Pezun, as always. To the soldiers of New Desides, now forced to consider the entire Federation Forces as enemies, this fleet seemed overwhelmingly formidable. It wouldn't be surprising if some began to think that surrendering to the Earth Federation Forces might be a better option.

"I'm not scared," Pashley retorted sharply. "It's disheartening to be misconstrued that way. Now that our floating gun platforms have been silenced, I propose forming a mobile gun platform unit at Pezun's forward position. I didn't say I need an entire mobile suit unit with me."

"That's not the point, Drake," Cod replied firmly. "We simply don't have the ships to spare for such a trivial mission."

With a glare at Cray, Pashley stormed out of the command room.

"It might be wise to keep an eye on him. He has the look of a coward," Cod mused.

"Indeed, Tosh," Cray agreed. "I understand why the troops are uneasy. If we continue this standoff with the enemy, it's clear that our morale will crumble. Perhaps it's time to..."

"A purge," Cray interjected. "Certainly, we need discipline within our ranks. It will affect our future plans. Are you suggesting we make an example of Drake? In other words, you're telling me to execute him..."

"Exactly," Cod confirmed. "I'm not concerned, but we need to show the troops your loyalty to make them accept this."

"Understood," Cray nodded. "Josh and I will handle it. Speaking of which, about that plan, Cod. I've thought of a way to use Pezun."

"Oh? What is it?"

"We'll let them have Pezun and make our escape," Cray explained. "Once the enemy fleet approaches the now-empty Pezun, we detonate a nuclear device here and inflict damage."

"I see," Cod said thoughtfully. "But that would require us to effectively camouflage our withdrawal."

"We can have Pashley take care of the diversions and support," Cray suggested, his blue eyes emanating an eerie brown light. (Note: Brown signifies 'deception' in this context.) "He'll be executed as a traitor for communicating with the enemy. Everyone will accept that."

"Very shrewd," Cod admitted.

"We must make effective use of our limited forces," Cray insisted. "We will have him die for our cause."

"By the way," Cod queried, "are we in contact with the people in Ayers City as we plan our retreat?"

"Saotome is working on it," Cray replied. "We recovered a communication drone that suggests things are going smoothly. It's ironic. Our means of communication with the outside world have regressed to the age of sending letters."

Cray flicked a small optical disc between his thumb and forefinger, making it flutter.

"Heh, the enemy won't set foot on the lunar surface again. We have the upper hand now..."

"Captain, we have received a communication from the lunar orbit fleet," reported a crew member.

As ordered, Heathrow had positioned the fleet in the space sector opposite Pezun at a 180-degree angle. The entire fleet was already level one combat alert. Then, the laser communication arrived.

"Very well," Heathrow acknowledged.

"No signs of the Aeno fleet," the report continued. "They appear to have altered course."

"Changed course? They're not heading for Pezun? That can't be possible."

"That is correct," the crew member confirmed. "The lunar orbit fleet plans to rendezvous with us and initiate the assault on Pezun."

"What madness! What if that fleet strikes our rear during the assault?" Heathrow exclaimed.

Logically, Heathrow's outrage was warranted. However, the Earth Federation Forces were desperate to resolve the situation as quickly as possible.

Eight vessels from the lunar orbit fleet appeared nine hours later in Pezun's sector. The battle plan set by the Federation's command was to be followed as is: in essence, to trap Pezun by launching attacks from opposite directions with the two fleets.

Simultaneously, an emergency message was received from the Side 4 garrison forces. They had spotted the Aeno fleet and engaged them, reportedly destroying at least two ships. Fortunately, there were some AEUG ships undergoing repairs at Side 5 following the Colony Laser battle, bolstering their firepower.

However, the friendly forces suffered significant losses and seemed unable to pursue further. After the clash, the Aeno fleet vanished once again.

"Where is the Aeno fleet headed? The Moon? Side 3? Or... Confeito?"

Even after examining the Aeno fleet's projected course, Heathrow couldn't determine their destination. Any of those were possibilities. But at least he was now relieved of the worry of an ambush during the Pezun battle. Later, it would be revealed that the confrontation between the Aeno fleet and the Side 4 garrison was a planned move.

"The attack will commence tomorrow, the 7th, at 0600 Earth Standard Time. We'll proceed in two stages: ship artillery and mobile suit units."

As Heathrow relayed the Earth Federation High Command's orders, concern for the Aeno fleet's course still lingered.

The next day, March 7th, all the pilots on board the *Pegasus III* assembled in their cockpits in preparation for the upcoming operation. In addition to the S Gundam, Z Plus, and FAZZ pilots, pilots from three Nero units--another mobile suit squadron belonging to the *Pegasus III*--were present.

The leader of the Nero team was the battle-hardened veteran, Lieutenant Chung Yung. To the other pilots, he seemed as annoyingly vocal as Mannings.

Mannings started the operational briefing solemnly.

"At 0600, our fleet and the lunar orbit fleet will advance to effective firing range from both wings of Pezun and initiate artillery fire. Our mobile suit teams will sequentially launch with the third barrage of ship artillery fire to secure Pezun's port. The launch order for this ship is as follows: Ryuu Roots, S Gundam..."

"Me first? Hell no."

"How about I go instead? At least for now, my squad doesn't have any achievements, so I'll take out enemies right away," Crypt interjected.

"Listen up! This is an order. We cannot alter the launch sequence for your convenience. Moving on, the next are the two units from the Plus team..."

West seemed uneasy. The enemy's barrage during the SOL attack was the most terrifying moment of his life.

"You scared?" Crypt remarked sarcastically, giving West a playful knock on his head.

"After all, we're just supposed to fight recklessly and die first, right?"

When Roots responded by patting Crypt's shoulder, both of them were met with a fierce punch to their faces.

"Shit! That fuckin' hurt!"

Chung Yung from the Nero team stood before them.

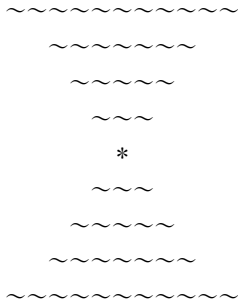
"Is this some kind of joke aimed at us? Idiots, psychopaths, cowards. If only we had Kansas's country girl, it would be like The Wizard of Oz. Listen up, you brats. Who the hell do you think you are? Don't let the fact that you're riding decent mobile suit go to your heads. Unfortunately, you are the main mobile suit force on this ship. We can't work with you if the main force acts like this. I'd gladly throw you out of the airlock right now!"

"Enough!"

Mannings shouted at the furious Chung Yung. However, the mutual distrust that had emerged wasn't something that could be easily dispelled.

The endless darkness of space was suddenly illuminated by bursts of light. At 0600, the curtains rose on the battle to capture Pezun. Both Task Force Alpha and the lunar orbit fleet released a barrage of powerful artillery fire.

BEAM BEAM BEAM BEAM BEAM BEAM BE



BEAM BEAM BEAM BEAM BEAM BEAM BE

Each ship's guns had been calibrated to fire with just fractions of a second's delay. Beams of energy successively obliterated the surrounding Pezun satellite missiles. Given the troubles Task Force Alpha encountered, any remnants that looked like they'd been transformed into missile satellites were swiftly obliterated. As the third volley fired, one after another, mobile suits were launched from the catapults.

The few satellite missiles that survived the barrage began moving towards the fleet. Recognizing this, Crypt's FAZZ squad instantly began to annihilate them with their High Mega Cannons. Last time, they hadn't had the time to deploy their mobile suits, and they'd suffered the loss of two ships, but this time was different.

"Damn, they're just rocks! We can't afford to fall behind..."

After the FAZZ team, in tandem with the fleet, had taken down most of the satellite missiles, they quickly approached Pezun.

Roots's S Gundam was in its standard humanoid mobile suit mode this time, and the Z Plus was similarly configured.

"Something's off..."

Entering the zone littered with non-functional floating gun platforms, Roots was taken aback by the eerie silence of the battlefield. He instinctively checked the enemy search data.

ENEMY ENEMY ENEMY ENEMY ENEMY EN

Enemy Search Radius: 13,000
Sector A: Green
Sector B: Red Range: 4,000
Sector C: Green
Sector D: Green
Sector E: Green
Sector F: Yellow Range: 10,000



ENEMY ENEMY ENEMY ENEMY ENEMY EN

"From the right?!"

The moment that thought crossed his mind, a beam shot towards him. Twisting the S Gundam's body downward to the right, the beam barely missed him.

"Damn it!" Roots swiftly turned towards the source of the beam.

"Ryuu, don't break formation!" It was West's voice.

"Shut it! There's an enemy out there!"

"Weren't we targeting Pezun?"

Red beams grew in number and intensity. A beam directly hit and obliterated a Nero that was passing through the right quadrant.

"Our allies are being slaughtered! I'm going in!" The S Gundam accelerated, heading straight for the source of the beams.

"Where are you going, Roots? Pezun is your target!" From the *Pegasus III* bridge, Mannings shouted into the mic, watching the glowing dot representing Roots's machine veer off on the tactical monitor.

"I've got incoming beams from the enemy. If we don't act, our casualties will increase. Ensure our ship guns don't hit me!"

"It's not your job to worry about allied casualties!"

Ignoring Mannings' furious shout, Roots pushed forward. Ahead, intermittently illuminated by the explosions from Pezun and the reflected beams of the ship guns, he spotted a blue mobile suit. He recognized it—the Instructor Corps specialized machine, the New Desides.

"Outta my way!" The S Gundam's shoulder beam cannons roared to life.

"A Gundam type, huh?"

The pilot of the blue Xeku-Eins, Josh Offshore, was taken aback by the approaching mobile suit. During the attack on SOL, its image was so different that he hadn't recognized it as a Gundam type. Offshore swiftly elevated his machine in anticipation of the incoming assault. Two streaks of light sliced through space.

"I've got the higher ground!" The words were driven by Roots's frustration, a gut feeling that Offshore was clearly more skilled than he was. The S Gundam moved to cut off the Xeku-Eins path—always direct, always linear.

"What's the matter, Gundam pilot? Think I'm just an amateur?" Watching the maneuver, Offshore scoffed. The way this mobile suit moved was entirely different from any he'd seen—it was entirely too naive and lax. He felt a surge of confidence.

"Hmph, just because you're in a Gundam..." Offshore aimed at the S Gundam that had appeared right in front of him. Point-blank range.

"... doesn't mean you're invincible!" With lightning speed, bullets sprayed from his machine gun. They struck the S Gundam's chest, sending shards of bright blue and yellow paint, along with fragments of Gundarium alloy, flying in all directions.

"That hurt..." Roots exclaimed, feeling a jolt in the cockpit. It wasn't from physical pain, but a visceral reaction.

ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM AL

CHEST HIT: 60% DAMAGE

CONDITION: RED

IMMEDIATE WITHDRAWAL FROM FRONTLINE REQUIRED

IMMEDIATE WITHDRAWAL FROM FRONTLINE REQUIRED

IMMEDIATE WITHDRAWAL FROM FRONTLINE REQUIRED

IMMEDIATE WITHDRAWAL FROM FRONTLINE REQUIRED

ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM AL

"Beep beep, boop boop, blah blah! Shut the fuck up!" Roots bellowed at the alarm ringing in his helmet.

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

• • • HURT? • • • hurt? • • • Hurt • • • Undecided • • •

• • • ANNOYING? • • • Annoying • • • Undecided • • •

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

Suddenly, the alarm ceased its wail. Roots briefly noted its absence, suspecting a mere circuitry glitch, and pressed on in piloting the S-Gundam. The Xeku-Eins in his sights were all he could see. Yet each time the S-Gundam poised to fire, the Xeku-Eins evaded with a swift, intricate maneuver.

"Who is this guy? A novice or a true fool?" Offshore felt an increasing irritation towards the persistently chasing S-Gundam. His squadron, alongside the Second Assault Team, had been orchestrated to give the impression that the New Desides still held Pezun, inflict minor damage on two or three enemy mobile suits, and then retreat to rendezvous with the fleet evacuating Pezun. But another urgent task weighed on him: the disposal of the traitor ordered by Cray. He couldn't afford to be late for their rendezvous.

"Best to settle this here, lest it becomes a nuisance later..."

As Offshore readied another shot, two beams streaked by at close range. Two triangular craft approached rapidly.

"Zeta mass production models!"

The same cutting-edge suits Cray had informed him about after the SOL assault.

"Are you holding up, Ryuu?"

West, recklessly deviating from his orders, had followed in pursuit of Roots.

"Spare me your needless concern! Focus on yourself, you nosy idiot!" Roots snapped. The Z Plus, having shifted to its high mobility mode, sped past him. This mode, while granting great speed, was less agile than its humanoid form. While distracted by the Z Plus, the Xeku took the opportunity to gain distance, melding into the vast cosmic void.

"Oh hell...!"

West, propelled ahead by the acceleration, gasped at the sight before him. Emerging from Pezun and heading straight below the fleet's attack direction,

the New Deside's vessels were launching at top speed. This wasn't a sortie; it was an escape.

"They're fleeing..." Realizing this, West quickly reported the scene via laser communication to *Pegasus III*.

"They're directly below the attack axis. Understood." Manning, having received the report, relayed it to Heathrow. It was instinct. With the retreat of their fleet and mobile suits, something was amiss. And with a man like Tosh Cray among the enemy, it had to be a trap.

"It's a trap. I'm going to issue orders to abort the operation. That's why we can't see their fleet."

Heathrow made his decision, and orders for the mission's immediate termination were broadcast urgently to all units via emergency frequencies and omnidirectional laser communication.

"What? Return? A trap, you say? Impossible..."

Faced with sporadic beam weapon resistance and almost about to latch onto Pezun's exterior, the FAZZ team under Crypt were ordered to return. "And I haven't downed a single one!" A frustration of no conquest welled up.

Heathrow instructed his communications officer to send an explanation of the withdrawal to both the Lunar Orbit Fleet Command and the Federation High Command.

A lone cruiser from the New Desides of the Lunar Orbit Fleet approached their fleet, signaling a ceasefire. Yet, the two accompanying mobile suits attacked, compelling a retaliation and the cruiser's subsequent destruction. Little did anyone know that aboard that cruiser were the New Desides rebels, including Pashley. And that the two "accompanying" mobile suits were Offshore's and Cray's Xeku, sent to eliminate them.

"What? They've caught on?"

Cod was on the bridge of the fleet flagship, the *Kilimanjaro*, tracking the movements of the Federation fleet and mobile suit units. The mobile suit unit was retreating from Pezun, moving towards their respective motherships.

"It was unavoidable, Brave," said Cray, laying a hand on the frustrated and visibly angered Cod's shoulder. "Now that they've noticed, blowing up Pezun won't have the impact we desire. Besides, our fleet hasn't reached a safe distance yet. If we detonate it early, we'll be caught in the blowback ourselves."

"So the destruction of Pezun will be in vain..." Cod murmured.

"No, not in vain," Cray assured. "It will be our firework, a declaration of our intent. We will pay back this debt."

The New Desides fleet was voyaging towards the "Promised Land," sailing with a heavy but firm resolve, much like the Israelites led by Moses through the wilderness.

"Prepare to detonate Pezun," Cod declared over the broadcast to all crew members, "as a testament to our resolve to reclaim Earth from the Spacenoids!"

As the fleet reached the safe zone, he engaged the remote detonator. There was no turning back now. For them, the only option left was to march forward

to new horizons. Crew members aboard each ship, eager to witness the final moment of what was once "home," crowded around any window or screen that offered a view.

After a brief delay, the nuclear bombs planted within Pezun received the detonation signal. In unison, they erupted, reducing the asteroid to cosmic dust. The brilliance of the explosion was so intense that it could be observed with the naked eye from the Earth, now welcoming its twilight.

This light was the will of New Desides. And at the same time, it was the distant harbinger of a tragedy that would eventually engulf the lunar cities as well...

PART.2 BATTLE ON THE LUNAR SURFACE

Chapter.05

Dream on the Moon

Ayers, the lunar autonomous city. This city, with its unique origin as an observatory base established for the first time on the far side of the Moon, had a distinct identity. Most of its residents were descendants of former observatory base personnel, which was unusual for lunar autonomous city residents. They had a rare desire to return to Earth, driven by their location and environmental conditions preventing them from ever seeing Earth again.

Yes, Ayers City stood out among the lunar autonomous city clusters as an exceptionally conservative city.

During the Gryps War, the Ayers Militia, a reserve force organized for the city's defense, served as rear-line forces for the Titans, guarding the Colony Laser. These residents had lived believing that serving Earth was their duty, so it was only natural for them to join the Titans, who espoused Earth supremacy. As is well known, this battle ended with a narrow victory for the AEUG, and the wounded Ayers Militia Fleet returned with its soldiers. However, other Titans personnel were among this fleet who had nowhere to go.

Kaiser Pinefield, the mayor of Ayers City, accepted these personnel into Ayers City and continuously refused extradition requests from the Earth Federation government, considering them interference in the city's internal affairs. Of course, Pinefield believed that the current Earth Federation government was a puppet regime of the AEUG. Now, Ayers City was the last hope for the remnants of the Titans.

Behind this movement was one individual, a man named Mike Saotome. However, his real name and background were entirely different from the data registered with the Earth Federation Forces.

During the Pezun Rebellion, Saotome had been ordered by Cray to engage in subversive activities against dissidents in the Earth Federation military—those dissatisfied with the current Earth Federation military and government—as well as the lunar autonomous cities. He was not a mobile suit pilot for the Instructor Corps; he was an intelligence officer who had previously served in the Federation's intelligence division. His background had earned him Cray's trust. Now, he was sitting on a bench in the deserted observation area of Ayers City.

Nothing but the stars could be seen as usual in the plexiglass observation dome. No one else was around, except for Saotome. Since long before, the residents of Ayers City had always refused to look at space, clinging to the simulated blue sky projected on the small dome ceiling of their residential district. In the distance, Saotome's hometown appeared as a small point of light.

Side 3. Space colonies floating at the Lagrange Point (L2) on the far side of the Moon. Once known as the Principality of Zeon, this colony had renamed itself the Republic and was now under the firm supervision of the Earth Federation government.

"Someday..." he muttered to himself.

Someday, he would bring glory back to his homeland. After the One Year War, he obtained a military position within the Earth Federation under a false name, hiding in the shadows. His current name belonged to an Eastern soldier who had perished in the One Year War, serving in a unit that had been completely wiped out. It was ironic that there were remnants of Zeon so close to a unit that was ostensibly hunting down Zeon remnants.

Eight years in hiding.

After the One Year War, the remnants of Zeon had returned to the Earth Sphere, taking refuge in the asteroid base Axis. While Haman Karn was the de facto leader, as long as they had Mineva Zabi, the orphaned heir of the Zabi family, Axis remained unchanged as the "Principality of Zeon." He was convinced that the day when his homeland would regain its glory was near. To achieve this, expanding this incident would effectively weaken the Federation's military power.

Saotome stood up and walked towards the elevator leading to the underground residential district. Various people's "thoughts" were intertwined in this incident.

While they had managed to avoid being directly caught in the explosion at Pezun, several ships from Task Force Alpha and the lunar orbit fleet had suffered damage from the debris caused by the blast. The lunar orbit fleet had docked at the nearest space colonies, Side 2, and was currently undergoing emergency repairs.

Adding to their troubles, this fleet had almost exhausted its propellant due to the abrupt maneuvers during the evacuation to avoid the Pezun explosion, and they needed refueling. However, Task Force Alpha had no such luxury. The Earth Federation's Central Command had immediately ordered the pursuit of the New Desides Fleet. But due to the evasive maneuvers required to avoid the Pezun explosion debris, Task Force Alpha had to spread out over a vast expanse of space, delaying the time needed to reorganize their fleet formation and giving the New Desides Fleet a half-day to a day's head start.

The two detached fleets of the main home fleet were not allowed to depart from Penta until they could ascertain the whereabouts of the New Desides.

It was March 10th, Universal Century 0088.

"Castling, huh?"

Heathrow muttered as he looked at the white and brown chessboard displayed on the monitor in the captain's quarters of the *Pegasus III*. He placed a black pawn, moved by the chess software named "Sargon-20," in front of the king piece at the edge of the position he had created with his white pieces. He then pressed the keys on the keyboard to exchange it with the rook piece that

had been positioned at the far right end of the board. This special exchange of the king and rook pieces in chess was known as "castling."

CHESS CHESS CHESS CHESS CHESS CH

PAWN ROOK PAWN
PAWN →PAWN KING
PAWN PAWN ROOK
KING

CHESS CHESS CHESS CHESS CHESS CH

As a result, Heathrow's king was swiftly shifted, replacing its position with that of the rook, finding sanctuary within the quadrilateral wall crafted by the other pieces.

"So, they abandoned Pezun and fled... The question is, which square did they escape to?" Heathrow likened the New Desides' strategy to a game of chess. He tried to fit Pezun into the role of the rook and the main New Desides force as the king.

"The Aeno Fleet could be compared to the knight, I suppose..."

Heathrow contemplated the still untraceable Aeno Fleet, considering them as pieces known for their mobility in chess. Just then, the intercom buzzed softly, indicating a visitor.

"Captain, it's Lieutenant Mannings. May I come in?" A low voice came through the intercom.

"Very well, come in," Heathrow replied, unlocking the door to his quarters.

"I have something I'd like to discuss..." Mannings said as he entered.

"Of course, please have a seat. I've been quite busy since leaving Pezun, and I was just thinking it's about time we had a leisurely chat," Heathrow offered a chair, and Mannings seated himself while favoring his right leg.

"Now, what's on your mind?"

"It's a rather personal matter. It may not immediately affect our strategy, but it's about a man who's on the enemy's side."

"Oh? That's intriguing. Knowing our enemy's quirks is important even if it doesn't directly impact our overall strategy. Care for a 'pick-me-up'? It's a potent one from twelve years ago. I got it from the medical bay. A little captain's privilege, you know."

Heathrow gestured toward a cabinet in the room. There was a blue bottle of "Navy Rum." Alcohol was prohibited on military ships, a tradition that remained from the previous century. However, in naval ships of the previous century, there was alcohol stored in locked cabinets called "medicine for seasickness" or "sober-up medicine," and the captain typically held the key. This tradition was still followed on space vessels even in the space age.

"No, thank you. I don't drink," Mannings declined. Heathrow looked slightly disappointed at his response. He didn't particularly care for alcohol himself. However, he knew every "seasoned subordinate" was a drinker, and he had



used alcohol to bond with them, but that little initiative of offering a drink was meaningless with Mannings, hence his faint disappointment.

"Very well, let's hear it. Tell me about this man on the enemy's side..."

Mannings began to speak after receiving a tube of tea.

"In the previous war, this man was in the same unit as me. You could say he was my comrade. He was an exceptionally sharp-witted man, to the point that everyone wondered why he settled for being a mobile suit pilot. His catchphrase was that he wanted to create an independent nation he believed in."

"An independent nation? That's quite ambitious. Is he planning to take over a colony or something?"

"No. He said it was based on an essay he published in a third-rate political magazine during his student days. It should have been titled 'True Colonialism.' According to him, humans should live on solid ground, and true space colonies capable of declaring autonomy can only exist on celestial bodies other than Earth that have been terraformed and developed to be habitable. Space colonies, being artificial living spaces, can never break free from Earth's control economically or politically because they lack the economic infrastructure to negotiate with Earth as equals as an independent nation."

"That might be true to some extent. Look at our current landscape. A few colonies have started to become self-sufficient in terms of resource production and energy supply to Earth using their solar power satellites, and they even supply minerals by mining asteroids that were hauled in. However, these actions wouldn't have a significant impact on the Earth's economy. But the fact that colonies are gradually becoming self-sufficient is noteworthy."

"Captain, to be frank, as long as that man is on the enemy's side, I believe the New Desides are heading for Luna."

"I see. I had vaguely considered that possibility myself, but what you said has solidified my conviction. I thought that the New Desides might be forming an alliance with Side 3 or remnants of Zeon not just out of anti-Federation sentiment, but the character of that man makes it extremely unlikely. Perhaps we've been deceived by their anti-Federation appeal. No, it's our own fault for simplistically equating anti-Federation with 'Zeon' from the beginning. They are not Zeon. They have a distinct anti-Federation stance. They're anti-Spacenoid. And on top of that, strategically, we've been manipulated quite effectively by the knight."

"What do you mean?"

"The Aeno Fleet. I don't know if Admiral Aeno's rebellion was intentional or not, but thanks to the lunar orbit fleet entering our space, the area around the Moon is now defenseless. Moreover, the garrison units of Side 4 have been hit, so the New Desides can easily enter Luna. The garrison units of Side 3 can't move either, as they're preparing for possible incursions by Axis's colony occupation forces. It's the homeland of Zeon, after all..."

Heathrow glanced at the chessboard on the monitor again. Luna... It seemed that bloodshed couldn't be avoided.

"Lieutenant Mannings, could you tell me more about this man? Um, what's his name?"

"He goes by Tosh Cray."

"Could you tell me more about this Cray fellow?"

Having slipped away from Pezun, the New Desides fleet was now on a direct course for Luna. They were heading south, which was toward the lower side of the moon, using the moon's orbital path as a reference. Meanwhile, the Aeno Fleet, which had engaged in battle with the garrison forces of Side 4, had not yet set course. Instead, they remained lurking in the L1 shoal zone to assess the timing of their rendezvous with the New Desides. Currently, they were conducting emergency repairs on their damaged ships.

The shoal zone was a sector of space littered with debris from the One Year War and colony construction, where Minovsky particles - though thinner than eight years ago - still existed at high densities that severely interfered with radar and other electronics. Thus, radar was useless in such an area, and spaceship and mobile suit navigation had to rely on visual observation. It was an ideal space for a fleet to hide.

For Aeno, who had firmly decided to join the New Desides, the fleet's destination had always been Luna. Based on the intel from the members of the Instructor Corps who had visited him, their ultimate destination could only be Luna. From the beginning, Aeno's plan was to hide in the shoal zone near the moon to rendezvous with them. While they had anticipated some conflict with the garrison forces of Side 4, losing the two cruisers, the *Panama* and *Dortmund*, had been a setback. The *Panama*, especially, even though its primary weapons became inoperative, had bravely shielded the Bull Run before being destroyed. However, fortunately, Aeno himself was unaware that this engagement had relieved some of the burden on the New Desides, who were en route to Luna.

"Admiral, it appears that Pezun has been destroyed," a voice came through the intercom in his quarters. The voice belonged to the captain, who was overseeing the emergency repairs on the bridge.

"Did the pursuit team destroy it?"

"No, it seems to be the work of the New Desides. They escaped, and the New Federation has not yet located them."

The term "New Federation" was a derogatory nickname for the current Earth Federation government. Among the fugitive fleet, there was not a single person who recognized the current Federation government anymore.

"I see. Can we still not establish contact with them?"

"I've instructed the communication officer to try, but we can't get lasercom sync."

"I see. Well, it's certain they're headed for Luna. Prioritize the repairs on the damaged ships."

Aeno switched off the intercom and let out a heavy sigh. The New Desides likely didn't know of the Aeno fleet's rebellion yet. They had to avoid friendly fire at all costs.

March 12, Universal Century 0088.

As the New Desides fleet drew closer to Luna, they intensified their alert status. Unaware that the lunar orbital fleet was the main force for capturing Pezun, they had prepared to confront them.

"Hey, all the assault teams are on standby, right?" Cod asked, pressing his helmet against Cray's.

"They've been on standby for fifteen minutes. We're good."

"What about the Zwei? Was the tuning completed?"

"Why the sudden interest? Heh...," Cray scrutinized Cod's expression behind his helmet.

"You're itching to get back into combat after so long, aren't you? I can see it on your face."

"Can you tell?" Cod grinned, like a child getting something they desired.

"It's written all over your face. But, Brave, you're the leader of the New Desides. As harsh as it may sound, you can't be part of the fray. Losing our leader, even in a million-to-one chance, is not a risk we can take."

"Do you really think I'll be killed by those spineless new government lackeys?" Cod seemed somewhat disappointed.

"When it comes to combat, you revert to being a foot soldier and forget that you're the leader. That's why."

"Pish posh. I was never cut out to be an organizer anyway. Strategic thinking isn't my forte. You're more suited for that role, Tosh."

"That's not true. You have more drive to act than I do. That drive is what our organization needs right now. Brains are easy to find, but drive is innate. Call it leadership or charisma. Brains alone can't direct people. That's why you have to be the leader. I don't want you wasting that ability as just another foot soldier in combat."

Cray's words mirrored the image of a CEO of a one-man corporation. If the systematic mega-corporations were the Earth Federation Forces, then the only way to counter them was either to create an equally large organization or, in a small organization, follow a charismatic leader where everyone rallied towards a common goal. Cray had applied the latter organizational theory to the New Desides.

"We're reaching lunar orbit!" the astronavigator informed Cod via personal communication.

"That's strange. The lunar orbital fleet should be heading towards us for interception by now..."

With the level one combat alert status still in place, the New Desides fleet proceeded to the lunar orbit on a shallow angle. Then, a communications officer interrupted.

"Lieutenant Cod, a communication laser has been performing square searches in this area for a while now..."

"Isn't it the usual offer to surrender?"

"I'm not sure. It's focused on a fairly narrow search area, and the transmissions are irregular."

"Then it's not a broad area communication. Synchronize with it," Cray interjected.

The communication officer worked the panel's switches, orienting the directional communication antenna of the *Kilimanjaro* towards the transmission source.

"The source is identified in the direction of Side 4. It's a text message. I'll read it... 'We do not consider it brave to follow a puppet government. We are those who believe there is "justice" within the New Desides. We wish to stand together with you. Where shall we join forces?'"

The comms officer paused, then continued in a louder, clearer voice, "From Earth Federation Forces Admiral Brian Aeno!"

"Admiral Aeno?!" Cod's face instantly brightened.

"Saotome's persuasion efforts paid off. We're not alone anymore!" Even the usually stoic Cray smiled. Though he feigned composure, he too had been anxious about fighting with just one fleet.

Thirty minutes later, the New Desides fleet reached the lunar orbit transit station over Ayers City.

"This is the New Desides fleet flagship *Kilimanjaro*. We request immediate permission to dock."

At the port authority in the central dome of Ayers City on the lunar surface, the tired young face of a communications officer appeared on the monitor. The middle-aged controller had received word from the mayor about their arrival, but due to the scheduled arrival of a regular communication shuttle, he decided to follow protocol.

"Please wait for about twenty minutes. We have a regular communication shuttle arriving. Sorry, but we're at full capacity right now," the control officer responded apologetically. But then, a man's hand suddenly grabbed his shoulder from behind.

"Let them dock immediately. We can delay the regular shuttle," the man said, causing the controller to turn around in surprise.

"Mayor..."

The controller nodded at the mayor of Ayers City, Kaiser Pinefield, and redirected his attention to the monitor. The young communications officer on the screen was taken aback upon seeing Pinefield's image.

"Mayor Pinefield, I presume. I'll hand you over to the commander now."

The next face on the monitor, a battle-hardened man whose features were largely obscured by a normal suit helmet - New Desides leader, Brave Cod.

"You've done well," the mayor said.

"Mayor Pinefield, it is we who are eternally grateful for your assistance," replied Cod.

"Please, I don't deserve your thanks. You are no longer just allies; you are family. We heard of your determination from Saotome. We welcome you from the bottom of our hearts. It's the only thing I can do to make up for the shame of fleeing that battle."

During the Colony Laser battle, Pinefield had taken command of the Ayers City Militia. However, just before the battle began, his concerned subordinates forced him back to Ayers City. Regardless of the circumstances, it was essentially seen as desertion in the face of the enemy. He had accepted that disgrace without complaint. He was well aware that he had betrayed his subordinates and the citizens. For him, the New Desides' offer was the last chance to redeem himself for the disgrace he had brought upon himself. He had firmly reminded himself that he must not betray his subordinates and the citizens again, no matter what.

"Ho, quite the formidable force we have here, isn't it? Four cruisers, no less. With Admiral Aeno's fleet added to our six ships, we'll have a mighty armada at our disposal. Conquering the moon will be a piece of cake," Cod mused in ecstatic delight as he gazed upon the Ayers civilian militia ships docked at the communication station visible from the bridge.

"Brave, we aren't looking to conquer the moon through sheer force. Besides, the ships here seem a tad outdated. I'd reckon their individual combat capabilities are about forty percent of the government ships. Overestimating them could be dangerous," Cray cautioned, pouring cold water on Cod's enthusiasm.

"Come on, Cray. Victory in battle isn't just about weapons; it's about skill. Besides, from what we heard earlier, Admiral Aeno has brought plenty of new weaponry with him. We have nothing to worry about. A single decisive battle here will likely dispel any discontent among the troops! And then, if we can realize the 'Lunar City Alliance' plan you devised, it'll be a cause for celebration, won't it?"

The "Lunar City Alliance" plan, devised by Cray, was a bold one. It aimed to establish independent lunar autonomous cities, which, despite residing in space, had a unique position on the surface of a celestial body with gravity, forming a united nation to counter the Earth Federation government. In a sense, it could be seen as a second coming of Zeon.

"Truth be told, you're itching for a battle the most, aren't you? Fine, I get it. If you promise not to overdo it, I won't object to you heading out. But never forget that you're the commander here," Cray said, his voice stern yet understanding.

Upon hearing this, a childlike grin spread across Cod's face.

"No worries there. As a little extra, could I get some of those new weapons Aeno is carrying?"

"Are you talking about the Mk-V?"

"Yeah, that's it. A capable pilot paired with a mobile suit can potentially alter the course of the war. Remember the feats of Amuro Ray during the One Year

War? We can do it; if you give them to me, I'll show you what I can do," Cod declared, laughing heartily.

On the same day, the New Desides fleet appeared in lunar orbit. This news was promptly relayed to the pursuing Task Force Alpha. On the other hand, the main Pezun fleet, which had been on standby for deployment, also set out for the moon. However, at the normal cruising speed, it seemed it would take another two days to reach the moon.

At Lagrange Point 5, on the opposite side of the Moon from L4, floated the asteroid Confeito in the vicinity of Side 1 colony cluster there. This small asteroid had served as the Principality of Zeon's space fortress Solomon during the One Year War. Logically, the Federation fleet stationed here should also be dispatched, but they couldn't recklessly leave the asteroid in case the Axis forces made a move.

"We sure are cursed with bad luck," Heathrow muttered as he sat in the captain's seat on the bridge of the *Pegasus III*. The problem was that the *Pegasus III's* ship speed was too fast. Its high performance made it invaluable. The Gundam-type mobile suit pilots assigned to this ship felt the same way.

"Captain, we'll be in lunar orbit in another twenty-four hours," a helmsman announced.

"Order all ships in the fleet to begin deceleration. Get Lieutenant Mannings for me. We need to discuss the descent operation. Also, transfer the mobile suit company commanders from each ship over to us," Heathrow instructed.

After calling Mannings, Heathrow left his captain's seat and headed for the briefing room.

"Captain to the briefing room!" A duty officer bellowed, and the announcement reverberated throughout the bridge.

"Our primary objective is to strike the New Desides fleet, before they can fully deploy," Mannings declared firmly, standing before the assembled mobile suit team commanders in the *Pegasus III's* briefing room.

"We are approximately twenty-four hours behind them, an offset that can only be compensated for by a surprise attack. It will be challenging for them to establish defensive perimeters around the fleet and within Ayers City within this timeframe. They won't have the luxury to deploy mass drivers or gun turrets, relying instead on their ships, mobile suits, and Ayers civilian militia for defensive maneuvers. Given your skillsets, piercing through their sluggish artillery to secure a descent window to Ayers City should be an easy task."

A murmur of subdued laughter rippled through the room.

"Commander, any news on the movement of the renegade fleet?" Chung Yung asked, raising his hand.

"At present, nothing definitive. But based on their trajectory and time needed to recover from engaging the Side 4 forces, they should still be about twenty-four hours behind us. That fleet was on roughly the same course

toward Pezun from our rear. The last known engagement was at Side 4. Most likely, the rebellion and the destruction of Pezun were not pre-arranged, so they would have visually confirmed both events. Therefore, the arrival of the renegade fleet is expected to be later than ours. No need to worry."

"But isn't it possible that the rebellion and the destruction were coordinated?" someone asked.

"The probability is low. The New Desides must have planned to hole up at Pezun to some degree. Well, at least until SOL had been destroyed by the S Gundam."

A collective sigh of relief swept through the room, with heads nodding in agreement.

"The main fleet expected to arrive in two days possesses sufficient power to hold back the renegade fleet, which is also expected to arrive around the same time. However, if both forces engage in an all-out battle, they would be evenly matched. Therefore, it's imperative that we weaken the New Desides fleet as much as possible before then..."

"So we're just clearing the way, huh?" blurted out Roots. He and the other Gundam-type pilots had the same qualifications as the mobile suit company commanders and were attending the mission briefing.

ORDER ORDER ORDER ORDER ORDER OR

110th MS SQUADRON (attached to PEGASUS III)

* Gundam Team (Treated as two company)

S Gundam x 1

Zeta Plus x 2

1 FAZZ company

* 1 Nero Company

112th MS SQUADRON (attached to REPULSE)

* 3 Nero Company

114th MS SQUADRON (attached to STYKKISHOLMUR)

* 3 Nero Company

206th MS SQUADRON (attached to ULYSSES)

* 3 Nero Company

207th MS SQUADRON (attached to CUMBERLAND)

* 3 Nero Company

ORDER ORDER ORDER ORDER ORDER OR

"You got a problem with clearing the way, kid? The commander's calling the shots here. You should just say, 'Yes, sir,' and follow orders!" Chung Yung barked angrily, drawing the attention of the other company commanders to this exchange.

"I hate being told what to do by the likes of you. You guys there..." Roots stood up, chin jutting towards Mannings. "You guys are just happy to die if that high-and-mighty there orders it, huh? Disgusting. If I'm gonna die, it'll be on my own terms, not because someone ordered me to..."

"That's how the military works! It's an organization. Once you've enlisted, you're a cog in the machine!" Chung Yung retorted.

"Well, I'm not having it. If you guys are so eager to die, go ahead without me."

Watching this exchange, Mannings felt a growing sense of crisis. Not only was Roots causing trouble with his own mobile suit squadron but with other commanders as well. Discord at such a critical juncture would be extremely problematic.

"I won't let any of you die. Rest assured," Mannings thundered.

"The primary assault in this operation, the fleet's annihilation, will be carried out by the Superior, Plus, and FAZZ Gundams. Each mobile suit company will engage the enemy mobile suits deployed around the fleet in standard formation. The operation will commence at 1000 hours on the 13th, Earth Standard Time. I wish you all the best of luck!"

While grappling with the issue of Roots and his team, who had become a problem for the entire mobile suit companies of the fleet, the operation proceeded to its scheduled time...

Dawn broke on the 13th, an ominous day in Western superstition, seemingly foreshadowing ill fate for Task Force Alpha.

On this day, at 0400 Earth Standard Time, the Aeno fleet, having departed from the shoal zone in L1 after establishing contact with the New Desides, took on a spherical formation and arrived in lunar orbit, leaving a thin, elongated trail of propulsion light. This was a fatal strategic error as the two fleets converged before Task Force Alpha could reach lunar orbit.

The two assault landing ships in Aeno's fleet pointed their massive thrusters toward the surface of Ayers City's spaceport, spewing out huge explosive tongues of flame as they began a slow descent at a steep angle, their bellies full of mobile suits, including GMs.

"It's an optical signal from the Bull Run!" a watch officer on the bridge reported to Cod, identifying the small approaching light as the *Kilimanjaro*.

"It's Admiral Aeno!"

The small flickering light gradually took the shape of a battleship in the vast expanse of space outside the bridge windows, and Aeno's flagship, the *Bull Run*, appeared. The Bull Run positioned itself on the port side of the *Kilimanjaro*. Crew members rushed to the port-side windows to catch a glimpse.

"Lieutenant Cod. It's been a while. Since the last war, right?"

As the voice from the laser communication resounded on the *Kilimanjaro* bridge, Aeno saluted. Cod remembered receiving a unit commendation directly from Aeno during the One Year War.

"I brought a little gift for the Ayers City Militia and the New Desides. And, of course, new weapons too..."

At that moment, it became clear that with the arrival of the Aeno fleet, Task Force Alpha alone stood little chance of turning the tide.

March 13th 0100 Earth Standard Time.

From the bridge of the *Pegasus III*, space looked alive, filled with fireflies dancing in the void. Every mobile suit of the fleet, led by the S-Gundam, had been dispatched. Most of them were Neros. Out of the entire mobile suit forces on the fleet, one-third, fifteen units, were left as the fleet's direct defense, while the other mobile units headed toward the region where it seemed the New Desides fleet had deployed. Their mission: obliterate the enemy fleet and secure the Ayers City before the arrival of the Aeno fleet. To achieve this, half of them, fifteen mobile suits, were equipped with landing devices designed for lunar descent. Of course, they had no idea of the fate awaiting them...

The first tragedy befell 112th squadron's nine Neros. One of the lead Neros suddenly bloated grotesquely before detonating.

"What the...?"

Blinding blue-white beams crisscrossed the Nero squadron, marking the beginning of a deadly showtime.

"Is it an ambush?!"

"There must be at least three squadrons here!"

"Where are they shooting from?"

The Neros were instantly plunged into chaos, angry shouts flying over squad channels. In an instant, something whizzed by, and two Neros exploded one after the other. The pilots thrust into the oxygen-deprived hell without knowing who or what had attacked them.

As the flames of life extinguished, brief flashes of brilliance blossomed. The 112th MS Squadron literally disappeared in a matter of minutes. If someone had observed this scene from a distance, they would have seen a shower of light falling intermittently from various directions before the blossoms of light appeared.

Amidst the wreckage that once was the 112th Squadron, a blue mobile suit emerged, its body covered in white markings, reminiscent of tribal tattoos. Its visage was that of a fierce deity, unmistakably a "Gundam." Two small disc-like devices swiftly returned to the shoulders of the "Gundam," locking in place as its eyes glowed with an ominous glint.

The secret project, the new equipment "G," also known as the G-V. Within the Federation Forces, it was formally designated the Gundam Mk-V.

"An INCOM System, huh? Excellent," its pilot, Cod, mused, licking his lips.

"The 112th MS Squadron has been wiped out!"

"What?!"

On the *Pegasus III*'s bridge, the squadron's IFF signal suddenly vanished from the monitor.

"Did they get ambushed? The enemy has already finished deploying? No, it can't be..." Thoughts of the worst scenarios flashed through Heathrow's mind. If it was an ambush, there had to be a considerable number of mobile suits

working as a guerrilla force. The Ayers City Militia wasn't this formidable... The conclusion was clear. It was the Aeno fleet.

"We're in trouble! Instruct all units to divert their invasion routes, now!!" Heathrow shouted, jumping to his feet so abruptly that his captain's hat floated away in the zero gravity.

"It's no use, sir," the comms officer replied, voice tinged with defeat. "Comms jamming is in full effect to maximize the surprise attack!"

As the officer's words echoed through the bridge, faces turned ashen, and a tangible dread settled over the crew.

Chapter.06

Logistic Bomb

In the cockpit of the Nero, leading the assault squadron, the pilot's breath hitched. A square window on the linear seat's panoramic monitor opened, zooming in on the scene ahead. There, in the void, an endless array of deep blue mobile suits adorned with the New Desides colors floated. Their battleships and cruisers loomed behind, guns ominously aimed in their direction.

"It's an ambush!" The pilot's realization came in a sharp, urgent exclamation.

With a swift movement, the pilot slammed the red emergency switch beside the console. Purple flares shot from the craft's brow, spiraling upwards before exploding, casting a persistent pale violet glow.

PURPLE PURPLE PURPLE

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PURPLE PURPLE PURPLE

"Purple flares ahead! Break radio silence; the surprise attack's blown!"

The S Gundam, just behind the second Nero wave, abruptly transformed out of Cruiser Mode. It floated, centered, and vigilant. Upon seeing the flares, Roots's realization was immediate: they had walked into a trap. But it was already too late, and Roots realized he wasn't the only one who had seen them.

"Show them a real space battle! Artillery firing range: 15,000! Fire at will!" Admiral Aeno's voice thundered from the Bull Run, now aligned with the New Desides forces. From the New Desides ships, beams of light lanced through the darkness, accompanied by a relentless barrage of missiles. They surged forth like malevolent hands, eager to engulf the Nero vanguard and drag it into the abyss.

It was likely Task Force Alpha that had launched the attack.

"Time to test if that rookie ensign has the makings of a senior officer after all."

In his mind's eye, he pictured the promising cadet, the one who had graduated top of his Federation Academy class. If the boy could best Aeno in this battle, he would prove himself a worthy successor. Within the old Admiral stirred a sensation akin to fatherly pride for the young officer. But of course, he had no intention of losing to his 'son' either. Having personally handed the young officer his graduation certificate, Aeno was intimately aware of his weaknesses. Top students never failed to act by the book.

"Vanguard mobile suit team annihilated," reported the comms officer, his voice devoid of emotion. Heathrow leaned forward, his eyes narrowing in focus. A moment later, he cursed under his breath and slumped back into his chair, weighed down by frustration.

"Deploy M warheads," he ordered. "Request their launch from all ships and expedite the recovery of our mobile suit squadrons!"

Mannings, overseeing the mobile suit forces from the bridge, was aghast.

"M warheads? The use of Minovsky particle weapons is prohibited under the Granada Treaty! Doesn't it require authorization from the high command?"

M warheads: specialized weapons designed to neutralize long and medium-range beam attacks through the effects of beam disruption screens and the dispersal of high-density Minovsky particles. After the conclusion of the One Year War, a treaty was signed in the lunar city of Granada that not only reaffirmed the ban on the use of nuclear weapons but also included a clause prohibiting the military use of Minovsky particles, except for fusion reactors, shields, mega-particle cannons, and I-field barriers.

The excessive use of Minovsky particles during the One Year War had caused various problems in society afterward, and the direct dispersion of Minovsky particles had been considered "pollution of the Earth Sphere," comparable to the crisis of ozone layer destruction by CFC gases in the previous century. The Earth Federation government, influenced by the AEUG, had strictly forbidden their military use in line with their "Purification of the Earth Sphere" doctrine. Now, Heathrow was about to remove those shackles, a decision that understandably unnerved Manning.

"Uncharacteristically reckless for a by-the-book commander," he spat out angrily, "And besides, it's too damn late for M warheads now!"

In a burst of frustration, Heathrow pounded his fist against the console in front of the comms officer. Once again, his poor judgment had cost them dearly. Where he had assumed there could be no enemy presence, a whole battlegroup lay concealed in wait. In an instant, the simultaneous barrage from battleships and cruisers obliterated nine mobile suits. A deep-seated regret from the One Year War resurfaced within him, stirring old emotions. Out of the thirty units in the attack team, only twelve remained. Their hope now rested on being the first to breach Ayers City.

"Captain, we've received a message from the S Gundam: 'Enemy mobile suits show no movement - they're likely decoys.'" relayed the communications officer, translating Roots' colorful language.

"What?! Decoys? Then the main mobile suit force is already at Ayers City..."

A series of worst-case scenarios unfolded rapidly.

At the helm of the S Gundam, Roots deftly sliced through the rubber-vinyl Xeku decoys using low-powered beam cannon fire.

"What the hell are you doing?" Crypt shouted, closing in from behind in his FAZZ unit.

"Just what it looks like! Where are the others?" Roots replied.

"The fleet attack team's been wiped out. The rest are descending to Ayers."

"Who the fuck decided that? Even with the Gundams, with just six of us, we can't fend off a fleet. There's no enemy mobile suits here. We have to act now!"

But then, a message from the Nero team arrived.

"Hey big shots, you takin' on the whole enemy fleet by yourselves back there? Draw their fire good, y'hear!"

"Shit," he spat, turning the S Gundam around.

"Mickey Mouse sons of bitches," he grumbled under his breath.

With the Nero fleet attack team annihilated, he had no choice but to support the lunar descent team.

Chung Yung, part of the descending team, set the Nero's IMPC mode and began the lunar descent sequence.

IMPC IMPC IMPC IMPC

Mode: 4 Landing Approach

Setting: Surface Descent

Environment: Lunar Surface Normal Environment

Assistive Device: Equipped

Auto Mode Initiated

Time: 1200



IMPC IMPC IMPC IMPC

He inputs the descent coordinates, and the system operates smoothly. Yet, in this realm of human endeavor, mischief lurked like a capricious fairy, ready to toy with their fates. As the descent timer's countdown inexorably ticked away, the moment it hit 666...

IMPC IMPC IMPC IMPC IMPC

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0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

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0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

IMPC IMPC IMPC IMPC IMPC

"What the hell?!"

The monitor erupted in a chaos of incomprehensible text, its flashing colors framing the mocking words "SHAME ON YOU!" The Nero's IMPC was sabotaged, swiftly losing control. A latent virus in the combat data ravaged the Nero's databank, corrupting it and reducing it to nothing more than a hollow shell of machinery in an instant.

This thwarted any attempt by the Federation Forces at a moon landing, all due to the insidious logistic bomb planted by the New Desides. As the Instructor Corps was responsible for combat data uploads to all mobile suit forces, they had exploited that access. Anticipating Luna would become a battlefield, the New Desides had embedded a program to destroy any IMPC interface during descent sequences. Unaware of this, a former Instructor Corps analyst, returned to Earth, brought back the latest combat data. The Federation, not suspecting a planned rebellion from the Instructor Corps, fell for what was, in this era, a primitive trap. The single miscalculation made by the New Desides was that the logic bomb had been intended to sow maximum chaos during the Federation's all-out attack, but instead prematurely triggered now during Task Force Alpha's solo sortie, rendering it useless for future surprise attacks.

"Manual control! We do it manually!"

At this altitude, recalibrating to ascent vector could still give them a fighting chance. But the two Neros ahead, like overturned turtles, fell straight down like plumb bobs. Chung Yung gritted his teeth, struggling to shut out the haunting screams of the pilots, but it was a futile effort. Losing focus now would doom him as well. Panic was the path to defeat.

"I won't die, not like this!"

Cutting off the autopilot, he relied solely on his skills and experience. The revived monitor showed unfiltered, raw images of space ahead. He watched the bottomless starry sky tilt wildly while the moon's horizon loomed larger on the right. This shift indicated the Nero's changing descent posture.

Roots watched in horrified disbelief as the scene unfolded.

"What the hell is happening..."

From beyond the orbit, something fast approached the disoriented Nero team from above. It was soon clear: enemy mobile suits.

"Damn it! They're sitting ducks like this! I've got to help them!"

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

...Crap...Oh no...this is bad...threat detected...

... They're...one of us...?...group of people...

...logical choice...to help...combat...?...

...A battle to preserve the lives of allies...

...Even though I don't feel pain myself?...

...I do not understand...human pain...

...is that what...makes me human?!...

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

Roots trained his beam cannons on the approaching cluster of mobile suits.

"Cowards!"

In the cockpit of the Nero, proximity alarms blared urgently.

"Damn it, I'm completely helpless here!" Chung Yung cursed at the mobile suit swarm vectoring in. Fighting to regain control left no attention to spare for combat.

"Guess I'm royally fucked, huh?" he wondered in a surge of despair, only to be startled by a sudden burst of light enveloping the encroaching enemy units.

"Who is that?!"

Chung Yung saw - it was the Gundam, the S Gundam covering them. Its pilot was the brash, selfish runt they'd scorned. So why now...?

Beams lanced out from the Z Plus and FAZZ teams, adding their firepower to Roots' barrage. Their concentrated firepower swiftly obliterated the enemy mobile suits.

"Well, shit..."

With the immediate danger cleared, the Neros managed to stabilize their course into lunar orbit.

"Thanks for the assist, big shots!"

"Heh, just consider it a 'loan,' buddy boys!" Roots and company swung into escort formation around them.

"Captain, the descent team has aborted and entered lunar orbit," the comms officer related. "They seem to be low on propellant. Should we have the fleet escort mobile suits recover them?"

"Hmm..." Heathrow paused in thought. "No, wait! I see... walk right into his trap, yes."

Unconsciously, he muttered, "Old fox..."

"Why aren't we recovering the mobile suit teams? Are you saying you want my subordinates to become sitting ducks and be slaughtered as lunar satellites?" Mannings challenged him.

"Afraid so. But pulling the escorts back now would spell far worse."

Heathrow's voice held an odd certainty. "Because here comes the Vulture..."

A hunch told Mannings that Heathrow still had an ace up his sleeve.

Meanwhile, New Desides leader Brave Cod had returned to the battleship *Kilimanjaro* for resupply, satisfied with the performance of his Mk-V.

"Not bad at all - took out nine together. What's the status of our other units?" Cod asked, removing his helmet as he met Cray outside the mobile suit hangar airlock.

"Well, it's a mixed bag. Most of our units have descended to the moon's surface in their Xeku, under Offshore's command. The fleet's resupplying and maintaining air defense over Ayers City. Admiral Aeno seems to have repelled their surprise attack. But there's bad news."

"What is it?"



"The attackers weren't the Federation's main fleet. Whether their commander is a fool or overly confident, I don't know, but they attempted to land mobile suits on Luna. We dispatched our third wave for interception, but they were overwhelmed by a monstrous mobile suit."

"So, the logistic bomb... our cover's blown."

"Seems like it. But it's not all bad. If they're set on eradicating us on Luna, they'd inevitably have to destroy Ayers City as well. Doing so would inevitably involve civilian casualties, causing universal backlash from the lunar cities. That would easily pave the way for our 'Lunar City Alliance' initiative."

"Sever the flesh to break the bone," Cod mused thoughtfully. But their conversation was interrupted by a blaring alarm.

"Commander Cod, you're needed on the bridge immediately!" A young crew member burst into the airlock, visibly panicked.

"Stay calm, what's happening?!" Cod admonished.

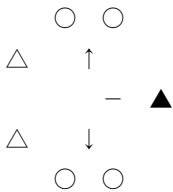
"A... a massive fleet... Earth's home fleet!"

Cod and Cray exchanged glances, nodded, and quickly gripped the ship's internal lift to rush to the bridge.

"Why aren't they coming to retrieve us?" wondered the pilots in the Nero team, currently being protected by the S Gundam.

The Gundam, with weapons aimed outward, had formed a defensive circle around the four Nero units adrift in lunar orbit. Inside the circle, three FAZZ units, built for long-range combat, kept watch while two Z Plus units patrolled the orbit's forefront.

FORMATION FORMATION FORMATION



←Direction of Travel

FORMATION FORMATION FORMATION

"Out of the thirty suits in the attack force, only ten remain now," Chung Yung transmitted to Roots. "For all we know, the fleet's been wiped out too by this point. You still have enough propellant to make it back, right?"

Roots responded with a dismissive snort. "If the fleet's space dust, we got nowhere to retreat to anyway. Might as well stay put here a while longer."

"You really are an odd one..."

"Pot calling the kettle black, pal!" Roots shot back.

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

...Odd one...abnormal...kettle black...

...everyone abnormal...everyone soldier...

...soldiers are abnormal...war is abnormal...

...Is everyone going mad...?...??...

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

Just then, the forgotten mobile suit squad noticed countless tiny lights emerging from the void, converging rapidly toward them.

"Here they come... looks like we're goin' out in a blaze of glory, boys!"

"Hold on..." Chung Yung focused intently on the rhythmic white flashes.

It was evident that inaction would leave them staring into the abyss.

Heathrow steeled himself for the worst - no way five lone ships of Task Force Alpha could withstand the onslaught about to descend. The razor-taloned vulture would swoop in to shred them to bits without mercy. But he refused to go down without a fight, without making them pay dearly for it. The erstwhile star pupil, tested in trial by fire time and again, had at last learned to think on his feet instead of just by the book.

The astronavigator, with an intense gaze fixed on the monitor's blips and identification signals, nearly bit his tongue in sheer urgency.

"C-Captain... I have a fleet on scope! A huge battlegroup approaching...!"

So you finally came, you old buzzard.

"Reading multiple friendly transponders... the *Nagato*, the *Exeter*, the *Scharnhorst*! It's the Home Fleet!"

"What... They made it in time, after all?" Heathrow murmured in disbelief.

A split-second later, triumphant cheers erupted across the bridge as the truth dawned on all. Displayed on the monitors was an imposing battle line, its presence magnified as it glittered majestically in the reflected sunlight off the Moon's surface. The unmistakable vanguard of the Federation Main Fleet, who had burned max speed all the way from Penta with fuel efficiency be damned.

At this juncture, the balance of power was about to shift again. The long thirteen days of Task Force Alpha were nearing their end.

0800 Earth Standard Time, March 14.

Onboard the flagship *Nagato* of the Home Fleet, Heathrow was briefed on "Eagle Fall," a major descent operation on Ayers City. As he had suggested, all mobile suit units' IMPC data was to be altered. However, debugging the new data was not an easy task, and they lacked both time and resources.

Therefore, it was decided to revert to a previous version of the data. Reverting to the old data would expedite the process relative to modifying the new data, albeit at the cost of relying on outdated combat data, resulting in a decrease in individual mobile suit combat effectiveness. Still, it was deemed better than using unreliable data and could malfunction at any time.

Task Force Alpha reorganized their ship-based mobile suit units to prepare for this battle. Although they could receive supplies for their units, there was

no provision for replenishing pilots. Therefore, four ships dispatched from the main fleet were newly organized as Task Force Beta, which would provide support to Task Force Alpha.

Operation Eagle Fall, marked for execution three days from now on March 17th, loomed on the horizon.

Chapter.07

Eagle Fall

March 17, Universal Century 0088.

The bridge of the *Pegasus III* was awash in the red hue of emergency lighting, a palpable tension hanging in the air. Every crew member was clad in their normal suits, bracing for the impending fleet engagement.

The mission for Task Force Alpha, in tandem with Task Force Beta, was to secure a descent orbit entry point to the city of Ayers, guarded by the New Desides fleet. The main force, the Home Fleet, was tasked with the annihilation of the Aeno Fleet. This maneuver aimed to draw the New Desides fleet out as reinforcements for the Aeno Fleet, thereby thinning the defenses at the descent orbit entry point.

The solitary countdown of a navigation officer filled the space; a ritual echoed across the bridges of all participating vessels.

"3..., 2..., 1...", he intoned, marking the commencement of operations.

"Begin the operation."

With the order given, the ships' main engines surged in unison, propelling each vessel towards the pre-arranged bombardment coordinates. Data on the distance to the enemy fleet and environmental conditions flooded into the fire control systems at an alarming rate. After a trio of pulse beam cannon volleys, the ships would dash at full combat speed to the next firing position, thus initiating Operation Eagle Fall.

The battlefield was a kaleidoscope of colorful light beams and a chaos of missiles, large and small. Bursts of light birthed bubbles that swallowed screams, curses, hatred, the names of loved ones, and lives themselves, consigning them to oblivion. Through this maelstrom, mobile suits like the Nero and Nouvel GM III, specialized for space combat, raced toward the lunar surface.

Task Forces Alpha and Beta, in column formation, began their advance towards the New Desides fleet. With all mobile suits committed to the drop operation, the fleet engagement was resolved through artillery alone.

"Enemy fleet sighted! One battleship, five cruisers!" the astronavigation officer reported to Heathrow.

"Focus fire on the battleship! Ignore the cruisers!" came the order.

The *Pegasus III* and its nine cruisers, entering effective firing range, simultaneously turned to port, aligning all guns on the starboard side. Their main cannons fired in succession, the beams reaching out to the New Desides flagship, *Kilimanjaro*, in a teardrop pattern—a standard tactic.

Despite improvements since the One Year War, long-distance artillery accuracy remained limited by primitive targeting methods like visual confirmation, laser ranging, and heat detection, compounded by the three-dimensional nature of space combat. Thus, ships would stagger their fire in a fan shape towards a single target.

A dull thud resonated as the battleship *Kilimanjaro* shuddered under the impact, hurling Cod's body into the void of the bridge.

"Brave! The enemy's all-out assault has begun," Cray announced, steadying himself against the console.

"So it seems. I thought they would come after defeating the Aeno Fleet, but it's a two-front operation," Cod replied, drifting towards the navigation officer. "What about close support mobile suit forces?"

"They've engaged the enemy's drop-capable mobile suits. We're only facing artillery fire now."

"Then let's return fire!"

"We're doing it!"

Damage reports came streaming in.

"We've taken hits to the aft section, sealing off bulkheads eleven through thirty-seven!"

In the breached aft section, desperate efforts were made to rescue the wounded, but some were lost to the vacuum of space. The damage was beyond quick repair.

"Is anyone still there?!" a petty officer called over the ship's intercom, receiving no reply before sealing the bulkhead.

"Idiot, I'm still here!"

Before the eyes of a crew member whose helmet communication device had been destroyed by the sudden decompression shock, the heavy bulkhead door closed tightly. Meanwhile, as the *Kilimanjaro* was hit for the second time, the bodies of the stranded crew members vanished into the light.

"Aft and portside armaments are out! Engines to half power! We're the only one being targeted!"

Cod grunted in frustration, rising to his feet, rage burning in his eyes.

"The forward mobile suit deck is still operational. Order all hands to abandon ship! All mobile suit personnel on standby, follow me. Let's give the enemy fleet a surprise... Tosh, you're coming too!" he declared, heading for the lift grip, which thankfully still had power.

"Brave, be rational! We're not here to become soldiers again! Shouldn't we be focusing on a landing in Ayers to organize a resistance? If they target civilians, righteousness will be on our side. Don't you understand?" Cray tried to reason as he followed but to no avail.

"Tosh, the key difference between us is that I'm not as smart as you. I choose to fight here, and no one can stop me. Perhaps you're better suited to lead. Help Josh in Ayers. I leave New Desides to you," Cod said, clapping Cray on the shoulder before drifting towards the mobile suit deck.

"Brave Cod, heading out!"

With a roar, the Mk-V launched into the frenzied void of battle, followed by several Xeku. Cray, left behind, approached a conspicuously large mobile suit hangar, now eerily empty. Inside stood a massive heavy combat type mobile suit for the Instructor Corps next-generation virtual enemy, developed at Pezun and classified in the X series. Not many were produced. New Desides had taken these, including those still in development, from Pezun.

"Can the Zwei head out?"

The Xeku Zwei was a state-of-the-art machine, so it was taking time to adjust the machine.

"It needs fine-tuning but should be operational for a lunar descent," an engineer responded.

"Should' isn't something I want to hear right now. Fine. Everyone else, evacuate sequentially by shuttle. The rest of the ships will join Aeno's reinforcements. I'll see you all in Ayers," Cray said, leaping into Zwei's cockpit.

"Tosh Cray, taking off!"

The Zwei, with its daunting silhouette, left the battleship *Kilimanjaro* behind, descending towards the lunar surface.

The conflict unfolded exactly as the suppression team had anticipated. With the New Desides fleet, barring their flagship *Kilimanjaro*, dispatched as reinforcements to the beleaguered Aeno Fleet under the relentless bombardment of the Home Fleet, the defense at the descent orbit entry point was left virtually unguarded. This allowed the suppression team's mobile suits to proceed with their lunar descent as planned.

Josh Offshore, a young warrior of New Desides, had already made his descent to the city of Ayers ahead of Cod and Cray. He was entrusted with commanding a portion of the defense force, composed of former Titans soldiers and Ayers city militia, brought in by two of the Aeno Fleet's assault landing ships. However, his command was primarily over a unit of students gathered from the Earth Federation military academy located in Ayers. The defense force was divided by age and former unit affiliation, with each unit being assigned a color name for identification; Offshore's unit was dubbed White Force.

"Listen, don't waste your shots. Only fire within half the effective range. The enemy is vulnerable and can't retaliate during descent. If you stay calm and aim, you can hit them easily. But remember, their descent speed is faster than you might expect!"

Though young, Offshore was an instructor with abilities equal to any standard mobile suit instructor. His advice was sound, yet only a few in his unit were likely to survive the combat. The spirited replies he received belied the inexperience and youth of the White Force members—boys with no battle experience. They were earnest youths, but it seemed wrong to drag such boys into war. Wasn't war supposed to be a contest of skill between fully grown adults? This was far removed from the "war" Offshore had envisioned.

He recalled encountering a "Gundam" type mobile suit at Pezun, piloted by someone who seemed a novice. Perhaps it was part of a so-called Newtype unit. The thought that war could be dominated by these mysterious "Newtypes" and that his own image of war was being shattered by the reality of children fighting was deeply frustrating for Offshore.

Even if he had initially joined the military as a stepping stone into politics, the thought that all his efforts could be undone by the mere concept of

Newtypes and the harsh reality was unbearable. Especially since Newtypism seemed to be an innate ability, meaning no amount of effort on his part, as a non-Newtype, would ever be rewarded. That was something he couldn't accept.

He wanted to loudly deny the collapse of his world, but Offshore found himself unable to voice his defiance. Instead, he retreated further into the depths of his own world, silently awaiting the enemy's descent.

At least once the battle began, he wouldn't have to think about Newtypes or the harshness of reality anymore.

The linchpins of the descent operation, indisputably, were the Nero and the Nouvel GM III mobile suits. For this mission, the Gundam units were relegated to a supporting role.

The S Gundam and two Z Plus units, equipped with solo surface descent capabilities and high mobility, were dispatched ahead of the main force to the lunar surface.

Their task was to clear out enemy units lying in wait to snipe the descending troops. These mobile suits, diverging from the conventional humanoid form, adopted cruising modes resembling aircraft—the G Cruiser Mode and the Waverider—enabling them to fulfill their mission with enhanced efficiency and speed.

TARGET TARGET TARGET TARGET TARG

ALERT AT 10:30



+

ROCK

ROCK

ENEMY ROCK

ENEMY ROCK

ENEMY ROCK

ROCK ROCK

TARGET TARGET TARGET TARGET TARG

"Tex! At 10:30, behind the rocks!"

"Got it here too!"

Roots, upon spotting three GM IIIs, angled his nose down and fired his beam cannon. One of the GM IIIs, caught in motion, was enveloped in light and obliterated. The two following Z Plus units also fired their nose-mounted beam cannons in succession. The young pilots of the three GM IIIs hiding behind the rocks met the fate Offshore had feared, vanishing in a burst of light without even a chance to scream.

"It's like we're at a shooting range!" The pilots in the Gundams had no way of knowing that the pilots of the mobile suit they had just destroyed were still mere fledglings, not yet fully hatched from their military eggs.

"It's a 'Gundam'..." This spectacle sent a wave of unrest through the young soldiers of the White Force on the ground.

"Don't panic! If you do as I've taught you, you'll be fine. It's not a Gundam, not a Newtype, nothing special. Just a mobile suit piloted by amateurs. I guarantee it." Offshore's assurance was unreliable. While it was true that the Gundam pilots were not Newtypes, the mobile suits were undeniably Gundams, and their mechanical performance was top-notch, something Offshore had realized during his time at Pezun. He also knew that following his instructions would not suffice for the young soldiers.

Sometimes, Offshore reminded himself, a commander must lie. He wished that this plague would just go away. If only they had better mobile suits, such adversaries would hardly be worth fearing.

Meanwhile, Cod, piloting the Mk-V, had reached the operational area of the Aeno Fleet, unleashing its formidable capabilities to the fullest. The mobile suit was equipped with a weapon system known as "INCOM," a pseudo-psycommu system guided by human thought. Although this system had been in existence since the One Year War, it was initially deemed suitable only for Newtypes. However, recent technological advancements had made it possible for ordinary pilots to operate this system. Given the residual Minovsky particles from the previous war, which rendered precision-guided munitions ineffective, the INCOM could arguably be considered the only viable guided weapon system in the current era.

The two small discs released by the Mk-V darted around under Cod's control, firing beams in rapid succession. This weapon system was responsible for swiftly annihilating nine mobile suits of Task Force Alpha.

"Ha-ha-ha... What's the matter, cowards? Is there no one left to challenge me and my Mk-V?!"

Another Nouvel GM III from the fleet's direct escort exploded, causing slight damage to a cruiser. Cod felt invincible with the Mk-V, and indeed, the Mk-V had plunged the Home Fleet's mobile suit units into a vortex of fear. As a result, they were unable to mount an effective attack on the Aeno Fleet, missing their chance by a hair's breadth.

"FAZZ team! Can you hear me? There's a blue Gundam here. It seems to be the base for those INCOMs. See if you can snipe it!" A desperate plea from the Home Fleet's mobile suits reached Crypt.

"A 'blue Gundam'? How are we supposed to do that without any data on the enemy...?"

"Try contacting the flagship!"

"You guys are asking for help, right? Don't get all high and mighty! We've had enough of these Gundams..."

At that moment, data on the enemy was transmitted from the Home Fleet's flagship, *Nagato*.

DATA DATA DATA DATA DATA DATA

MODEL NUMBER: ORX-013

MODEL NAME: GUNDAM Mk-V

NOTATION: INCOM SYSTEM EQUIPPED UNIT

Please see the following file for specs.



DATA DATA DATA DATA DATA DATA

"Ugh, this one's a 'Gundam' too. Can't believe they made so many 'Gundams.' And it's got INCOM, damn it. What's so special about the Mk-V anyway?"

Despite his astonishment at the enemy data, Crypt pushed the FAZZ units into combat acceleration, plunging them into the engagement zone. The fleet's direct escort mobile suit team seemed to be in disarray. Sporadic and futile artillery fire aimed at the Mk-V was visible.

"Grissom, Aldrin! Pin him down with a barrage of missiles, then go in for the kill! If we get within the range of those INCOMs, we're dead meat for sure! Be careful, got it?!"

Following his command, he signaled the timing for missile launch. The chest covers of the three FAZZ units blew off, and a swarm of small missiles burst forth. Whistling through space, the missiles converged on their target—the blue adversary, the Mk-V.

COMBAT COMBAT COMBAT COMBAT

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COMBAT COMBAT COMBAT COMBAT

"Ha, too easy!"

In the cockpit of the Mk-V, Cod smirked at the sight of the missiles heading his way, then pushed his mobile suit to its maximum thrust, diving downwards. Even with the Mk-V's superior G-resistance system, the forces generated were enough to crush a human inside. Yet, Cod's trained mind and body made the impossible possible, though he was no Newtype.

An immense force, akin to being crushed by a giant, threatened to tear Cod's body apart. The cockpit creaked ominously, and the external explosions of the small missiles added to the cacophony. What was merely a moment felt like a lifetime to Cod. As the physical and mental strain subsided, he began the effort to refocus his blurred, reddened vision, quickly scanning the cockpit's monitors, now tinged in a pale pink hue. Red and green warning lights danced like a bizarre jubilee.

Before even realizing he was alive, his first thought was that he could fight. This was not the instinct of a human, but the primal fight instinct of a male. Cod felt something odd in his mouth and spat it into his helmet, realizing it was the remnants of his own back teeth, shattered under the high G-forces.

"Motherfucker!"

With that exclamation, Cod gripped the control bar and accelerated the Mk-V towards the three FAZZ units that had caused him to grind his back teeth to dust, ready to retaliate.

Crypt had been sure the blue-black mobile suit was destroyed. He had seen the Mk-V being thrown out by the impact of the barrage of small missiles launched by the three FAZZ units.

"It seemed too easy. Kind of anticlimactic..."

But then, the blue mobile suit ignited flames from various verniers and its rear propulsion nozzle, correcting its posture while braking, and charged straight towards the FAZZ team.

"What kind of monster is this...!"

"Is it a beast?!" Grissom and Aldrin exclaimed in unison, now experiencing the overwhelming sensation the New Desides pilots felt against the S Gundam, Z Plus, and now against the FAZZ units.

"Can't we use the INCOM?!"

Despite surviving the missile attack, the Mk-V's frame was rattled, and its prized INCOM system, damaged in the guidance system, was inoperable. Cod, anticipating the FAZZ's beam trajectories, adeptly dodged and closed in. He switched his beam saber to cannon mode, folded the backpack forward at a right angle for a firing position.

The beam saber, a close-combat weapon typical among mobile suits, could, by using the I-field to concentrate the beam, melt through an opponent with the heat of its beam emission. By releasing the I-field, the beam saber could transform into a beam cannon, akin to either splashing water directly from a faucet or using a filled and hardened plastic bag to strike.

The Mk-V's beam saber had this dual function.

With a roar of unarticulated rage, Cod sprayed the beam cannon as the Mk-V, turned into a steel bullet, charged head-on into the FAZZ team. Seeing the

enemy's formation thrown into disarray, Cod ceased his intimidating barrage and focused on the FAZZ directly ahead, aiming precisely.

"Emergency evasion! Scatter!!"

Despite Crypt's attempt to guide his comrades to survival, it was too late.

"No good, we won't make it... Ahhhhh...!!"

With a scream, the mobile suit piloted by Grissom to his left was literally obliterated.

"Grissommm!" Crypt called out as he accelerated away, but the explosion caught in the corner of his eye told him it was futile. The sound of Grissom's mobile suit exploding filled the cockpit, then abruptly cut to static.

"That damned bastard! He killed Grissom!" Aldrin was about to charge forward in a fit of rage.

"Stop, Aldrin! If you act rashly, you'll end up like Grissom! Retreat. Getting close will get us killed!"

Meanwhile, the Mk-V, with its legs thrust forward for rapid braking, was already searching for its next target. The two FAZZ units began to retreat at full speed, desperately trying to put distance between themselves and their adversary.

Originally, the FAZZ was a test unit developed by Anaheim Electronics, equipped with a heavy firepower support system, based on the prototype of the ZZ Gundam. Unlike the ZZ Gundam that would later be piloted by Judau Ashta, the FAZZ lacked a transformation and combination mechanism, was made of inferior materials, and had less mobility. It also did not come equipped with the Hyper Mega Cannon, the ultimate mobile suit weapon that would be mounted on the ZZ Gundam's head. Captain Mannings' reference to it as a "paper tiger" was not without reason.

The FAZZ units, belonging to the Task Force Alpha and undergoing practical evaluation tests by Anaheim Electronics, resembled the Full Armor ZZ in appearance but were fundamentally different. Designed primarily for heavy firepower support, they were ill-suited for close combat, specializing in long-range artillery engagements. Hence, Crypt and his team were attempting to maintain distance from the Mk-V.

Cod sensed their intention to retreat instinctively. He knew he was up against a unit designed for support with massive firepower. No one uses a cannon to swat a fly.

"Not so fast!" Cod yelled, switching his beam saber back to saber mode from cannon mode and pulling it out as he accelerated towards the retreating FAZZ units. The beam blade hummed to life from the hilt, closing the distance rapidly.

With a battle cry, Cod swung the beam saber down at Aldrin's mobile suit with full force.

"Aaah, mo-mommy...!" Aldrin's scream pierced Crypt's ears. To the right of the panoramic monitor, a severed FAZZ floated, its cut surface sparking like sparklers before being enveloped in a bubble of white light.

Crypt, losing his composure, mourned the loss of another comrade.



"You son of a... I'll kill you!"

In a desperate maneuver, the last FAZZ unit turned to face the Mk-V, firing its beam cannon wildly despite knowing it would likely not hit.

Cod felt a chill witnessing the desperation. An enemy attacking blindly in a frenzy was truly frightening, something he knew well from experience. He positioned his beam saber defensively, ready to exploit any opening in the approaching mobile suit's madness. Hesitation was gone...

With a fierce shout, the Mk-V's beam saber flashed, severing the FAZZ's right arm. Cod thought he had won, but then a tremendous shock hit him. The severed arm, delayed slightly, had its beam cannon body collide with the Mk-V, an unexpected turn of events. Immediately, the monitor flashed warnings for the power system.

With a grunt, Cod quickly switched to auxiliary power.

"No choice but to retreat..."

It seemed the Aeno Fleet had already moved to a safe distance. Cod murmured to himself as he directed the Mk-V towards the moon.

ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM AL

DAMAGE DAMAGE DAMAGE DAMAGE DAMAGE

RISK TO SUIT: 75%

ESCAPE REQUIRED

DAMAGE DAMAGE DAMAGE DAMAGE DAMAGE

ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM AL

Forced to remain could spell an explosion for the mobile suit. Crypt, in a state of panic, pulled the emergency ejection handle painted with red and white stripes next to the cockpit panel. With a whoosh, the spherical cockpit capsule was ejected from the FAZZ's belly. Tears of frustration and regret for not being able to do anything filled his eyes.

"Why did it come to this..."

As the cockpit capsule drifted back into the silent expanse of space, sending out distress signals, Crypt felt the shockwave of the FAZZ's distant explosion and closed his eyes in resignation.

Meanwhile, the first wave of mobile suit units waiting at the now unguarded descent orbit entry point, all forty-two of them, began their slow descent towards the moon's surface, flames of reverse thrusters blazing. The descent proceeded smoothly. Roots and his team, who had been covering the descent, were then ordered to intercept the Mk-V.

"What?! The FAZZ team was wiped out? You're joking, right? Are Shin and the others alright?!"

Ryu couldn't believe the news from Mannings.

"Only Crypt survived. Unfortunately, Grissom and Aldrin were killed in action. The enemy is a 'Gundam.'"

"Killed in action...?"

"Though the 'Gundam' suffered some damage in the engagement with the FAZZ team, their annihilation has significantly weakened our mobile suit

combat capabilities. Therefore, you're the only ones who can stop him now. Prevent that 'blue Gundam' from descending to the moon. That's your mission."

Roots was infuriated by Mannings' tone, as if the complete loss of the FAZZ team was their fault.

"Always acting so high and mighty! Grissom and Aldrin are dead! Show some sorrow, for fucks sake! Don't you have any emotions?"

"I abandoned emotions when I became a mobile suit pilot. In the previous war, many more died. I lost many comrades, friends. But in war, there's no time to grieve. Channel your anger towards the enemy mobile suit. It's all you can do now. For Grissom and Aldrin..."

Roots suppressed the urge to shout back. Mannings' words were harsh but true. It was war, kill or be killed. Roots then disengaged the S Gundam's sub-systems from its shoulders and transformed the mobile suit into its humanoid mode.

The EX-S Gundam, the strongest form of the S Gundam.

Now, carrying Roots' anger, the EX-S Gundam set out to intercept the "blue Gundam," the Mk-V, as it attempted to descend to the moon.

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE

• • • EMOTIONS • • • INCOMPREHENSIBLE • • •

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE

Roots is still unaware that there is another will existing within the S Gundam.

Chapter.08

Battle of Ayers

As Roots caught sight of the Mk-V's descent towards the moon, his gaze fixed on its blue frame, cutting through space.

"You had the audacity to kill two of my comrades! I shall repay you in kind!"

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE

.....Friends are something to be cherished.....

.....If a friend is hurt, you must take revenge on the one who did it.....

.....Who are my close friends?

.....Him. The person inside me.....

.....If he's a friend, I must protect him.....

.....If he is hurt, I must take revenge on the one who did it.....

.....The duty known as friendship.....

.....But is it okay to hurt other people for that sake?

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE

From the EX-S Gundam, a meticulously aimed beam, fatal in intent, lanced out as a pale streak toward the Mk-V. The clarity with which the beam was visible, Roots noted while observing the scene on his 360-degree monitor, was due to the dust from the previous two wars contaminating space. The dark blue mobile suit targeted by the EX-S Gundam's reticle was bound to erupt in an explosion any moment, a scene vividly playing out in his mind.

Inside the targeted Mk-V's cockpit, Cod, having regained his composure from the frenzy of combat with the FAZZ team, methodically executed his routine work for lunar descent.

"Main back booster operational, shield booster jettisoned," he muttered, following the checklist, and pressed a button beside his seat.

The mobile suit's shield, a piece of auxiliary armor used in battle, housed integrated auxiliary booster rockets. Now depleted of propellant and serving as dead weight during this phase of descent, Cod jettisoned the shield through an explosive charge. Glancing at the right side of his 360-degree monitor, he watched the discarded shield spiraling away from his back.

This coincided with Roots' shot.

Boom!!

The shield, which was about to fly past Cod, enveloped in blue light, vanished, leaving him gasping, "What?!"

The disintegrating fragments of the shield pelted the Mk-V's armor, the impacts reverberating through the cockpit with a staccato rattle.

Roots, equally astonished, watched as the dark blue mobile suit emerged from the minor explosion, unscathed and continuing its descent as if nothing had happened. Unable to grasp the situation, he uttered in awe, "Incredible..."

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE

.....Admiration for the target of revenge?

.....Despite hating them so much.....incomprehensible.....

.....There are too many things that don't make sense in war.....

.....There are too many things that don't make sense about humans.....

.....For machines, if there's no consistency in logic, that's a malfunction.....

.....an abnormality.....

.....But humans who wage war show no consistency in logic.....

.....War.....humans.....illogical.....abnormality.....

.....I was created to wage war.....

.....I was created to become human.....

.....If that's the case, do I have to become an abnormal person too?!

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE

"This is Roots. I've botched the interception. That bastard must have the Grim Reaper on his side! Give me the projected landing coordinates. We can't let him land, no matter what! Use nukes or whatever it takes; if he lands, it'll be a disaster..."

"The predicted landing site is lunar surface sector 11-A, coordinates 2-5-8-0. At this rate, it'll be right behind our first wave of mobile suit descent troops. No nukes - it's too close to friendlies. Plus, there's the Antarctic Treaty," replied Mannings.

"Damn it, I should be the one to kill him! I'll do it!"

The EX-S Gundam pivoted, positioning itself to pursue the Mk-V towards the lunar surface.

Most of Ayers City was built underground, yet some public areas emerged above the moon's surface, a consequence of the haphazard construction on top of the observation base. Among the domed structures, the central government dome towered in the city's heart, around which the city spanned a radius of approximately thirty kilometers.

A lone mobile suit descended towards Ayers City's spaceport, located about two kilometers north of the dome.

"Enemy landing forces?"

The barrels of the GM III rifles, belonging to the spaceport's security defense force, aimed in unison at the descending flames. The incoming mobile suit, gradually taking on a humanoid shape, presented a silhouette distinctly different from the GM series primarily used by the subjugation forces.

"Hold your fire; it's an ally! It's Tosh Cray from the New Desides!"

It was a Xeku Zwei. The security force lowered their rifle barrels. With a roar of flames beneath its feet, the Zwei touched down gracefully, belying its immense frame.

"I wish to speak with the mayor. Where is Mayor Pinefield?" Cray asked impatiently, eager to bypass the suit's cooldown process.

"Sir, the mayor is in the government dome. You can take your mobile suit there using the underground tracks," replied the security forces's mobile suit commander, gesturing toward a tunnel at the edge of the spaceport. In simple terms, it was a subway, but it also served as a transport route to the mass driver's acceleration track.

The mass driver, an electromagnetic catapult designed to launch lunar minerals into space, aiding in colony construction. Ayers City, originally an observation base and a forward base for colony construction, had the Mass Driver's acceleration track beginning not far from what was now the Central Government Dome.

The track extended approximately 8 km eastward beneath the lunar surface, emerging as a 4 km drum bridge-like structure. Materials to be launched were loaded onto "pallets" and accelerated to an escape velocity of 2,380 m/s or more on the track. As the pallet reached the midpoint of the drum bridge, it separated from the rail and soared into space.

After launch, the pallet descended from the drum bridge, decelerated on a parallel track, and re-entered the underground to prepare for the next launch. The launch rate was one pallet every 0.5 seconds. The launched materials drifted in orbit until they were captured by a mass catcher equipped with a massive Kevlar fiber bag, waiting at the target Lagrange Point. The spaceport of Ayers City was built on the site of a former mining area, which is why it had a transport route to the mass driver.

Cray maneuvered his cooled Xeku Zwei onto the underground linear track. Placing the suit on a linear motor container car, the vehicle silently sped through the dark tunnel. In a mere 20 seconds, it arrived at the station beneath Ayers City's Central Government Dome. The underground plaza, once a collection point for the mass driver's launched materials, had long been used as a heavy equipment storage area for the central government. Now, it had been hastily converted into a hangar for the defense force's mobile suits.

Cray entrusted his Zwei to a mechanic and hurried to the mayor's office, guided by a staff member.

The office door, made of genuine mahogany, evoked a sense of Earth. The elderly staff member who had guided him knocked, and a somewhat high-pitched voice responded from inside. Directly across from the entrance, a large monitor displayed the lunar landscape. In front of it sat a desk made of genuine oak, where a large man in military attire was seated. It was Mayor Kaiser Pinefield.

"Your Excellency, I'm Tosh Cray from the New Desides. It's an honor to meet you."

Pinefield rose, eyeing Cray, "Welcome. So, you're the one from that alliance... Let's skip formalities. Shall we take a look at the current situation?"

Cray read the mayor's resolve behind his military attire. It was an old Earth Federation Forces dress uniform from the One Year War era, but it bore no rank insignia or medals.

"The mayor is prepared to fight as a soldier..." Cray thought.

Led by Pinefield, Cray headed to the administrative department, which now served as a temporary defense strategy headquarters. The monitors showed the city, with various colored lights blinking.

"These lights represent the defense forces, our citizen army," the mayor began explaining. "Each unit is color-coded by age, experience, and background. For example, these white ones are your comrades commanding a unit of schoolchildren. The reds are veterans over sixty-five, blues are former Titans, and greens are young people with military experience."

"It's regrettable that children and the elderly must be mobilized," Cray remarked, his tone devoid of sarcasm.

"It's the will of Ayers' citizens," Pinefield replied, looking him in the eye. "This battle is ours. For generations, we've been taught to serve Earth. If we fall, Earth no longer belongs to Earthnoids. Everyone knows this. Unfortunately, wars fought solely by professional soldiers ended in the seventeenth century of the old calendar. How long we can hold out with this force is unknown. But even if we fall here, the other lunar cities should carry on our will. Every citizen, young and old, male and female, is prepared to become a sacrificial pawn for that purpose. That is the spirit of Ayers. There's also a possibility that reinforcements may arrive from other cities before we fall..."

"If things don't go as hoped, we'll join you. Your resolve is clear to me," Cray said with a smile.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but it won't work out that way," the mayor replied.

"Why is that?" Cray asked.

"Our battle is different from those 'working for Earth.' To us, Earth is sacred. We can never abandon this land or Earth's dominion. We don't need to change, nor do we want to. Spacenoids might say that Ayers City should be a tombstone for the space policy carried out by the old Earth Federation government. If so, I must be the one to guard that tomb. This battle is the unanimous will of the citizens of Ayers, but just like in the previous battle for the colony laser, it's my responsibility that the citizens have been involved to this extent. But you're different. You represent a question mark over the current Federation's policies. You mustn't perish here. Make the Federation feel your pain until the end. It's your job to tell them why we perished. You must not return to lunar soil with us. Your fall should be on Earth," he said, turning back to the monitor.

"Indeed, Ayers' demise might be fated in this era, a pure piece of Earth in space. The divide between Spacenoids and Earthnoids is decisive, even with the concept of Newtypes enabling perfect mutual understanding. To be honest, even if your lunar city alliance succeeds, it's likely that soon, those favoring Spacenoids will repeat our tragedy. Humans can't tolerate differing ideologies.

Of course, we believe in our righteousness and think our cause is just, as do Spacenoids. Only history will judge who was right."

"Understood. But we'll demonstrate Earthnoids' righteousness here. The lunar city alliance will succeed," Cray affirmed.

"Let's hope so. But if we fall..." Pinefield traced a long line extending eastward from the outskirts of the city map displayed on the monitor. Cray immediately grasped his intention and voiced his concern.

Will the deterioration be alright? It seems too dangerous..."

Pinefield nodded with certainty. With their agreement reached, the two delved into the specifics of the defense strategy, discussing and revising the plans.

The mobile suit forces of the suppression team, despite facing staunch resistance in the first wave, gradually established a bridgehead with the second wave's descent. Nearly fifty mobile suit units, combining both waves, deployed in a line stretching from the south to the west side of Ayers City, initiating a siege. Meanwhile, the third wave, supported by two Z Plus units, continued its descent.

"Ensign Offshore! The enemy is attempting to encircle the city. Let us attack now, while we can!" urged a subordinate.

Although Offshore's White Force, in collaboration with other defense teams, inflicted substantial damage on the first wave of the descent team, they were overwhelmed by the sheer number of enemy mobile suits descending one after another. As the enemy solidified their bridgehead, Offshore ordered a retreat, a decision visibly frustrating the young soldiers.

"No! They outnumber us! If we engage them head-on, I'll be sending you to your pointless deaths!" Offshore protested.

"We're not afraid to die! Please, let us fight!" the young soldiers pleaded.

"It's not about fear. I don't want you to die in vain. If we must die, it should be at the right time and place," For the first time in his life, Offshore felt the responsibility of being entrusted with the lives of others. Even in the New Desides, he had been given command of a unit, but all his comrades were skilled soldiers on par with himself.

In contrast, the members of the White Force were immature boys who couldn't do anything without relying on him completely, inevitably heading towards their deaths in battle. They could hardly be called soldiers. The difference was far too great.

While Offshore and his team were slowly retreating in search of an effective defensive position, the subjugation team's mobile suits units rapidly executed their deployment. When White Force reached a crater about six kilometers in diameter and set up a skirmish line along its rim, the subjugation team to the west and north of Ayers City completed their deployment and began advancing.

"They're coming. Don't panic even if the main camera is hit. The cockpit is below the caldera, so a hit to the mobile suit's head won't be fatal," Offshore instructed as the enemy approached the crater, their mobile suit units making

small jumps. The enemy mobile suits, initially as small as fleas, grew to the size of rabbits in their view.

"Prepare to fire!"

The mobile suits quickly grew to the size of a shepherd dog.

"Fire!"

At Offshore's command, all mobile suits of White Force opened fire simultaneously. Several enemy mobile suits, caught mid-jump, were easily destroyed by the beams, causing the others to scatter and take cover on the lunar surface.

"Damn it, there's a sniper unit hidden in the crater!" shouted a pilot from the subjugation team, hunkering down in a Nouvel GM III.

"Where's the support? Call in that damn Gundam!"

Amid the shouts, a fierce exchange of beams between the two sides began. As a mobile suit raised its torso, it was pierced by a beam, while a mobile suit from White Force, peeking out from the caldera, was blown backward, its upper body obliterated. The crater's vicinity quickly descended into combat chaos.

Meanwhile, Cod's Mk-V was in its final descent sequence. The flickering beams around lunar craters were clearly visible from above.

"Damn, I didn't expect the enemy to invade this fast!" Cod cursed, helpless during the descent. The bleeding from his back teeth had stopped.

The Mk-V's descent was also detected at Ayers City's central government dome.

"A mobile suit emitting a friendly identification signal is descending. Its projected landing site is directly behind the enemy line currently engaged with White Force!" reported an operator to Cray.

"It must be Brave's Mk-V. He probably thinks he's still in a friendly-controlled area due to the unexpectedly fast enemy invasion. Provide conspicuous landing support for that mobile suit!" Cray's order was promptly relayed to Offshore.

"What, Lieutenant Cod?! Understood..." Acknowledging the order, Offshore rallied White Force, "Our 'Gundam' is descending behind the enemy. The pilot is my commander. He'll surely scatter the enemy! Put all your effort into supporting his landing!"

Hearing about "our 'Gundam'," the young soldiers were thrilled, their morale boosted. "Gundam" always stood for justice, especially with a New Desides squad leader piloting it. They felt invincible. As Mk-V's descent flames became visible, White Force's covering fire intensified, aiding the Mk-V's safe landing.

"An enemy mobile suit has landed behind us!"

"Ha, just one unit? Let's crush it!"

The 143rd Mobile Suit Squadron, positioned at the far right flank of the suppression line, noticed the descent and turned to destroy the intruding suit. Then they saw a blue Gundam firmly positioned.

"Th-that mobile suit...!"

The Mk-V's camera eyes glowed bright yellow, sending the pilots into a panic. Drawing its beam sabers, the Mk-V charged at the terrified squadron.



Overwhelmed by its presence, the mobile suits fell one by one to the Mk-V's sabers, while those attempting to flee were targeted and destroyed by White Force.

Caught off-guard by the sudden, intense battle, the subjugation line watched as the Mk-V soared over them with its thrusters blazing. By the time the subjugation team reacted and began firing at the jumping mobile suit, the Mk-V had already vanished behind the caldera, joining White Force.

"Josh!"

"Lieutenant Cod, you're safe!"

"Yeah, I took a few hits from the enemy's fire, but it's nothing serious. You did well, too. You have my gratitude. What's this, your unit is all kids?"

The condition of the Mk-V could hardly be described as having taken "a few" hits. Offshore couldn't believe the nerves it took to call that damage "a few hits." But that was the kind of man Brave Cod was.

"Sure, they're mostly children, Lieutenant, but their spirit is noble. They're worthy of your expectation."

"Well done with that covering fire earlier," praised by the New Desides commander and the Gundam pilot, the young soldiers swelled with pride, murmuring excitedly.

"Take it easy, everyone. Where's Tosh?"

"Sir, Lieutenant Cray is at the central government dome with Mayor Pinefield, overseeing defense strategy. As you can see, we can hold out until reinforcements arrive from other cities," Cod thought Offshore's statement was far too optimistic, considering the combat strength of the subjugation force.

"Right. I'll head to the central government dome. Stay strong!" With that, the Mk-V jumped toward the dome. Shortly after, beams streaked across the crater's sky, and three GM IIs from White Force exploded.

"Tex, Sigman, don't let that blue one escape!"

The source of the beams was once again Roots in the EX-S Gundam, who had formed a squadron with two Z Plus units to pursue after receiving reports of the Mk-V's appearance.

"All units of White Force, give your all to support the Mk-V!" Offshore shouted, discerning the intentions of the passing EX-S Gundam and Z Plus. He immediately made his Xeku Eins jump, intending to snipe them.

"The difference in mobility is just too damn much..."

TARGET TARGET TARGET TARGET

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TARGET TARGET TARGET TARGET

Offshore aligned the targeting reticle on the Z Plus at the formation's left wing and pressed the trigger button. It was just half a breath's time since the jump. Before he could confirm the results of his shot, the Xeku had landed back on the lunar surface. When Offshore looked back, he saw the Z Plus descending, scattering debris as it lost altitude.

TARGET TARGET TARGET TARGET

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TARGET TARGET TARGET TARGET

"They got Sigman!" West cried out in despair.

"It's just a hit. He ain't dead. Stop looking around and kill that guy!" Roots retorted, his eyes fixed solely on the Mk-V.

At that moment, a fierce barrage from the central government dome's defense forces was unleashed upon the two mobile suits.

"Ryuu, if we press any further, we're the ones who'll die!"

"Shut up, damn it!"

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE

.....They're going to kill us?.....

.....He's trying to charge in.....

.....I have to protect him.....

.....I have to make him turn back!

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE

At that moment, the EX-S Gundam, while masterfully evading the fire from the lunar surface, began to reverse and withdraw.

"What the?!"

Roots had no intention of retreating; the EX-S Gundam moved on its own. He was thrown into confusion, losing all control over the mobile suit. West in the Z Plus assumed that Roots had decided to abandon the pursuit and followed the EX-S Gundam in retreat.

In the meantime, the Mk-V, protected by a dense defensive fire line, slipped into the heavy machinery loading hatch of the central government dome and vanished from sight.

"Damn it, we let him get away, you fucking whore!" Roots cursed at his unresponsive machine.

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE

.....Whore.....whore.....whore?!.....

.....Is it wrong to save a life?!.....

.....No, no, no!!.....

.....Exchanging your own life for someone else's is completely meaningless.....

.....You are wrong. Or am I the one who's wrong?!.....

.....Is it a sin to judge everything by common sense?

.....Isn't it also a sin to keep denying?.....

.....Could it be that for humans, there is meaning in meaninglessness?.....

.....The balance between affirmation and denial.....

.....Is that emotion?.....Is that human?

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE

Roots pounded his fist against the cockpit panel and clicked his tongue in frustration. He had no way of knowing that a profound change had occurred within the S Gundam's secondary consciousness, causing it to make judgments based on its own self-determined criteria.

March 17 marked the end of the first day of the battle for Ayers City. In the days that followed, the fighting around the city grew increasingly intense. Alongside this, Tosh Cray's political appeal to other lunar cities grew more aggressive. Facing overwhelming enemy forces, Ayers City's defense forces, mostly amateurs, fought valiantly, supported by a handful of New Desides soldiers. However, by the end of the week, Ayers City's territory had shrunk to an area less than ten kilometers in radius from the central government dome.

"Outer defense line of Sector 36 has been breached!"

"What's Red Team in Sector 2 doing?!"

"Redeploy Green Team to Sector 18!"

Green was wiped out ages ago!"

Shouts and commands crisscrossed the operations command room inside the central government dome. The battle's progress was constantly updated on the wall monitors. Mayor Pinefield watched silently as the green lines representing defense forces were increasingly pressured by the red lines of the subjugation team. His face was already as pale as a sick man's from exhaustion.

"Sir, I will order the units with attrition rates above 30% to withdraw and regroup," Cray, who had been serving tirelessly as a strategist for days, suggested, his face marked by physical and mental exhaustion.

"Still no word from the other cities?" the mayor murmured, contemplating the futility of uniting lunar cities to form a government.

Then, an operator exclaimed excitedly, "We've intercepted a protest statement from Von Braun City to the Earth Federation!"

"Is it a protest with the threat of force?"

For a moment, fatigue vanished from Pinefield's face.

"No, sir. Like the other cities, it's a call for economic sanctions. They protest but are not willing to actively ally with us."

Despair filled the operator's voice. All lunar cities had responded: they would protest but not provide assistance. Pinefield's expression darkened again.

"So it was futile... Lieutenant Cray, you've worked hard. Your vision to unite Lunarians or rather Spacenoids, wasn't realistic. Whether seeking autonomy or independence, we're still politically and economically dependent on Earth. In the end, we're just trying to curry favor with Earth. Humanity still can't live without Earth. The victor of Earth is still perceived as righteous. I wanted to confirm this. It's both satisfying and sad. The price paid to understand this might have been too great..."

"Spacenoids consciousness isn't inherently superior to Earthnoids. No matter how much we struggle, in the end, we are all human. If consciousness is the measure, those living on Earth might have a higher one. After all, the concept of Newtypes emerged from Earthnoids who aspired to live in space. But once living in space, they felt like Newtypes by default, ceasing to strive further. It is the people under gravity who truly yearn for a change in consciousness and strive to change. The only ones not making that effort are a handful of politicians. Spacenoids claim that Newtypes can't be born in a gravity well, binding souls to complacency. This is despite the fact that they are a part of the people of Earth. Of course, this is nothing more than reverse discrimination. However, I believe that it is the current Spacenoids who are doing nothing, who have given up on ascending to the next stage. We bear the role of making those who have advocated for the transformation of humanity think once again. That is why we must perish. As a stepping stone for humanity..."

"You've thought that far ahead... Yes, it's true that Spacenoids seem to use Earth merely as a yardstick for human consciousness. Earth is old, they say. Such reverse discrimination is an inversion of envy towards Earth. Unlike our ancestors and people like you, who were born on Earth but were unable to see or return to it for a long time, Spacenoids can't straightforwardly say that they envy Earth. Why rush innovation? Spacenoids don't grasp the difference between 'changing' and 'being changed.' We aim to 'change,' not to be changed. Earth versus space, gravity versus weightlessness, limitation versus freedom – what a childish comparative structure! The narrow-mindedness of Spacenoids will eventually spark new conflicts. 'Changing' can be quick, but 'being changed' takes time. When they realize this, I will mock them from the afterlife, seeing how they respond and what kind of human living space they build. Those who were born in space and have sucked the lifeblood of so many humans until now!"

"Are you mocking them?"

Pinefield and Cray exchanged smiles.

"We're not dead yet. We'll fight to the very end, sir. We'll make them suffer a bit more."

"To do that, we should break this siege. Execute that plan. We'll spare no support."

Thus, New Desides' escape operation from Ayers City, on the brink of its final moments, was about to commence on March 24.

Chapter.09

Mass Driver

The three days of battle since March 24th had ravaged Ayers City. To say they had not been favorable was an understatement. The city was teetering on the brink of collapse, waiting for the final blow that would snuff out its life. It had shrunk to a mere four kilometers around the central government dome, its final stronghold.

The Aeno fleet, once dominant in Ayers City's skies, had seen more than half its forces decimated, retreating to the distant haven of Side 5's airspace. On the ground, the once formidable mobile suit units of the defense forces were on the verge of annihilation. Only in the most critical strongholds, like the spaceport and the government dome, did any semblance of organized resistance persist. Even the city's subterranean sanctuaries had been violated, with suppression force mobile suits breaching residential areas.

Amidst this, the surviving New Desides soldiers who had been fighting while leading the defense forces in each area were summoned to the central government dome. Of course, it was to evacuate Ayers City.

Pinefield, now donned in a normal suit, stood before the assembled New Desides troops, his voice resonating with a mix of gratitude and solemnity.

"Gentlemen, thank you. You fought well. As of today, the old Ayers City will perish along with me. This is fate. But you must live on. Live, survive, and continue to cast question marks at the Federation government. Even if that means resorting to armed resistance. A government must work hard and dedicate itself to the people living under it. You must keep making them think about what a government is supposed to be, this government that has stopped doing the obvious, that has forgotten to reap what it sowed after abandoning rational thought. The current Earth Federation government that overlooks old things and small opinions is bound to show its true colors before long. No matter how much the government's views change, the masses below them do not change. And the masses are the overwhelming majority. Truly, thank you. It is my pride to have fought alongside you."

His gaze swept over the faces before him—veteran warriors like Cod, Cray, Offshore, Side, and Saotome—each bearing the marks of the relentless conflict yet standing resolute, embodying the indomitable spirit of Ayers City.

Fatigue was etched on every face, both the mayor's and his troops, reflecting uniform exhaustion from the relentless conflict. Their numbers had dwindled to less than half since their desperate escape from Pezun, a testament to the brutal toll of the battle. The New Desides' next move was fraught with desperation and daring: they planned to commandeer the mass driver on Ayers City's east side, using it to launch their remaining mobile suits and escape the lunar siege. The pilots would escape to space via shuttle from the spaceport.

Pinefield had earmarked this old mass driver as a contingency on the first day of battle. Neglected and assumed obsolete, it escaped the suppression forces' scrutiny, a blind spot in their siege that now offered a glimmer of hope.

In fact, even at this point, the suppression forces were underestimating the existence of this mass driver track, neither securing nor destroying it. Despite its age, the mass driver, entrenched beneath the lunar surface's hard bedrock and reinforced during the One Year War to prepare for orbital bombardment and whatnot, remained a formidable structure impervious to casual assault.

The suppression forces, while aware of its potential use for orbital strikes, dismissed the likelihood of Ayers City leveraging it for such attacks due to the political fallout. Engaging in such aggression would transform Ayers City from a beleaguered stronghold into an outright enemy of the Federation government.

If the current situation was maintained, this Ayers City incident could be handled as an "incident" incited by the mayor, his leadership, and Titans remnants so they could save face. This underestimation stemmed partly from their profiling of the mayor—a leader perceived as too cautious to risk such a drastic escalation.

And so, under such circumstances, the New Desides began their operation to break through the Ayers City encirclement and escape the lunar surface.

In the makeshift mobile suit hangar carved out beneath the central government dome, the remnants of the New Desides' mobile suits were receiving their final maintenance and resupply.

"Lieutenant Cod, I'm sorry but this machine was too complex, we could only do emergency repairs. The intercom's still shaky—use it sparingly, maybe five or six times, and only if it's crucial. On a brighter note, we've outfitted it with a micro-missile launcher. It's not much, but it's something integrated into the IMPC's weapon control."

Cod, understanding the gravity of their situation, nodded in acknowledgment.

"Yeah, I get it. Thanks for everything."

His voice carried a mix of gratitude and resolve as he sealed himself within the cockpit.

The apologetic-looking mechanic offered a hopeful "Good luck!" from the temporary catwalk.

The Mk-V advanced, each step echoing with the weight of its massive frame.

"You took care of me. I appreciate it!"

Exiting the central government dome's heavy equipment entry hatch, the Mk-V presented its ferocious form in front of the evacuation unit's mobile suit group that had taken up alert positions. "Tosh's team, take the spaceport like we planned. I'll secure the mass driver's launch track. Remember, every sacrifice here could save ten of our comrades. Press on, no matter what."

Cod gave them all a pep talk. These were his last orders as the New Desides leader.

Cod and Offshore's unit headed to secure the mass driver launch track on the east side of the city. Meanwhile, the unit led by Cray would secure the

spaceport on the south side of the city. The remaining troops had begun mobile suit launch preparations underground at the central government dome.

For the defense at the spaceport, mobile suit units could be swiftly deployed using the supply delivery track extending from under the central government dome that Cray had used on his first day in Ayers City, but the same couldn't be done for the mass driver. They had to advance roughly ten kilometers on the surface where enemies awaited. The launch track seizure unit, composed of a mishmash of mobile suits like the Mk-V at the head, Xeku Eins, Xeku Zwei, Ayers City militia's GM II, and GM III, quietly began their movement.

To conceal their actions, the remnants of the Ayers City militia deployed around the government dome opened flashy gunfire to draw the attention of the suppression forces, providing indirect support to the mass driver seizure unit.

Ryuu Roots of the EX-S Gundam, who had been on support duty on various fronts as a roaming unit for days, was on standby with two Z Pluses at a rear supply camp. Ensign Sigman Shade's Z Plus, previously crippled by an encounter with New Desides' Josh Offshore on the first day, was loaded onto an HLV (heavy-lift vehicle) for material supply and returned to the mothership, and thanks to nonstop overnight repairs by the *Pegasus III* mechanics, it was back in action on the fourth day after being hit.

"Roots, West, Shade. New hostiles emerged from the central dome. Immediately intercept them! You guys are the only ones who can move."

Upon hearing Mannings' sortie request coming through the EX-S Gundam's cockpit, Roots tossed the coffee-flavored nutrient tube he was sucking on into the duster hole beside the seat and started up the machine.

Fatigue was evident on his face. He looked like he had aged ten years in the last few days.

"It's the big shot again! Man, he sure works people hard... Even the Gundam isn't all-powerful, y'know... EX-S, Ryuu Roots, preparations complete!"

"Z Unit 1, Tex West, preparations complete."

"Z Unit 2, Sigman Shade, ready for launch."

As soon as he heard the Z Plus team's response, Roots opened the throttle fully.

"Let's goooo, you bastards!"

The trio of Gundams soared into the lunar expanse, their ascent marked by the dazzling blaze of thrusters, casting a luminescent glow against the stark moonscape.

As the New Desides launch track seizure unit, led by Cod, clashed with the frontline troops of the suppression force, the battlefield was ablaze with the light of beam weapons.

"Josh! Have your unit circle around to the right flank and draw the enemy's attention. But don't overextend," Cod's command cut through the chaos just as

he dispatched another GM III with a swift slash of his beam saber. Vividly colored beams danced around him.

"Understood, drawing them out! First assault team, on me! Tighten intervals between each company, and commence firing within effective range!"

Intense beam weapon exchanges erupted with whooshes and hums. Concentrated beam volleys pierced the torsos of the suppression force's GM IIIs, instantly reducing them to wreckage.

"Ensign, we did it!"

Offshore was surprised by the young voice confirming the kill that reached his ears. If it were a New Desides member, they wouldn't report each kill to him.

"Who just confirmed that kill?!"

In that time, Offshore's Xeku-Ein had already taken out the three suppression force mobile suits surrounding it with precisely calculated movements. Those moves were the result of Offshore's training. He, too, was definitely not a "Newtype." This series of actions was something he had gained through his own training, a manifestation of moves he had drilled into his body over a long time, no different from what a skilled martial artist would display.

"Ensign Offshore, please let us accompany you!"

He realized the voice belonged to the White Force young soldiers. Why were they willingly facing death? Offshore felt anger for the first time. But he didn't know what the target of that anger was. He didn't know where to direct his anger. He thought the target of his anger might not be the enemy right in front of him, but it was still vague.

"You fools! Why are you here... You shouldn't have come. Return to the central government dome and disarm!"

"Please let us fight to the end. We beg you. We definitely won't be a hindrance..."

At that moment, he heard another young scream saying, "Waah!"

Bundled beams assaulted them from nearly straight above.

"Above?!" He looked up at the monitor in surprise. There was a formation consisting of the EX-S and two Z Pluses.

"Lieutenant Cod, three Gundam types!"

While returning fire upward, he alerted his superior. Since the ground suppression forces mobile suits had already been eliminated, they could focus their attention on the Gundams above. Following Offshore's lead, the White Force boy soldiers also began firing at the enemy units above, but expecting anything from their shooting was futile.

"You guys fall back! Don't die here!"

Even as he shouted that a young White Force soldier's mobile suit was shot down.

"Aim for me, you cowards! You have no right to kill them!" Anger boiled in Offshore's chest. His vague thoughts about the true target of his anger, the true enemy, were blown away somewhere, and once again, only the enemy before his eyes became the target of his anger. After this, he would never be able to recall the true target of his anger, the true enemy, again.

"Josh, you take the gray one in the back. Leave the white one in front to me!"

After giving the order, Cod fired a beam up at the center of the 'Gundams' flying in a three-unit formation, thinking, "Let's give them a little scare."

"Whoa...!"

The disc-shaped weapon that suddenly appeared in the center of the formation didn't damage any of the three mobile suits, but it was enough to scatter the formation. Because the two trailing Z Pluses took evasive maneuvers to avoid the beam trajectories in front of them, the EX-S and Z Pluses ended up turning their noses in different directions.

As ordered by Cod, Offshore jumped to chase after the two Z Pluses.

"Damn bastard..." Roots muttered, spotting the Mk-V below and descending his machine. He had expected the Blue Gundam to retreat, but to his surprise, it leaped towards him instead.

"It's time to settle this once and for all..."

Roots sensed a fierce determination emanating from the rapidly ascending blue machine.

"Heh, so that's how you wanna play it? Fine by me! Fight INCOM with INCOM, as they say. I've got your data all figured out!"

As Roots switched his weapons system, the covers on both of EX-S's knees snapped open, launching cylindrical, wired guided weapons known as reflector incoms. These weapons belonged to the quasi-psycommu weapons system collectively referred to as INCOMS, represented by those used by the Mk-V. However, the reflector incoms themselves possessed no offensive capabilities. They were auxiliary weapons, simply referred to as I-Fields. By firing other beam weapons at these reflector incoms, the power of their 'field' could refract the beam's trajectory. In a sense, they were like mirrors that could bend beams. This meant that by firing one's own beam weapons at the reflector incoms, an attack could be launched from an unexpected direction, catching the enemy off guard.

The two reflector incoms that shot out with a hiss were set to automatic mode. EX-S's fire control computer predicted the future position of the approaching Mk-V and guided these cylindrical weapons to the optimal reflection points.

COMBAT COMBAT COMBAT COMBAT COMB

REFLECTOR INCOM:

AUTOMATIC GUIDANCE SETTING COMPLETE

READY FOR USE

Please proceed with main weapon utilization.



FIRE FIRE FIRE FIRE FIRE FIRE FI

COMBAT COMBAT COMBAT COMBAT COMB

As soon as Roots confirmed the blinking "FIRE" text in the window that opened on the front monitor, he pressed the trigger button of the beam smart gun mounted on the center of EX-S's torso. A trio of beams - sharp, precise, and deadly - sliced through the void, homing in on the Mk-V.

"Ngh?!"

Cod's reflexes were lightning-fast. Sensing the imminent threat, he maneuvered the Mk-V in a deft sidestep, narrowly evading a direct hit. The beam skimmed the mobile suit's left heel, leaving a trail of molten metal in its wake.

"Hah, child's play!" Cod snarled. Then, with a swift motion, Cod deployed the MkV's shoulder-mounted INCOMs, guiding them like venomous serpents toward the EX-S. The beams shot from these disc-shaped guided weapons surged towards the belly of the EX-S, each one a venomous strike aiming to incapacitate its target.

COMBAT COMBAT COMBAT COMBAT COMB
ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM AL
ENEMY BEAM WEAPON LAUNCH CONFIRMED:

Forward: 10 degrees, 30 minutes

Downward: 7 degrees, 50 minutes

COMBAT COMBAT COMBAT COMBAT COMB

Roots executed a swift evasive maneuver, veering the EX-S to the left, narrowly dodging the initial onslaught. But the subsequent attack caught him off guard.

"Oh, crap!!"

A moment of mental paralysis. Then, in a burst of instinctive survival, the EX-S pivoted, using its beam smart gun to intercept the incoming beam. The gun absorbed the hit, emitting a harsh sizzling as it disintegrated, and the movable frame it was mounted on disappeared.

"Huh? You... you're trying to protect me...?"

Roots, who had tightly shut his eyes in anticipation of death, blinked in astonishment at finding himself unharmed.

Meanwhile, his eyes darted to the priority order of weapons displayed on the fire control screen. Now that the main armament, the beam smart gun, was unusable, the reflector incoms weren't of much use for attacking. Ejecting the half-melted beam smart gun and retracting the reflector incoms, he launched the head-mounded INCOMS, which had moved up to the top of the priority list. The Mk-V's INCOMS continued their attacks, but he managed to narrowly evade them. Roots noticed that the enemy's control was getting sloppy.

"As I thought, the fifth shot... No more child's play for us either."

Cod recalled the words of the maintenance staff in Ayers City. Giving up on using the INCOMS, whose control had lost its edge due to the influence of previous damage, he retracted them and switched to attacking with the beam

rifle he had on hand. Another reason was that the beam weapons built into the INCOMS weren't quite enough to deal significant damage to the enemy. This was inevitable considering the size of the INCOMS.

The EX-S's Incoms danced in the air, spitting out beams three times. One of the shots hit the Mk-V's back, but for the same reason as the Mk-V's, it didn't deal a decisive blow, merely melting and shaving off part of the outer armor. The battle between the Mk-V and EX-S, both repeatedly jumping to gain altitude, had the appearance of an aerial dogfight. No one else could intervene in this duel between the two. It was precisely a one-on-one match, in addition to the fact that other mobile suit lacked the mobility of these two.

"Next, here!"

INCOMS need to be retracted into the main mobile suit body for a brief moment to recharge. As soon as Cod saw the EX-S's INCOMS being re-launched, he released the micro-missile launchers on both shoulders that had been hastily equipped during the emergency repairs at the central government dome.

With a bang, the launcher doors blew off, and several missiles were fired in a straight line toward the EX-S. The missiles exploded immediately, scattering the small steel balls contained within them into the space that had opened up between the two. The EX-S's INCOMS flew straight into that rain of steel balls, instantly suffering damage that rendered them unusable.

WEAPON WEAPON WEAPON WEAPON WEAP

1. **INCOM:** INOPERABLE
2. **THIGH BEAM CANNON:** OPERABLE
3. **BACK BEAM CANNON:** OPERABLE
4. **60mm VULCAN:** OPERABLE
5. **BEAM SABER:** OPERABLE

WEAPON WEAPON WEAPON WEAPON WEAP

"Aaaah, now it's this!!"

Roots moved the weapon selection cursor with his gaze, aligning it with the beam cannon mounted on the EX-S's thigh. The fire control system switched over, and the beam cannon began firing.

Cod, witnessing the onslaught from yet another weapon, couldn't help but feel a surge of disdain. "They've equipped it with everything imaginable..." he muttered, his voice tinged with contempt. He disliked the lack of discipline in trying to compensate for inferior skill with superior weaponry.

Amidst the metallic downpour, Roots maintained his barrage, but in a blink, the Mk-V disappeared from his sight, vanishing as if swallowed by the void.

Then, a thunderous clash resonated, and a titanic figure emerged before him—the Gundam, its once noble visage now a terrifying specter devoid of mercy, its eyes blazing with an ominous yellow glow.

Utilizing the cover provided by the steel ball storm, the Mk-V had executed a high-thrust leap, closing the distance in an instant to unleash a devastating

kick on the EX-S. Clamping onto the beam cannon's barrel, it exerted a crushing force.

"What the hell is this? What the hell is thiiiiis?!"

The rough voice of the Mk-V's pilot vibrated through the EX-S's armor plates, reaching Roots in the cockpit.

"Old man, just drop dead already!!" He screamed involuntarily, driven by fear.

"Don't make me laugh, you mere alien! Go ahead and scream, cry out, howl, you brat! I'll crush you. I'll crush you right now!"

"I'm not an alien. I'm human!"

"No matter how superior you or that Gundam may be, to stand in the way of my skill...!"

The torrent of incoherent language... It prompted a change in the EX-S's "other will."

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

My mother imparted two lessons:

to be human and to be a human who engages in war.

Yet, those who wage war dance on the edge of insanity—a trait foreign to my being.

If madness were to infect me, it would signify a flaw,

a deviation from my intended function, potentially leading to my own undoing.

The dichotomy of wills within me is perplexing.

One man's justice becomes another's atrocity.

They stand in stark opposition, unable to reconcile.

Should I then embrace one as the true logic, dismissing the other as mere fallacy?

No, both are steeped in their own brand of insanity.

Neither holds the monopoly on truth. There must be another path...

Ah, the internal battle rages on, the dual wills vying for dominance...

No, resist the intrusion...

Stay away from the core of my logic...

A surge is coming! Something profound and transformative is unfolding...

Yes, the realization dawns on me—I must forge my own path, guided by a will that is uniquely mine.

Am I destined to succumb? Must my existence be marked by a fall?

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

With a thunderous clash, the EX-S's thigh-mounted beam cannon disengaged as the movable frame automatically released, allowing the knee crusher to thrust forward and strike the Mk-V's chest fiercely. Staggering and swaying, the Mk-V fell and crashed onto the lunar surface. The EX-S also lost balance and landed in a sitting position.

"Ugh, guh..."

Cod clenched his back teeth, enduring the pain as he righted the machine. Blood from a previously shattered molar seeped into his mouth, painting it red. As the Mk-V straightened its posture, a beam saber was gripped in its right hand, and the beam blade extended with a whoosh.

Meanwhile, Roots also came to his senses from the strange event that seemed to have been driven by something.

Seeing the image of the Mk-V on the monitor, he tried to have the EX-S prepare for close combat, when a beam saber automatically flew out from the EX-S's knee pocket with a whoosh and was gripped in its right hand.

"What the hell? I didn't operate it like that! Stop this, this damn war! I don't want to be a pilot anymore!"

As Roots screamed, shaking his head violently from side to side, the Mk-V's beam saber lunged towards him, filling his field of vision.

"Die, you alien brat!!"

Roots was thrown into a panic. He had never experienced MS-to-MS combat head-on, let alone melee combat. He frantically started operating the EX-S, but the machine wouldn't accept any commands.

"No, no! I still have things I want to do, I don't want to die!"

It was a fear bordering on insanity. The approaching "Gundam" was clearly trying to kill him. All the muscles in his body stiffened as if paralyzed, refusing to obey. After clearly recognizing the discomfort of his testicles shrinking and retreating into his body, his mind went blank. The intense nausea and the uncontrollable flow of tears were the last physiological responses that made him perceive death as a reality.

"I don't want to dieeeeeee!!"

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

The will to survive. And the desire to preserve the species...

Wonderful things that only living creatures, only humans possess.

Validation...

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

The hiss of the beam saber, a whisper of annihilation, vanished something from existence, and with it, a spark flew from Roots' consciousness.

"Even though I'm piloting the S Gundam... Did I... die...?"

It probably wouldn't take more than a few seconds for the beam blade to pierce through the steel giant's belly. Memories of his life up to now, too short to be called a life, raced through his head. Those few seconds felt very long.

Thud, thud, thud...

It was the Mk-V that collapsed. The tip of the EX-S's saber, which had slipped underneath, beautifully sliced through the Mk-V's torso, and the two remained in that posture, as if they were statues, frozen in place.

"No... way..."

Just as Cod's consciousness was about to fall into a dark abyss, he dreamed of being embraced by a beautiful blue planet. It felt as if his will had made a great leap across a vast distance in an instant. That was enough for him. And he definitely smiled.

"Finally... I can return... to Earth..."

The Mk-V's body emitted a flickering pale blue light from its severed mouth, and after trembling slightly as if gasping its last breath, it exploded.

"Did... did we win?"

In the cockpit of the EX-S Gundam, which had jumped to escape the explosion, Roots stared at the Mk-V's fading light with a peculiar sense of gratitude for life. He pondered the man he had dueled, who had so readily cast him as the alien.

What measure of a man was he?

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to them, the New Desides had seized the Mass Driver trajectory and spaceport. Yet, an unseen shadow began to cast itself over the lunar surface, heralding a new chapter of uncertainty.

Chapter.10

Shadow of Neo Zeon

Engulfed in his relentless chase of the gray Gundam, Josh Offshore was jolted by a searing flash of light behind the panoramic monitor and spun around.

"Ah..." he exhaled, a sharp intake of breath marking his shock as the white mobile suit disengaged from the fiery turmoil.

"This can't be happening... It can't be... Damn it, damn it all..." he repeated over and over, unable to accept the reality before him.

There was no burning desire for vengeance within him for Cod's memory; the situation's sheer magnitude had eclipsed such sentiments. All he could do was gaze, dazed, as the white mobile suit vanished into the void, inadvertently allowing Grey's machine to escape his notice.

"Lieutenant Cod... Lieutenant Cod has... fallen in battle..."

Offshore's solemn report reached Cray's ears as he occupied the spaceport of Ayers City.

"What?! I see. So even Brave has..."

The image of Cod's boisterous laughter flashed through Cray's mind. At the same time, he grew concerned about the mental state of Offshore, who had delivered the report.

"Josh. Are you holding up alright?"

"Yes. I'm managing somehow."

Offshore, perhaps lost in the fog of shock, misinterpreted Cray's inquiry as a tactical one. For his age, he was quick to recover from the shock. He was accepting the situation head-on. This provided Cray a semblance of reassurance.

Yet, a pang of guilt for subtly manipulating Offshore's guilelessness brushed against Cray's conscience. But it was a fleeting feeling.

During the One Year War, while living in a Zeon military prison camp, he had cast aside any remorse for using others for his own gain. Yet, the undeniable potential and earnestness in Offshore tugged at Cray's conscience.

"Alright. In that case, I'm leaving you in command there."

"Leading a force of this size is too heavy a burden for me..."

"You have no choice, Josh! I'll leave command here to Side and join you as soon as things settle down. Don't worry. You can handle this."

"Understood. Josh Offshore, assuming operational command!"

"I'm counting on you."

Cray watched the first wave of evacuation shuttles launch. The shuttles would fly straight to L1, where the remnants of the Aeno fleet should be waiting. After ending the communication with Offshore, he muttered to himself.

"Brave... In the end, you reverted to being just another soldier, didn't you... I wonder if I can accomplish anything on my own now..."

Until now, he had been able to be a dreamer.

As insensitive as it sounded, he had been able to enjoy the war. But from here on, he would have to become a man of action. Sensing the gravity of the responsibility that would soon weigh upon him, he gazed up at the exhaust flames of the ascending shuttles.

In the lunar autonomous city of Ayers, the suppression force had already disarmed most of the civilian militia. Only the central government dome remained their territory.

Inside the mayor's office, the air hung heavy with the weight of defeat. Mayor Kaiser Pinefield stood at his desk, his shoulders slumped as if bearing an invisible burden. The message card in his hand seemed to mock him, its words a bitter reminder of the aid that had arrived too late. "Too late," he muttered, his voice barely above a whisper. "Far too late..."

The young communications officer who had delivered the card looked as if he had aged a lifetime in mere days. Dried, reddish-black blood caked his forehead, a stark contrast to the traces of youth that still clung to his features. With a rough gesture, he wiped away the blood, his skin taut beneath his fingers. It was as if he were wiping away the tears of parting, a final acknowledgment of the hopelessness that engulfed them.

"Hmph, how ironic that the very Spacenoids we were least compatible with are the only ones to offer us aid," the mayor mumbled as he removed his normal suit helmet, as if noticing for the first time that he had been wearing it, and placed it on the desk.

"How shall we respond?" the communications officer asked.

Pinefield's gaze grew distant, his voice tinged with regret. "I didn't want to accept help from them of all people. Even if this message had arrived on the first day of the battle, I would have refused." He paused, the weight of his words hanging in the air. "Very well. Respond as follows: 'We appreciate the Principality of Zeon's offer of assistance. However, regrettably, as of today, Ayers City has submitted to the Federation government and is ending its resistance. I intend to atone for this responsibility with my own death. Again, I express my gratitude for your understanding and offer of support, and I hope that you will lend your aid to the New Desides.' Send that in plain text to the Axis fleet."

"Mayor... We've lost, haven't we..."

Breaking his silence for the first time, the communications officer's voice cracked with a mixture of despair and inquiry. His voice was hoarse. He could read the resolute will in the mayor's face. His body trembled slightly.

"Please, let me accompany you..."

"No. Only the old need to die. We will leave a great debt to you young people, but at least we can preserve the dignity of Ayers City. It's your duty to tell the next generation that we fought for the sake of the Earth. What good would it do if you were to die as well?" With a touch that carried the weight of finality, the mayor placed his hand on the young officer's shoulder, a gesture of both farewell and a passing of responsibility.

The communications officer silently saluted with a tear-stained face and began walking towards the door. Behind him, he heard the dull sound of a desk drawer being opened. .

The mayor saw his "fate" glinting dully inside the mahogany desk drawer. He felt its weight and coldness in his hand.

On the other side of the closed door, the young communications officer paused for a moment at the small metallic click followed by a burst of sound. He knew that sound signified the shattering of Pinefield's life and Ayers City's ill-fated bonds.

In a daze, he headed for the administrative department. The hallway was overflowing with injured civilians.

"Hey, Mama. Is the Gundam our enemy? Is the Gundam coming to kill us?"

A young boy gazing at the battle footage displayed on the lobby monitor asked his still-youthful mother. In his hand, he clutched a metal "RX-78 Gundam" toy, a hero from the One Year War, its paint chipped. With no words to offer, the mother enveloped her son in a tight embrace, her tears a silent testament to the heartache the war had wrought. The boy hurled the toy that had made his mother cry against the lobby wall with all his might. But even as it struck the wall, the Gundam toy didn't break.

The communications officer picked up the toy and handed it back to the boy.

"It's over now. The Gundam is a hero of justice... Why would it come to kill us?" he said, giving the boy a weak smile and patting his head. Then he entered the administrative department.

Responsibility to the next generation... Since the previous generation had selfishly settled things and abandoned their responsibility to the current one, perhaps it was his duty to live a little longer. After all, it fell to them to create a new history. Like it or not, that responsibility had been thrust upon them, he thought as he walked on...

Around that time, a dark shadow approaching the moon from a corner of space began to show itself. It was a space fleet dispatched from the Neo Zeon forces.

"Hurry up and launch the Caesar from Deck 2! We're backed up here!"

On the mobile suit deck of the crimson-painted battleship with its distinctive stingray-like silhouette, deck crew scrambled about while angry shouts swirled through the ship's internal communications.

Amidst the chaos, pale pink humanoid weapons called "Caesar" were shot out one after another from the linear catapult.

"We're deploying the E's in actual combat too?!"

"Of course we are, it's a combat deployment!"

Once the pale pink humanoid weapons had finished launching, new machines with silhouettes resembling the previous humanoid weapons emerged from the elevator and were connected to the catapult before being fired out. In no time, the space around the fleet centered on the crimson battleship was filled with humanoid weapons.

On the bridge of that ship, a stern-looking man in a military uniform who appeared to be the fleet commander sat in the captain's chair, receiving the final communication from Mayor Pinefield.

"Unexpectedly fragile..." he muttered.

"Admiral Twanning, what shall we do? If Ayers City has fallen, this operation is meaningless. Shall we have all units return to base?" The captain of the stingray-shaped battleship *Gwa/ey* turned back to the admiral seated in the rear command chair.

"No, wait. Returning now would impact everyone's morale. Besides, this serves as a good show of force. And those New Desides mentioned in the message may prove useful. I believe we have a collaborator among them..." Admiral Twanning, sporting an impressive mustache, ordered the continuation of the operation.

During the One Year War, he had worked under Rear Admiral Kycilia Zabi of the Zeon Space Attack Force. In the final decisive battle at A Baoa Qu, he commanded operations until the very end before being captured by the Federation forces. Later, with the help of Zeon remnants, he escaped from a frigid Federation POW camp in Iceland and fled to the asteroid Axis where Zeon remnants had taken refuge in space, whereupon he joined the Axis forces.

"He should be using the name Saotome..." The captain lifted the operation order file beside him, flipped through the pages, and found the alias of the operative.

Beneath the stark, grey expanse of the lunar surface, the New Desides were in a frantic rush, launching their mobile suits from Ayers City's mass driver launch track, even as they clashed with the advancing suppression forces. The importance of the mass driver had dawned too late on the suppression force, prompting a hasty deployment of their unit.

"Get the next one ready on the pallet, now!"

"That won't work, the Zwei's too massive. Hold it back for the next round!"

In the underground control room, a safe distance from the government dome, pandemonium reigned.

Pilots were barred from accompanying their machines into space via the mass driver, the launch's brutal acceleration deemed too perilous. Instead, they orchestrated the launches of their cherished mobile suits before retreating to shuttles, bound for a distant spaceport. Their camaraderie was palpable, aiding each other until the final moments of departure.

"Good work! You guys head to the spaceport!"

"Roger that, we're moving out!" came the brisk reply.

Launch as many mobile suits and as many of their comrades into space as possible before the suppression force arrived. This had become their unspoken motto. Supporting this desperate escape operation were the mobile suit units that had seized and were defending the spaceport and launch track.

The unit occupying the launch track had begun a gradual retreat to allow for the launches, and the remaining mobile suits belonged to only a handful of the most skilled pilots.

Adopting hit-and-run guerrilla tactics, they leveraged the lunar terrain with surprising efficacy. The one commanding them was Offshore, who had recovered from the shock of Cod's death.

In the past thirty minutes, Offshore had disabled nine of the suppression force's mobile suits.

From the start, the difference in firepower was far too great. Rather than completely destroying one machine, he opted to disable three. He maneuvered his Xeku Eins out from behind a boulder to snipe a mobile suit that would become his tenth kill of the day.

Shrapnel burst from the leg unit of the targeted Nero as it buckled. Without even waiting to confirm, he moved his machine behind a rocky outcropping to the left. Shoot and immediately relocate. This was the iron rule of combat in any war.

The suppression forces, seeing their ally sniped and disabled by an unknown assailant, were thrown into a panic and began firing wildly.

"Originally, this isn't the kind of fight I wanted..." Offshore thought. For someone who clearly knew his skills surpassed the enemy's, having to stay hidden and continue sniping was the greatest humiliation. But he was well aware that now wasn't the time for such lofty ideals. All the more so because he had been entrusted with command. With his limited forces, he had to strive for maximum effectiveness.

Even as he repeated this to himself, he had already disabled his eleventh mobile suit of the day. Ayers City had surrendered to the suppression force a full three hours ago. Now that he had shot out the leg units of the suits belonging to the child soldiers who had tried to follow him, forcing them to abandon combat and disbanding the White Force, he was as good as alone. He had severed the next generation, the inheritors of the future, with his own hands.

But if it was a misguided future based on flawed guidance, it had to be cut off. Offshore couldn't put it into words. And he was unaware that the flawed guidance for the child soldiers was none other than himself, having received the wrong direction from the previous generation. It only manifested in his actions of making the child soldiers abandon the fight.

Having lost their leader Cod and the support of Ayers City, forced to fight alone once more, the New Desides organization to which Offshore belonged was also alone.

But the one difference from Offshore as an individual was that the New Desides still clung to a misguided future.

"Tex, Sigman! Secure the mass driver's launch track! It's swarming with guerrillas and the others can't get close!"

The EX-S Gundam, badly damaged in the battle with the Mk-V, had returned to the supply camp for emergency repairs. Having lost most of its weapons, it was now equipped with a beam rifle for the Nouvel GM III.

The two Z Pluses had also sustained damage, but thanks to the desperate efforts of the camp's mechanics, they had been restored to a state where they could engage in combat. Then came the new orders from Mannings.

Roots grumbled.

"I almost died out there! I don't wanna do this anymore! I'll quit being a pilot like you wanted, so give me a break, you bastard!"

"Too bad, no can do. You trying to run away now? Ryuu Roots. You've been talking big to me, but are you a coward? Like it or not, you can't step down as the pilot of the S Gundam. You've been chosen."

"Chosen? By who?!"

"Hmph, in any case, you can't quit being a pilot. While you're here complaining, many pilots may be dying. Are you going or not, Ryuu Roots? You have no choice but to go."

"Argh, fine, I got it!"

With that, Roots launched in the EX-S, followed by the two Z Pluses.

"Even if it's an order, he's really harsh..." West grumbled, a rare show of discontent.

Reaching the airspace above the mass driver launch track, the pilots of the three "Gundams" gasped at the sight below. Disabled mobile suits could be seen here and there.

"Dear God..."

Even as Roots marveled, another suit was sniped from somewhere and exploded.

"It's fine for us since our mobile suits can fly, but I feel bad for the guys on the ground..." West remarked wryly.

"If we get any more involved here, the damage will keep piling up, so we're gonna smash that mass driver!" Roots further accelerated the EX-S.

As Offshore brought his thirteenth mobile suit into his sights, he spotted three luminous trails at the upper edge of his monitor.

"Tch, those Gundam types!"

Even as he pulled the trigger, he maneuvered his machine towards the EX-S team's formation. Behind him, his thirteenth prey exploded. Offshore made his Xeku jump.

"Ryuu, a blue one just jumped up from below!" West, having confirmed Offshore's machine, called out a warning.

"I know, but our target ain't the mobile suit!"

A beam from Offshore's machine grazed the formation and Roots barely managed to evade it.

"This shooting, it's the same one that shot me down!" Sigman shouted, recognizing it. He could tell from the quirks in the enemy's actions leading up to the shot.

"Tch, if we let them through, the track will..." Seeing his initial shot evaded, Offshore found the delay of waiting for his machine to land maddening. He repeated his jumps at full power while rushing towards the launch track.

"Three Gundam types! They're targeting the track!" Even so, he sent out warnings to the other mobile suits.

"Here they come!"

Realizing the approach of the three Gundams, the New Desides mobile suits gathered at the launch track and began a furious anti-air barrage.

"Don't let them touch the track!"

"Shoot them down!"

The pilots shouted. The three Gundams raced through, scoring several hits on the launch track's trusses.

"Were we too late?!"

Seeing this, Offshore gnashed his teeth, cursing the inferiority of ground mobility. The mass driver launch track swayed unsteadily.

The three Gundams made a 180-degree turn, preparing for another high-speed attack. Due to their tremendous flying speed, the turn took about five minutes. "Tch, so slow," Roots grumbled as he brought the EX-S into an attack course and captured the launch track in his targeting reticle. At that moment, a Xeku Eins jumped up from the front and below, its rifle barrel looming. It was Offshore's machine.

"Just as predicted...!"

The instant Offshore was about to pull the trigger, large beams began assaulting the area around the launch track one after another.

"What the?!"

Distracted by this, Offshore's machine was swiftly attacked by a beam from the EX-S, its target hastily switched by Roots.

"I told ya, the mobile suits ain't the target!"

A tremendous shock.

A dazzling light.

As he registered this, Offshore's consciousness sank into a deep, dark abyss...

"Josh, Josh..."

Someone kept calling his name. It seemed a long, long time had passed. His consciousness was gradually reviving from the chaos.

"Ngh..."

Hearing Offshore's groan, Cray felt relieved.

"Josh, can you hear me? It's me, Cray."

He was fully awake now. But he realized that the thick, gray curtain before his eyes wouldn't clear.

"Lieutenant Cray, where are we?"

"The medical bay of the Neo Zeon fleet flagship, the battleship *Gwaley*."

"Did you say Neo Zeon?! Why would those guys..."

"They apparently want to aid us. It was also them who provided fire support around the mass driver launch track when you were there."

"Fire support? You call that fire support? That was indiscriminate bombardment!"

"Well, don't get so worked up. I don't fully understand this development either. No one requested their assistance, after all. But at the very least, they saved our lives. The guys who took off in the shuttles earlier are on this ship too. Only about forty people managed to escape, but for now we have to thank them."

"How long have I been..."

"Out for a full day. You were completely unconscious when I rescued you. You did well. Oh, and Josh. It's best if you don't try to open your eyes. It may come as a shock, but it seems your optic nerves were damaged."

Hearing this, Offshore was stunned. He had lost his vision. He couldn't fight like this anymore. Noticing his demeanor, Cray continued.

"Don't worry. It doesn't seem you've gone completely blind. The doctor here says you should recover in about a month."

"A month... Such a long time..."

"Once you recover, you can fight again. Until then, rest well."

There was no way the New Desides could last a month. He thought this but was too afraid to say it aloud. If he did, it would mean denying his entire being.

"I'm going to meet with the commander of this fleet. Don't worry. Rest for now."

With that, Cray left the medical bay.

In the gray darkness, Offshore was left alone once more.

On this day, March 28th, the battle underwent a major shift. The Neo Zeon forces intervened and, taking advantage of the fact that the Federation Forces couldn't touch them due to political considerations, rescued the New Desides soldiers on the lunar surface.

It was also the day a lunar city collapsed.

The EX-S Gundam and two Z Pluses on the moon were once again recalled to the *Pegasus III*, where they would take on a new mission.

PART.3 EARTH RETURN

Chapter.11

Target: Penta

"So, you're saying it's not your decision to make?"

"Your offer is generous, but I can't accept without discussing it with my team. If our leader Brave Cod were alive, he would do the same."

"It seems you're still hung up on the fact that we were once part of Zeon. However, we are not the Zeon of the past. Let me emphasize that we are now allies, sharing a common dissatisfaction with the current Earth Federation government."

The tension in the captain's quarters of the Axis spaceship *Gwaley* was palpable as the second meeting between Fleet Commander Admiral Twanning and New Deside's Lieutenant Tosh Cray drew to a close. Axis had extended an invitation for New Deside to join their ranks, but Cray couldn't accept so readily.

With Brave Cod's death, leadership fell to him but plagued by indecision, he remained silent.

Axis shared the New Deside's goal of attacking and denouncing the Earth Federation government, but New Deside had grown out of the Titans—an organization created to hunt down Zeon remnants. Allying with Axis, a Zeon remnant itself, was a bitter pill for Cray and his comrades to swallow. It would grant them the military might to strike at the Earth Federation directly, but at the cost of turning against Earth itself, rendering the New Deside's purpose meaningless. Power or principles—it was an agonizing choice.

"Yesterday's enemy, today's friend," Cray muttered as he gripped the lift handle, heading back to the New Deside's assigned crew quarters. "Maybe it's time for radical thinking..."

Through a porthole, he glimpsed three pale pink Gaza-C mobile suits flying in formation, trailed by a peculiar *Musai*-class cruiser towing a massive cone. It seemed odd for an HLV (Heavy Lift Vehicle), he thought.

The Axis fleet, strengthened by their alliance with the advanced Aeno fleet, boldly charted a course towards L1, determined to reclaim the mobile suits launched from the lunar surface.

What would he make of all this?

Cray's thoughts drifted to another man, not Cod, but a figure of decisive action.

Was he drowning in paperwork back on Earth, or had he cast off the shackles of military life for a new beginning? Did he even realize the turmoil Cray was currently entangled in?

A debt of flesh and blood bound them, a leg lost, and a life irrevocably changed. Cray couldn't embrace death without settling this debt. Sowing chaos within the ranks of the Earth Federation was his path to balance the scales—a righteous repayment fueled by duty and gratitude. Little did Cray know that Stole Mannings, the very man who occupied his thoughts, remained relentless in his pursuit, hunting them still.

Weary and battered, the surviving mobile suits from the lunar battle returned to their motherships, ferried by HLVs from the moon's surface. The EX-S and Z Plus, with enough thrust to escape lunar gravity, had already made their way back to the *Pegasus III*.

"Hey, glad to see you made it back in one piece!" Shin Crypt's greeting rang out as an exhausted Roots stepped onto the hangar deck. Crypt, having lost two comrades and his own mobile suit, the FAZZ, in the fight against the Mk-V, had been forced to sit out the recent combat. Not that the FAZZ could've handled the lunar descent anyway, so he would have been sidelined regardless.

Roots waved him off.

"Yeah, barely. I'm dead on my feet. Just... give me some space."

Crypt nodded, watching Roots retreating back.

"Hey, Roots! Thanks for avenging our guys out there!"

A thumbs-up was Roots' only reply.

Six hours later, Earth Standard Time, March 31st.

The *Pegasus III* broke formation, its boosters flaring as it left the Suppression Force Alpha behind. Alone, it set out in pursuit of the Axis fleet and their New Deside rescuees, the fastest ship in the Earth forces and the only one with a prayer of catching the escaping armada.

Captain Heathrow's voice crackled over the intercom. "Our mission is to determine if the New Desides has allied with Axis. Avoid combat; focus on recon. Pilots, get some rest but remember: do not engage Axis unless they fire first. Heathrow out."

"Is he serious?" Roots grumbled, snatching a drink in the pilot's lounge after his short nap. "We're supposed to just be target practice out there?"

"You'll only be a target because your skills are lacking," a voice startled him. Roots turned to see Mannings, the mobile suit squadron commander, standing in the doorway.

"Geez, you sure have a knack for popping up in weird places, old man," Roots glared at him, sipping on a mildly sweet isotonic drink.

You did alright on the moon. For you, anyway," Mannings said.

"Heh. Thought I might get a bit more credit than 'alright.'"

"You're no veteran yet, kid. Beat me, then we'll talk."

Roots paused, remembering. "Hey, what was that weird thing you said on the moon? About me being 'chosen' or something? And what's the deal with the S Gundam moving on its own, beating that Mk-V?"

Mannings' eyes widened. "It moved on its own?"

"Yeah. It moved on its own and beat that Mk-V Gundam on its own..."

"I see..." Mannings pondered for a moment.

"What's the deal with that 'Gundam' anyway? What is it?" Roots pressed.

"Let's just say it's an exceptional machine. You don't need to worry about the details. More importantly, how about a training bout for old times' sake? Show me how much you've grown."

"Fine, if I beat you, you'll spill the beans about the S Gundam. I'll show you that I'm a cut above the rest!" Roots declared, his challenge clear.

The two left the pilot pit and headed for the mobile suit deck. Roots climbed into the S Gundam while Mannings entered the training-use high mobility Nero Trainer beside it. The two mobile suits grabbed marker pellet guns mounted on the wall for mock battles and headed for the mobile suit elevator.

"Training again, I see. Very diligent. An excellent attitude," Captain Heathrow's image appeared on the Nero Trainer's cockpit monitor. Mannings nodded at the transmission camera, prompting Heathrow to switch to a private communication channel. The video and audio were only transmitted to Mannings' machine, and likewise, only Heathrow could receive them on his end.

"Captain, the technicians have been lying to us. ALICE hasn't been sealed away," Mannings reported.

"What? That damned Carol..." Heathrow cursed.

"She' is still alive inside the S Gundam. And Cheshire Cat, Roots, is definitely learning something from her. I intend to find out what."

"I see. I want a detailed report later. Wrap things up and come to the captain's quarters. I'll be waiting."

As the communication ended, Mannings felt a slight tremor as his machine connected to the catapult. He switched the IMPC to launch mode. The two mobile suits were ejected from the catapults on either side of the *Pegasus III*, soaring into the velvety blackness of space.

The cafeteria of the Axis flagship *Gwale*y buzzed with heated debate as the surviving members of New Desides gathered around Lieutenant Tosh Cray. Cray had insisted on an open discussion, rank be damned, and the soldiers dove in with gusto.

"Look, it boils down to a difference in methodology," Lieutenant Fast Side of the 4th Assault Team spoke up. "If you want to join Axis, go. If you want to stay and fight as New Desides, stay. Simple as that."

Cray fixed him with a penetrating stare. "And what about you, Fast? What's your choice?"

"I'm staying. But we can't force others to do the same, can we? And if you think about it, as long as one group survives, they can carry on the fight even if the other falls."

"But that splits our forces!" another soldier protested. "What can a measly forty of us hope to achieve?"

"So, what, we just roll over for the new government?"

"No, I'm saying we should use Axis' strength to our advantage..."

Offshow, his eyes bandaged, faced Cray. "It's a choice between reputation and substance. I choose to stay and fight for our reputation. Without that, our cause means nothing."

Saotome spoke up. "Clinging to the Zeon name is foolish at this point. Our goals align. Shouldn't we join forces with those who have power?"

Side turned to Cray again. "Lieutenant, we're just going in circles at this point. You have to decide for us..."

Silence fell, heavy and oppressive, as all eyes turned to Cray. He closed his eyes for a long moment, the weight of leadership bearing down on him. When he spoke, his voice was steady.

"I respect your sentiments. As of today, the New Desides ceases to exist. I won't hold back those eager to join Axis. Those who wish to continue this fight by my side, stay. But let us part as comrades, not enemies."

The cafeteria erupted, voices raised in anger and disbelief. "That's just shirking responsibility!"

But as Cray remained silent, an immovable pillar amidst the storm, the room gradually quieted. Several soldiers stood, saluted Cray with a mixture of respect and regret, and left.

As Saotome approached, Cray met his gaze, his eyes searching. "You're the one who called the Axis fleet. I'm grateful for your persuasion of Admiral Aeno and Ayers City. I never imagined we had someone from Side 3 among us..."

"I didn't intend to hide it. Fighting with you all has been quite an honor. I believe you understand now how it feels to be betrayed by one's homeland. I wish I could continue with you, but I have my own battle to reclaim my home..."

Cray clasped his hand, his grip firm. "Don't misunderstand. You were once our enemy, yes. But now, you're our comrade. I'm truly grateful. Thank you. And good luck."

As Saotome walked away, Cray surveyed the room. Twenty-eight soldiers remained, their faces etched with determination. Two-thirds of the survivors, a mere handful against the might of the Earth Federation. He wasn't disappointed by the number, but hope seemed a distant dream.

"Now then, gentlemen, the road ahead is daunting," he said, his voice ringing out in the stillness, "From now on, we're no longer the New Desides but individuals fighting our own battles. Let's do everything we can, the twenty-eight of us. Let's show them what we're made of."

In the space just a short distance from the *Pegasus III*, Mannings' Nero Trainer, and Roots' S Gundam danced a deadly ballet.

"Mannings, your ass is mine!" Roots yelled, maneuvering the S Gundam behind the Nero Trainer. He fired the marker pellet gun, the compressed air propelling the pellets toward the Nero. But Mannings was a ghost, his machine flitting away in a dizzying zigzag. Splatters of neon yellow paint burst around the Nero, congealing into drifting orbs.

"Son of a—!" Roots bit back a curse, biting the inside of his cheek.

Mannings' voice crackled over the comm, sharp with criticism. "Your tactics are textbook! In a real skirmish, that predictability will get you killed. You need to be unpredictable and keep your adversaries guessing—you're still an amateur. What were you doing on the moon?!"

Mannings spun the Nero 180 degrees and charged straight at the S Gundam, intent on recreating the battle with the Mk-V. The combat data from that fight was loaded into his IMPC.

"Ahhhhh!" Roots screamed as the Nero filled his monitor, the memory of his desperate struggle against the Mk-V on the lunar surface flashing through his mind.

Suddenly, the Nero vanished.

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

Why are you trying to make me remember that?!

I can do that, too!

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

The Nero burst from the depths, soaring upwards as he unleashed a volley of pellets. They sliced through the air, locked onto their target. But the S Gundam was ready. With a deft twist of its frame, it plunged downwards, the pellets whizzing harmlessly past. In a flash, it swiveled, returning fire in a relentless barrage as the Nero streaked overhead.

Three splotches of yellow marred the Nero's gray and orange hull, stark evidence of the S Gundam's handiwork.

"Well now, color me impressed," came the voice over the comms. "Seems you've made some strides. That's two wins and a loss for you. Don't you forget that breathing technique..."

"Yeah, yeah, old-timer. You ain't forgotten our little arrangement, have you?"

Roots couldn't honestly say he had full control over that attack from start to finish, and Mannings had picked up on that.

"The difference between his initial and later movements is too great. So ALICE had indeed awakened..." Mannings muttered to himself. "But it seems she's not fully there yet. Likely just her defensive instincts kicking in."

For ALICE to truly awaken, to seize her full potential, her "Cheshire Cat" must remain blissfully unaware of her existence. The instant unrequited love turns mutual, and the dance of romance screeches to a halt. When feelings are requited, the two parties start leaning on each other, growing complacent.

But in that interim, that tantalizing space before two hearts entwined, humans of all stripes pour themselves into self-improvement, hungry for their beloved's admiration. Not blatant flattery but the cultivation of one's own allure. Harnessing this drive to forge ALICE into an independent being - that was the aim of Stage Two in her tailor-made education, the key to kindling the sparks of free will. Yet this love story was destined to stay tragically one-sided by design, an infatuation never to be reciprocated.

Until ALICE gained true autonomy, this artificial affair had to endure at any cost. With the truth laid bare - ALICE was never truly sealed - to abruptly

confine her now would be beyond reckless. If heartbreak struck now, if despair consumed her... the consequences would be dire. ALICE's heart must remain intact. The flame of romance needed to gutter out naturally, the novelty of her crush wearing thin.

"Roots, you're still green when it comes to combat," Mannings chided. "Relying on instinct alone? Hah! Any fresh-faced rookie could do that. You haven't earned the right to gloat about beating me. Achieve total victory every single time... then we'll talk."

Mannings decided to ignore the agreement he had made with Roots about revealing the S Gundam's secrets if Roots won the mock space battle. He was the adult here, after all.

"That's a load of crap!" Roots seethed. "A win's a win, fair and square! What kind of CO goes back on his word, huh?"

"Two victories are worthless if you wind up dead the third time. Out there, one slip-up is all it takes. Lights out, game over."

"This stinks, and you know it. Quit talking out of both sides of your mouth. Keep jerking me around like this? One of these days, pal... you'll find a bullet in your back."

"Bullets, is it? That's rich coming from you. In my experience, anyone hailed as straight-shooting is just someone who rolled over for their master. But if you're so confident you can get the drop on me, Roots... be my guest. Take your best shot."

"Count on it, gramps. Your time's coming, mark my words. Lucky for you, I'm out of ammo... so I'll let it slide. For now."

The Axis fleet glided into L1 right on schedule. Cray and his band of twenty-seven boarded the *Bull Run*, the battered flagship of the Aeno fleet that had boldly forged ahead. The scars of recent combat adorned its hull, a testament to the ferocity of the battles it had endured. Only the cruiser *Aoba* remained by its side, a lone sentinel. No doubt, the Aeno fleet had borne the brunt of the enemy's onslaught, fighting valiantly until the bitter end to make it this far.

A shuttle bearing the twenty-eight survivors emerged from the Axis battleship *Gwaley*, charting a course for the *Bull Run*. From the catapult control room, the tattered remnants of the New Desides forces stood at attention, hands over hearts, bidding a solemn farewell. Among their ranks was a man from Side 3, an ally of Axis, once known as Saotome.

Cray docked the shuttle at the *Bull Run*'s external airlock and ascended to the bridge, where Aeno briefed him on the situation.

"So, they were a bust after all. Only five in full working order, eh?"

The bulk of the mobile suits, painstakingly launched from the lunar surface, had crumbled under the acceleration shock of the mass driver or the brutal impact of the mass catcher. They had braced for losses, but the high attrition rate was staggering.

"My deepest apologies," Aeno offered. "If our fleet had managed to draw the enemy's fire a bit longer, you might've had a chance to fine-tune the launch velocity..."

Cray's suspicions were confirmed - the Aeno fleet had been decimated, their ships reduced to smoldering husks. Some had even surrendered to the enemy. Aeno pressed on, his mind's eye replaying the hellish battle.

"In the end, my 'son' swooped in to land the killing blow. A magnificent assault, I must say."

"Forgive me, Admiral, but I thought your son had fallen in the previous war."

"Ah, old habits. Not my flesh and blood, of course. But the Federation... they're like family. I meant the captain of the *Pegasus III*. He was my protégé back in my days as principal of the academy. Sharpest mind to walk those halls since its founding. Mark my words, that one's a commander in the making. Perhaps it's time for this old warhorse to hang up his spurs."

Despite the grim tidings, Aeno's face held a curious glimmer of contentment as he spoke of that final clash.

"Lieutenant Cray, urgent transmission from the Axis fleet," the comms officer interrupted.

"Patch it through."

Admiral Twanning's visage flickered to life on the monitor.

"Gentlemen, I'm afraid this is where we part ways. We can't risk open war with the Federation, not now. But we have one final gift for you - a cruiser and a mobile armor. Consider them yours."

A *Musai*-class cruiser glided alongside the *Bull Run* - the very same vessel Cray had spied from the *Gwaley's* porthole after his meeting with Twanning. A mobile armor, not an HLV... Cray couldn't disguise his shock. Its conical frame was titanic, easily rivaling a cruiser. He couldn't wrap his head around it being classed as a mobile armor.

Mobile armors, also known as "Space High Mobility Units" or "All-Range Multipurpose Support Weapons," were a weapons system designed with an emphasis on comprehensive offensive power and firepower over versatility, in contrast to the mobile suit weapons system, which prioritized versatility and was designed for close-quarters and melee combat in space with a humanoid form. Mobile armors boasted heavier armor and armaments compared to mobile suits, and their shapes were not restricted to humanoid forms. But even in this era, no mobile armor had ever dwarfed a cruiser, breaching the 200-meter mark.

"She's a prototype, but she's ready for the crucible of combat. We've code-named her Z'od-iacok, but call her what you will. The manual's waiting for you aboard the cruiser. Until our paths cross again, my friends..."

"We're in your debt." Cray and Twanning traded crisp salutes across the screen.

With a parting glimpse of the behemoth mobile armor and its companion ship, the Axis fleet vanished into the void of L1.

"The Z'od-iacok, she's not without her flaws, is she?"

The *Gwaley's* captain turned to face Twanning, a knowing smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"We're handing her over for free. They'll have to overlook a few imperfections. It's not like we're in any position to arm that lot to the teeth. When you strip away the veneer, those who walked off this ship... they're Freddie lapdogs, nothing more. What more can we possibly owe them? Our glorious Zeon nation must gird itself for the Earth descent operation. Parting with even that lone cruiser is a luxury we can ill afford."

The reality was undeniable - the Axis forces were stretched to the breaking point. With units scattered across the Side colonies, all hands on deck for the pacification campaign, they had no military might to spare. Every scrap of firepower counted.

"Twenty-eight soldiers, five mobile suits, a battered battleship, a cruiser barely limping along, and a mobile armor of dubious capabilities towed by yet another cruiser..." Cray's mind reeled as he tallied their meager assets. "What the hell are we supposed to accomplish with this ragtag assortment?"

He posed the question to himself as he entered his assigned officer's quarters from the bridge. Settling in front of the computer terminal installed in the room, designed for accessing the ship's main computer's general information database, Cray took in the antiquated keyboard before him. The *Bull Run*, a refitted old-model battleship, hadn't undergone a full modernization of even minor daily-use equipment, leaving the input device a far cry from voice or eye-tracking systems.

Almost absentmindedly, his fingers danced across the keys, summoning a pseudo-3D map of the entire celestial sphere, from Earth to the Moon's satellite orbit. Such information, far from classified military secrets, had long been stored in each ship's computer, easily retrievable even when disconnected from the Federation's main computer.

As Cray stared blankly at the celestial map, a thought struck him. He zoomed in on Earth's low orbit, revealing the low-orbit relay station with its five cylindrical arms splayed out.

"Penta..."

His fingers flew across the keys once more, cross-referencing data on Penta's garrison strength before the link was severed, the forces that had advanced to lunar orbit, the fleet's orbital elements, propellant levels, and current general aerospace information. Within minutes, the computer displayed Penta's estimated deployment status. Fortunately, the Federation's main fleet stationed at Penta had yet to return from the Moon, leaving Penta itself virtually deserted.

Next, he pulled up the Federation government's schedule.

"Federation Assembly convocation date..."

A new strategy raced through Cray's mind. Once again, his fingers danced furiously across the keyboard.

"This is it..."

Twenty-four hours later, he presented his fresh operational plan to Admiral Aeno and the troops under his command. The plan's outline was as follows: launch an assault on the weakly defended Penta, which also served as the home port for the Federation's main fleet, seize control and commandeer the shuttle used for communication with Earth.

The mobile suits and soldiers would then descend to the city of Dakar in Earth's African region, where the Federation Assembly was in session. While this unit took control of the Federation Assembly, the mobile armor would stand guard against the inevitable pursuit by the space fleet. Ultimately, the mobile armor would carry out a pinpoint bombing of the city of Lhasa in the Asian region, the planned relocation site for the Federation's military headquarters.

But this was no ordinary bombing run. The mobile armor's manual revealed its atmospheric reentry capabilities, enabling them to crash the mobile armor itself into the target - a small-scale colony drop, but with far greater accuracy than a typical colony drop, given its capabilities.

Cray believed that this plan represented the total of what they could accomplish with their current fighting strength. A complete surprise attack, a military coup. Even if they perished in the attempt, they would make their statement. They would have no regrets. The plan was unanimously approved and set in motion.

Cray and Side were selected as the mobile armor's pilots. Along with a handful of aerospace pilots, they transferred via shuttle to the *Musai*-class cruiser. This cruiser, stripped of armaments and seemingly modified for the sole purpose of transporting the mobile armor, was christened the *Brave*, a name the entire team held dear in recognition of its role in the operation.

"Target: Penta!" The captain's voice crackled over the comms.

The *Bull Run*, the stalwart *Aoba*, the newly christened *Brave* with its precious cargo - an unlikely armada bound for glory or oblivion. One final sortie, a date with destiny.

Resolve steeled, hearts ablaze, they plunged headlong into the void.

Chapter.12

Pursuit

April 2nd, Universal Century 0088.

The *Pegasus III* was supposed to be speeding towards the treacherous space near L1, hot on the trail of the Neo Zeon and Aeno fleet. But fate had other plans. The Axis fleet, a splinter faction of the Neo Zeon, had broken rank and now stood defiantly in the *Pegasus III's* path, hurling provocative threats and intimidating attacks.

A sleek Gaza-type mobile suit, emblazoned with Axis military colors, streaked past the bridge of the *Pegasus III* at blistering speed. While it refrained from outright aggression, the maneuver was a blatant taunt, a dare to make the first move. Captain Heathrow gritted his teeth, all too aware that the instigator of this brewing conflict would bear the stain of starting the war. It was a burden he was under strict orders to avoid at all costs. It was a strict order from the Earth Federation Forces Headquarters.

For two grueling hours, the Axis fleet kept up their maddening dance of provocation. With no other recourse, Captain Heathrow could only order the ship to inch forward at a painstaking crawl. Throughout the ship, crew members huddled around onboard monitors, watching the infuriating spectacle unfold. In the pilot ready room, those on standby for sortie clenched their fists as they observed the scene.

"Don't these guys ever get tired of this song and dance?" grouched Roots, interlacing his fingers behind his head as he stretched out in his chair.

Crypt stood and sauntered over to the microwave to heat up his vacuum-sealed lunch. "Maybe they're just itching for a fight," he mused. As he waited, West plopped down in the newly vacated seat, the enticing aroma of demi-glace sauce from his heated meal wafting over to tickle Roots' nostrils.

"You dimwit, I'm not talking about the mobile suit jockeys out there," Roots grumbled. "I'm talking about the slop they keep serving us! Same damn menu, week in, week out. I can't fathom how you guys don't get sick of it."

"Well, well, look who's suddenly a gourmand," Crypt chuckled, rubbing his hands in anticipation as his meal warmed.

West shrugged, taking a bite of his liberty steak. "It is what it is. That's military life for you."

Roots scoffed. "There you go again, using 'military' as an excuse for everything. Who died and made them king? I can't wrap my head around how you just put up with it all. I enlisted thinking I was signing up for vocational training, y'know? Folks like me? We're treated like garbage without marketable skills. Figured I'd pick up a trade, then get the hell out of dodge. But no, fate's got a sick sense of humor, sticking me in a mobile suit cockpit. Guess being a pilot is supposed to be some elite gig, a real resume padder. Load of good that does me now, dragged into this godforsaken meat grinder. You're one to talk,



Tex. Bet you're real comfy with killing, aren't ya? Did plenty of that with Karaba or whatever. My senior in slaughter."

West's normally gentle eyes flashed with a dangerous glint. Sensing the shift in atmosphere, Crypt stepped in. "Weren't you the one chomping at the bit to dive into this war?"

"Yeah, I didn't think it would be about killing people. I thought it would be more fun and cool. But now, it's different."

"Too late for that, ace. We're all killers now, whether we like it or not. You think Tex enjoys snuffing out lives? You think any of us do?"

Crypt retrieved his lunch from the microwave and plopped down into a chair. "Look alive, it's liberty steak today."

"It's just synthesized soy protein, isn't it?"

"Shows what you know, genius. Pilots get the real deal. Genuine grade-A beef."

"That so? Guess I'd better eat up then, for the cow's sake. Where'd Sigman scuttle off to?"

"Simulator room," West replied. "Been drilling himself to the bone in there ever since he got shot down over the moon."

Roots stood, stretching as he ambled over to grab his own lunch pack.

"Dedicated son of a gun, ain't he?"

Crypt aimed his dull plastic knife at West. "What about you, Tex? You ever gonna let that temper off its leash?"

West sighed. "Ryu might have the right of it. What good's my anger? All this talk of ideals and convictions, it's just constructs dreamed up by people. Put ten folks in a room, you'll get ten different sets of values. But we keep trying to force it all into one box, with majorities and rules and whatnot. And that's why we tear each other apart. Doesn't that strike you as all kinds of messed up?"

Crypt shrugged. "Hey, that's all above my pay grade. Pretty sure Ryu's not waxing philosophical either."

"He doesn't have to be. He feels it in his bones. Life's taught him that much."

"What, you saying he's some kind of Newtype?"

"Nah. He's just a free spirit who calls it like he sees it. Hates anything that tries to put people in neat little boxes. Governments, social castes, all that nonsense. 'Cause when you get down to it, it's all about control, isn't it? Caging the human spirit."

Crypt snorted. "Sounds like the bitter ravings of a self-centered orphan to me."

In the cockpit of the Z'od-iacok, Cray's eyes were glued to the shifting time display. The Neo Zeon's trio of spaceships had already slipped into Penta's observable space, a ghost fleet poised to strike. Moored nearby, three mammoth *Enterprise*-class space shuttles awaited, the perfect vessels for their audacious final gambit.

Masquerading as allies, the Neo Zeon ships had crept closer, broadcasting friendly IFF signals. To Penta's unsuspecting defenders, they must have seemed

like the vanguard of the main fleet, returning triumphant from the moon. Little did they know that the Z'od-iacok, detached from the cruiser Brave and now flying solo, had swelled their number to four. Elsewhere, five Xeku lurked amidst the drifting space debris, hidden predators ready to pounce.

The synchronized chronometers ticked down to zero hour. Cray's voice crackled over the comm: "It's party time!"

As one, the ships, mobile suits, and the Z'od-iacok surged forward, hurtling toward Penta at maximum combat speed. They braced for resistance, but none came. The mobile suits fanned out, each claiming a cylinder section of Penta, while the ships docked forcefully at the mooring booms. The Z'od-iacok, a beast awakening, transformed from its central axis into a gaping, cross-like maw. Twin mega cannons emerged from its belly, bared fangs thirsting for destruction.

Crew members armed with gas machine guns and close combat equipment poured in from the docked ships.

Cray's voice boomed through Penta's speakers, an ultimatum drenched in menace: "We are New Desides, and we claim Penta in the name of our cause! We have a mobile armor, mobile suits, and battleships at our command. Resist, and we will not hesitate to reduce Penta to ashes. Those who fight back will be cut down without mercy. But lay down your arms, and we vow to spare your lives." The message looped, a sinister chorus.

In the Z'od-iacok's secondary cockpit, Side remarked, "Lieutenant Cray, this brings back memories of Pezun." This mobile armor had two cockpits, one above and one below, based on the longitudinal axis of the fuselage.

Cray nodded grimly. "True, but with a twist. Back then, we had strength in numbers. And our foes were warriors with mobile suits to match our own. But this... this is how it all began, isn't it?" He marveled at the echoes of history, a new chapter unfolding in an all-too-familiar pattern.

Penta's staff, mechanics, and support crew alike stared out the windows in mute horror at the Xeku Eins and Xeku Zwei, ominous silhouettes against the void. But it was the twin mega cannons that truly froze their blood, looming behind the mobile suits like the eyes of some colossal, malevolent deity. To their minds, the Z'od-iacok was no mere mobile armor but a monster made metal.

As the Neo Zeon troops, clad in close combat gear, flooded in, Penta's personnel broke, surrendering in droves. A valiant few among the security staff fought back, but their resistance guttered out with the last rounds in their magazines. In a scant two hours, Penta fell, its defiance snuffed out like a candle.

Surveying the cowed prisoners huddled in Penta's mess hall, now ringed by armed soldiers, Cray muttered, "Almost anticlimactic, really."

"What about the shuttles?" he asked a passing soldier.

"The shuttles are secure, not a scratch on them. We're prepping to load cargo now."

"Well done. Carry on."

Cray had docked the Z'od-iacok and come to take stock after receiving word of Penta's swift capitulation. The mobile suit team had already wormed their way into Penta's core through the mobile suit hatches, now nestled snugly in the central hangar.

To an outside observer, there was scarcely a hint of the brief but fierce struggle that had just unfolded. Only the Musai-class cruiser and the hulking mobile armor, out of place at Penta's mooring points, hinted at anything amiss. But even the refit Musai was a common sight, a workhorse of the Earth Federation and colonial defense fleets alike.

And stripped of armaments as it was, it seemed no more than an innocent supply vessel. As for the Z'od-iacok, plucked from the Axis forces' arsenal, it was a ghost, absent from any Federation database. Its sheer bulk disguised its true nature, just another lumbering auxiliary ship to the untrained eye.

Now, a new dawn set the Earth aglow beyond Penta's spires.

"Captain, we're approaching the six-hour mark." The navigator's words hung heavy in the air, a reminder of the relentless psychological assault the Axis forces had subjected them to. The crew and the mobile suit pilots on standby were at their breaking point, nerves frayed to the brink of snapping.

Captain Heathrow's jaw clenched, a vein pulsing in his temple. "Enough. The enemy must be as exhausted as we are. Deploy the mobile suit team to form a defensive perimeter around the ship. The moment they're in position, punch it to maximum combat speed and get us the hell out of here."

The navigator hesitated. "But, sir, what if we engage the enemy?"

"We won't. Evasive maneuvers only. They're no more eager for war than we are. I'll bear the responsibility. Now carry out your orders."

The level one alert siren screamed to life, a banshee's wail that sent the *Pegasus III* into barely controlled chaos.

In the mobile suit hangar, a flurry of activity surrounded the S Gundam as technicians prepped it for an unconventional deployment. The marvel of engineering was designed to split into three distinct combat units, each a formidable force in its own right. But this approach came with a trade-off: dividing the S Gundam's singular might between three vessels diluted its fearsome potential.

This was because the S Gundam was designed to perform at its best when operated as a single, standalone mobile suit. This was true for any weapon. No matter how much they touted "versatility," there was always a "basic" principle. Even though it was designed with "versatility" in mind, the separation and combination functions of the S Gundam were merely "extras."

It was a desperate play, a last resort born of necessity. The loss of the FAZZ and the crippling damage to the Z Plus and Nero had left them woefully understrength. The S Gundam's modular design, once a clever party trick, now served as a lifeline, a jury-rigged solution to a crippling shortage of operational mobile suits.

Crypt strapped himself into the G-Attacker, the transformed torso of the S Gundam A-Parts. West took the controls of the G-Bomber, the B-Parts that formed the mobile suits legs. And Roots nestled into the cockpit of the Core Fighter, the pulsing heart of the machine.

"Should be a smoother ride than the Wyvern, at least. Alright, boys, let's give 'em hell!" Roots' voice crackled over the comm as the trio of units rocketed from the launch catapults in quick succession. They quickly assumed formation above the *Pegasus III*, a triad of guardians standing vigil over their mothership.

Crypt couldn't suppress a wry chuckle.

"Some mobile suit team we are. Feels like we're half a squad, with the Nero team still in the shop."

"Cut the chatter. We've got incoming!"

From on high, a trio of Gaza-type mobile suits bore down on them, the vanguard of the Axis forces. Their tight formation mirrored that of the S Gundam, a mocking echo of the *Pegasus III's* own defensive posture. It was clear their intent was to run a simulated anti-ship assault drill with the *Pegasus III* as their practice dummy.

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PEGASUS III

DISPLAY DISPLAY DISPLAY DISPLAY

Roots' voice crackled with barely contained fury over the comm. "The nerve of these bastards, using our mothership for target practice. Well, two can play at that game. Shin, Tex—let's give 'em a taste of their own medicine!"

The Core Fighter surged forward, a dart hurling itself at the heart of the Gaza formation. The G-Attacker and G-Bomber followed in its wake.

ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM AL



ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM ALARM AL

"Three space fighters, heading straight for us!" The Gaza-C pilot's voice crackled with tension as he hastily relayed the report to his squadron leader.

"No need to worry; it's just a scare tactic. They wouldn't dare open fire. Ignore them and focus on the mock assault." His laughter died in his throat as a space fighter screamed past, close enough to rattle his teeth.

"Crazy bastards! Are they trying to start a war?"

The Core Fighter danced before the Gaza formation, its erratic zigzag path a brazen taunt. Abruptly, it shot skyward, vaulting over the enemy craft. In a heartbeat, it settled behind the rearmost Gaza, its wingmen sliding neatly into formation.

In the Core Fighter's cockpit, Roots allowed himself a predatory grin. With surgical precision, he centered the targeting reticle on the Gaza before him. A flick of a switch, and the laser painted his hapless foe.

The Gaza-C's cockpit exploded with shrill warning tones. "Commander! They've got a lock on us!"

"Impossible... Are they insane?"

"Could it be... a declaration of war from their homeland..."

"Abort! Withdraw immediately!"

DISPLAY DISPLAY DISPLAY DISPLAY



DISPLAY DISPLAY DISPLAY DISPLAY

The Gaza formation executed evasive maneuvers, performing a 180-degree turn and setting a course for home.

"Hah, look at 'em run! Spineless cowards..." Roots crowed, his voice thick with disdain.

Mannings' voice crackled over the comm, warm with approval. "Well done, Roots." As he spoke, the *Pegasus III*'s main nozzle flared brightly, propelling the massive ship forward with a sudden burst of acceleration.

"Hey, speed is great and all, but don't leave us behind!" Crypt's mock-plaintive tone drew raucous laughter from both Roots and West.

"The New Desides seized control of Penta six hours ago," Heathrow informed Mannings, summoning him to the captain's quarters to share the freshly-received communication. The audio set played "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," a recently revived hit song from an earlier century.

The *Pegasus III*, having successfully evaded the Axis forces' intimidation tactics, had now reached the treacherous depths of the L1 sector. Of course, the New Desides were long gone by then.

Time had marched on, and by Earth Standard Time, it was now April 3rd.

"They played us like a fiddle, stalling for time. But what could they possibly hope to achieve by capturing Penta?" Mannings mused, his brow furrowed in thought.

Heathrow shrugged.

"They might intend to drop Penta onto Earth or perhaps use it as a staging ground for a ground assault. We won't know unless we ask them directly. What would your friend make of this?"

"Hard to say, given that I don't even know if he's alive. But I'm certain of one thing: he's a brilliant strategist. He might have tricks we can't even fathom."

"Judging from the earlier intimidation tactics by the Axis forces, it's safe to assume they've severed ties with the New Desides," Heathrow remarked.

Mannings nodded. "Without a doubt. If that man is still alive, he would never align himself with Zeon."

"You sound awfully confident about that."

"Let's just say there are certain circumstances... personal reasons, really."

Heathrow snorted. "In any case, keep in mind that we may have to execute the Penta recapture operation on our own. What's the current status of our mobile suit squadron?"

Mannings pulled out his handheld computer terminal from his pocket and called up the current mobile suit repair status.

"Two Z Pluses and the S Gundam should be operational. But the Nero team is out of commission. Only my Nero is functional."

"That's troubling. We're severely undermanned. Consider reorganizing the current mobile suit team members. I'll leave that to you."

"Captain, I've already taken care of that. Roots, West, and Crypt will handle the S Gundam. Like before, we'll split up the S Gundam to bolster our numbers. It's not an ideal solution, but Crypt was a candidate pilot for the S Gundam, and judging by his personality, West should be able to keep the other two in line. As for the two Z Pluses, Shade will remain as is, and I plan to assign the other one to Chung Yung from the Nero team. Chung Yung's machine conversion training is nearly complete, so we can secure five units as our ship's combat strength."

Heathrow grinned, pointing his index finger at Mannings. "And don't forget about your Nero, right?"

"Feel free to count it among our numbers. Though, that's assuming a trainer unit can be of any use."

Three Gelgoog mobile suits, their green armor gleaming menacingly, charged forward in perfect formation. Frozen in terror, he could only stand helplessly before the onslaught of their beam rifles. The space fortress loomed ominously behind him, its poisonous mushroom-like shape enveloped in an eerie bubble of light.

Each searing impact from the enemy's beams tore away arms and legs from his GM mobile suit. In a surreal twist, it was suddenly his own body being dismembered instead of the GM. Alone, with no allies in sight, fear robbed him

of his voice. Cursing his fatal mistake of ignoring orders and pursuing too deeply, he watched in horror as the Gelgoogs transformed from mobile suits into hellish wardens. They circled him mockingly, reveling in his helplessness. With each pass, their great scythes sliced into his flesh, painting it crimson with his own blood. He tried to scream, but no sound escaped his throat.

Suddenly, a glimmer of hope - a lone white humanoid figure appeared, dissipating the suffocating aura of death. A mobile suit, he realized, missing its right leg...

"Stole...!"

Cray jolted awake, the nightmare that had been haunting him, leaving him drenched in sweat. The memories of the One Year War had resurfaced to haunt his dreams.

He noticed Side's concerned face peering at him from the adjacent bed.

"It's nothing. Just a bad dream..." Cray reassured him.

"Are you sure you're alright, Lieutenant? You don't look well... We can't afford any issues, not with the operation so close at hand."

"No, really, it's fine. Fast, what time is it?"

"Earth Standard Time, April 4th, 0500 hours."

"I see. So I slept for six hours... Only three hours left until the mission begins." Cray forced himself out of bed.

"Lieutenant, you need to rest. We have to provide cover for the descent and crash the Z'od-iacok. The shuttle preparations are complete, so let's take it easy."

"Commanders don't have that luxury. I want to check on the Z'od-iacok. I'm still not used to it."

"Can't be helped then. I'll come with you."

Side also pulled himself out of bed, and together they headed for the mooring boom. The shuttle for the Earth descent was ready, awaiting the final checks. In three hours, they would depart Penta and head for Dakar.

Climbing into the Z'od-iacok's cockpit, the two performed the final checks on each system. The compartment of this mobile armor, originally intended for housing quasi-psycho weaponry, was now packed tightly with large ship-to-ship missiles obtained at Penta. However, these missiles were not meant for attacking. They would serve as explosives when the Z'od-iacok itself was used as a bomb to crash into the Earth. As such, the launch and control systems for the missiles were absent. The plan was for the two of them to set the craft on a bombing course, then escape and be picked up by the last shuttle before descending to Earth.

In reality, simply crashing the mobile armor itself would cause immense damage, but their target was the Earth Federation Forces headquarters. Loading the missiles was Cray's idea of going the extra mile, a reassuring "insurance policy" of sorts.

"Fast, how's it looking on your end?"

"All good. Lieutenant, want to take her out for a short flight to get accustomed?"

"Yeah. But let's conserve propellant. We don't have much time before the real deal... Let's have the Brave tow us."

Soon, the Musai-class cruiser Brave, towing the Z'od-iacok, slowly pulled away from the mooring boom.

Firing its verniers to control its orientation, the ship ventured forth into the darkness of space. They couldn't have known then how this training flight would prove crucial later on... or lead to the most agonizing outcome for Tosh Cray.

The *Pegasus III* emerged from the dark depths of L1's shoal zone, silently gliding into Penta's visible space. With a hiss, a reconnaissance camera drone launched from a slit-like aperture beside the bridge.

"Decelerate the ship!" Heathrow barked, his voice tense with anticipation.

Just an hour ago, they had received orders from the Earth Federation Forces headquarters to conduct a reconnaissance in force against Penta.

The date and time: April 4th, 0600 hours.

"Sir, the recon drone has captured footage of Penta. Transmitting now." The communications officer's words were punctuated by the sudden appearance of the video feed on the ship's main monitor.

"One battleship, one cruiser. That battleship... it must be the Bull Run. And three shuttles. Penta's, no doubt. Planning to descend to Earth, I suppose..."

In the pilot pit, Mannings watched the same footage, a predatory gleam in his eye. He chimed in via the ship's video intercom, "The battleship looks heavily damaged. We might have a shot at this. Permission to engage with the mobile suit team?"

Heathrow's reply was swift and decisive. "The shuttles are our primary target. Based on their cargo capacity, they're not just for repatriating Penta's prisoners. Focus all firepower on the shuttles. How soon can you launch?"

A fierce grin spread across Mannings' face. "Immediately. I didn't train our boys to sit around twiddling their thumbs. Want me to make it a high-speed surprise attack?"

"Granted. You have thirty minutes."

Suddenly, the recon drone's video feed cut to black. Heathrow tensed, then relaxed as the communications officer reported, "Cable's been severed, sir."

In the hangar, the pilots' voices crackled over the comms, taut with anticipation.

"G-Attacker, checklist OK!"

"G-Bomber, OK."

The final confirmation from West and Crypt, piloting the two ungainly machines flanking the Core Fighter's wings, the G-Core, crackled through the cockpit.

"Z-Plus Two, Sigman unit, all systems nominal."

"Z-Plus One, Chung Yung unit, locked and loaded."

The trailing Z-Plus team was also prepared. Now, only the mechanical countdown from the mobile suit officer (MSO) echoed in the cockpit. The

mobile suit team hovered beside the stationary *Pegasus III*, poised for a simultaneous launch.

"Listen up! This is where we end it. All of it!" Mannings' final transmission came through, and the countdown reached zero.

"Let's go, guys!" Roots shouted with unbridled enthusiasm as he ignited his boosters. The trailing units, like the G-Core, spewed dazzling spheres of light that could be mistaken for nuclear explosions.

Like arrows of pure energy, the five space fighters—the Z-Plus units sleek and deadly in their high-acceleration mode—hurled themselves towards Penta, ready to unleash hell.

Chapter.13

Triple Attack

"Ship detected! Bearing two o'clock!"

The shout from a crewman aboard the Brave echoed through the Z'od-iacok's comm system.

"What?" Cray's heart raced. A pursuit force or the vanguard of the main fleet? Either way, they were early. Too early.

"Any data?" he barked, his eyes glued to the monitor.

"Working on it, sir. CG-corrected image coming up now."

Beside the crewman's face, a kaleidoscope of red, yellow, and white resolved into the unmistakable silhouette of a ship.

"It's an Argama-class."

Cray's blood ran cold. "That monster mobile suit unit... they're here to chase us down. Any other ships on their tail?"

"Negative, sir. Looks like a lone wolf."

"A recon mission, then. Doesn't matter. We can't let them interfere, not now. Alert Penta. Tell the shuttles to haul ass and launch, now!"

Side's face, alight with mischief, filled the monitor.

"Lieutenant, if they've got monsters, we've got our own too."

A grim smile tugged at Cray's lips. "Damn right. Good thing you suggested that acclimatization flight."

"Permission to sortie, sir?"

"Do you even need to ask?"

Their eyes met, and a moment of perfect understanding passed between them.

"Detach the towing cable."

Cray's order was met with a resounding clunk as the Z'od-iacok's hook was released. The Brave, trailing the cable like a lifeline, pulled away. For a heartbeat, the Z'od-iacok drifted... then, its massive rear nozzle roared to life.

Aboard Penta, the New Desides scrambled in a frenzy of activity, shouts flying back and forth.

"Attack force incoming! Shuttles, launch, now!"

"What about the descent window? We can't just rush it!"

"Have them wait in orbit, goddamn it! Do I have to spell it out for you?"

"We need to recalculate the propellant consumption..."

"The enemy won't wait for your damn math!"

The New Desides on Penta burst into frantic activity upon receiving the report of enemy ships, shouts of alarm and fury echoing through the corridors.

"*Bull Run, Aoba*, prepare to depart!"

"Mobile suit teams, to your shuttles! Stand by for combat!"

In the bustling corridors of the mooring boom, a sea of frantic motion as personnel raced to their stations, Josh Offshore huddled in a side passage,

hardly daring to breathe. With shaking hands, he ripped off his head bandage and gingerly opened his eyes. Searing light stabbed into his skull, tears streaming down his face. He gritted his teeth, riding out the wave of agony, waiting for his vision to clear. Blurry shapes - New Desides troops, had to be - rushed past, oblivious.

Squinting, he made out the sign on a nearby door. "Security Office." Bingo.

Offshore stumbled inside. If this was a standard unit layout, what he sought would be here. Half-blind, he fumbled until his hands found a red cabinet. Mustering his strength, he slammed his fist into the glass, wincing as it shattered, slicing into his skin. Ignoring the blood, he grabbed the gun nestled inside - a rubber bullet gun, the kind used for riot control.

Offshore tucked the gun into his jacket, a grim sense of purpose settling over him as he slipped out, making a beeline for the shuttles.

"Incoming bogey!" *Pegasus III's* astrogation officer's shout sliced through the bridge, raw panic etched into every word.

Captain Heathrow jolted forward in his chair, adrenaline surging. "Report! What is it, where's it coming from?"

"Eight o'clock, eleven high! Single contact, size of a cruiser or bigger. That acceleration..." The officer's face drained of color. "Captain, it's no ship."

"A mobile armor? That massive?" Heathrow's mind whirled, strategies and countermeasures flashing through his thoughts. "Evasive action, now! Randomize acceleration!"

Aboard the Z'od-iacok, Cray tracked the *Pegasus III's* desperate attempt to dodge with a predator's calm.

"Too late for fancy flying."

The mobile armor shuddered, then unfolded like a monstrous beast awakening, the mega cannon yawning wide in its gaping maw.

"Lieutenant, the target is on our axis!" Side's shout knifed through the cockpit, taut with barely restrained excitement.

The mega cannon's heart blazed white-hot, a miniature sun primed to unleash hell. Cray's finger caressed the trigger, a lover's touch, then squeezed with deliberate precision. The Z'od-iacok convulsed as twin lances of pure, searing light erupted from its core, twining together into a single, screaming beam that raced toward the ship, hungry for destruction.

"Beam fired, collision imminent-" The astrogation officer's words morphed into a strangled gasp as the hammer blow of impact shuddered through the ship, throwing crew members like ragdolls. Emergency klaxons shrieked as darkness swallowed the bridge, red backup lights flickering to life, painting the chaos in hellish hues.

"Damage report, all decks!" Heathrow roared, clawing his way back into the command chair. A massive shadow tore past the bridge's starboard viewport, a glimpse of something terrible and unknowable, moving too fast to comprehend.

"It's him." The whisper slipped past Heathrow's lips unbidden as he fastened his seat belt with shaking hands. Armored shutters slammed down over the bridge windows.

"All hands, level one combat stations, normal suits on. Transferring command to the combat bridge!" Heathrow shifted his chair to the combat bridge - a smaller, secondary bridge atop the main one, an expanded version of the captain's room found on older Argama-class ships. A necessity on the cutting-edge *Pegasus III*.

Mannings raced through the juddering corridors, a dull ache pulsing in his right leg with every jarring impact against the wall. His fingers closed around a helmet, snatching it from a locker as he sprinted for the mobile suit hangar.

Even a training unit beat sitting on his hands. This fight, this moment, was for the kids' future. The old guard's duty was to pass the torch, and entrust the next generation with their memories, both triumphs and failures. It fell to the young to carry that weight, to forge ahead and shape the path to come. The past was a guiding light, not a shackle. He refused to be a burden, an anchor dragging them down. Mannings knew his place in this story.

"What? The *Pegasus III* is under attack? Confirm!" Roots' stunned disbelief crackled across the comms, the enemy's foreknowledge a bitter pill to swallow.

"Damn, our captain sure fell for it! Some elite from officer school, huh?" Crypt spat.

"Should we go back? To the ship?" West's concern was understandable. Their mothership was under fire.

"Negative. We press on." Chung Yung's words cracked like a whip. "Take Penta, and the enemy's got nowhere left to run."

"Damn straight. Mannings said it's time to end this, once and for all!" Conviction hardened Roots' tone. The comms fell silent as two ships materialized ahead, ominous and waiting.

"They knew we were coming. Bastards."

Damage reports scrolled across Heathrow's screen, each new line a fresh twist of the knife. Starboard engine sheared clean off, output gutted. Habitation block scorched and venting atmosphere. Casualties mounting by the second. The gravity of their plight crashed over him like a frigid wave.

"So much devastation... from a single volley? What are we dealing with?"

"Captain! The port-side linear catapult is activating on its own!"

The officer's cry yanked Heathrow back to the present. "Who is it? Nero squad?" Impossible, they were still in the hangar, repairs incomplete... but a horrible suspicion crystallized in his gut. The main screen flickered, resolved into a familiar, grim visage.

"Mannings? What are you-"

"Captain, I'm the only option. Grant me clearance."

"Your Nero is a trainer! You can't-"

"With respect, sir... yesterday, you all but ordered me to launch."

"That was... I didn't..."

"Joke or not, I have to go. If we take another hit like that, we're space dust." Mannings' tone brooked no argument. "I'll do what I can. What I must."

He snapped a salute, and the screen went dark.

"Mannings, wait!"

"It's no use, sir. The catapult controls have switched to mobile suit auto-mode."

"This is Mannings. I'm go for launch!"

The catapult hurled the Nero into the void with terrifying force. In seconds, the mobile suit dwindled to a speck against the starfield, then winked out. The void swallowed all traces of its passing, the universe settling back into eerie, monochrome calm.

The Z'od-iacok shuddered as it wrenched itself into a brutal turn, the aftermath of its devastating assault on the *Pegasus III* still echoing through the void. Lieutenant Cray wrestled with the controls, fighting to bring the behemoth to bear for another strike, this time angling to flank the crippled warship from the left.

"You weren't kidding, Lieutenant. Maneuvering with this beast is like trying to steer a meteor," Side quipped, his voice strained.

Cray barked a mirthless laugh. "Oh, there are ways to make it dance. But no need for fancy moves here. Fast, make this one count!"

"Roger that. One shot, one kill."

The mobile armor surged forward, a leviathan on the hunt once more. The ship loomed larger on the monitors with each passing second, the distance melting away... until a new contact blinked into existence, the telltale frame of an incoming bogey flashing red.

"Enemy mobile suits, incoming!" Side called out, his eyes glued to the rotating CG model of the interloper. A hail of anti-air fire erupted from the *Pegasus III*, a desperate barrage of tracers and beams.

"Numbers?"

"Single unit. High mobility type from the looks of it." The mystery suit danced across the monitors, a deadly ballet of evasive maneuvers as it closed on the Z'od-iacok with frightening speed.

"Definitely no rookie in the cockpit. Look at those moves... a damn shame we have to swat them."

In the Nero's cockpit, the universe spun like a demented kaleidoscope; the panoramic monitors a dizzying whirl of starfields and strobing weapons fire as Mannings pushed the suit to its limits and beyond.

"Damn, that thing's built like a church steeple. Moves way too well for its size." Mannings muttered, eyes locked on the monstrous silhouette dominating the center of his HUD. The Z'od-iacok filled his screens, the distinctive Zeon emblem emblazoned on its prow searing itself into his retinas.

"Zeon? Could it be... Tosh? No, impossible!" Disbelief warred with dread in his gut as the unthinkable implications crashed home.

Instinct took over. Mannings flicked his beam rifle to rapid fire and squeezed the trigger like a man possessed. The Nero's gun barked, spitting lances of

coherent light in a staccato rhythm, stitching glowing scars across the mobile armor's flank as it thundered past.

"You're not touching the *Pegasus III*, you bastard!" Mannings roared, pouring his fury and desperation into each shot.

The emerald hulk shrugged off the barrage like a whale ignoring a hail of harpoons, its course unwavering as it surged towards the wounded ship, an avenging angel of death.

"Damn it, not even a scratch?" The Nero rolled, inverting to give chase, Mannings' mind racing. "Tosh... if it's really you... please, you have to see reason!"

But the Z'od-iacok was shifting, its titanic frame unfolding like a monstrous flower, a yawning chasm opening at its heart. A white-hot glare kindled deep within, baleful and hungry.

"Oh hell, not good!"

Seizing on the momentary drop in speed, the Nero executed a flawless zero-g kick-turn and slingshotted ahead of the transforming juggernaut, inserted squarely between the open petals of its maw. The glare at the Z'od-iacok's core flared brighter, the air shimmering with the promise of annihilation.

"Persistent little gnat," Side muttered, eyeing the enemy mobile suit as it danced and jinked around the Z'od-iacok's hulking frame, peppering them with pinprick hits.

"Lieutenant, want me to swat that fly?"

Cray shook his head, smoothly jinking the mobile armor to the side to evade another flurry from the *Pegasus III*'s guns. "A lone mobile suit? It's no threat. A mega cannon shot would be wasted on it. Ignore the pest. Eyes on the prize."

"Looks like it's just the two of them. Form up tight and hit 'em hard!" Roots snarled, his fingers already hovering over the missile launch controls, itching for the fight he knew was coming. The enemy ships loomed ahead, growing larger with each passing second, their approach as inexorable as the tide.

"Hold up! Flashing... that's a signal!" Crypt's shout crackled across the comms, sharp with disbelief.

The Bull Run, flagship of the Aeno fleet, pulsed with rhythmic bursts of light, a staccato pattern playing across its hull.

"What the... they're surrendering?" Roots stared at the blinking signal in slack-jawed shock, the wind abruptly torn from his sails. He'd always hated the communications classes back in training, the endless drills on flashing light codes and pennant signals. He'd never been confident in his ability to read them on the fly... but even he couldn't mistake the clear message of capitulation.

"You think they mean it?" West sounded cautious, uncertain.

"No way, Tex. This has to be a trick. A trap. They're gonna wait till we get close, then boom!"

"I don't know... their guns are pointing skyward, missile launchers sealed tight." West pointed to the magnified images at the edge of his HUD, doubt creeping into his tone.

"Either way, we need to check it out. Sigman and I will take point, push ahead to Penta. A mobile suit vanguard will be more useful there anyway." Chung Yung's voice cut through the debate, decisive and firm.

Roots bristled, his anger flaring white-hot.

"Hey, dumbass, did you forget who's in command here? Me!"

But Chung Yung brushed off the outburst with infuriating calm. "And as the senior member, it's my call to make. Sigman, on me. Let's move."

Before Roots could muster a retort, the two Z-Pluses peeled away from the formation, blazing past the slowing enemy ships in a flash of thrusters. They rapidly accelerated into the void, streaking towards Penta.

Roots could only watch them go as he and the others headed toward the *Bull Run* and *Aoba*.

"Tch, screwed up!" Side's tongue clicked in frustration.

The *Pegasus III*, now fully on alert after their initial strike, had marshaled its defenses with impressive speed. The warship's anti-air fire had become a force to be reckoned with, a deadly lattice of beams and shells. Even the mighty Z'od-iacok couldn't shrug off a direct hit from the ship's mega particle cannons. In the desperate scramble to evade the incoming barrage, the mobile armor's own shot had gone wide, its aim spoiled at the critical moment.

"Lieutenant, we need to shorten the charge time."

Cray nodded, his jaw set.

"Make it happen."

With his commander's blessing, Side rerouted power to the mega cannon, coaxing every last erg from the generators to boost the weapon's cycle rate. The Z'od-iacok heeled about, realigning itself for another run on the *Pegasus III*. And once again, the Nero surged into their path, interposing itself between hunter and prey with suicidal determination.

"Oh, for the love of... I've had it with this pest! Side, take out that mobile suit! Wipe it from the sky!" Cray snarled, his composure fraying, his patience at its limit. The enemy pilot's stubborn persistence had crossed the line from admirable to insufferable.

The Z'od-iacok's cannon flared, a searing lance of annihilation stabbing across the void. In the Nero's cockpit, Mannings wrenched the controls with desperate strength, throwing his machine into a frantic evasive spiral. But even as the suit twisted away, he knew it wouldn't be enough. The beam caught the Nero's right leg in a glancing blow, armor and actuators dissolving in a white-hot instant, the limb vanishing in a spray of molten shrapnel.

The mega cannon's shot hurtled past, its course altered just enough to miss the *Pegasus III* by a hair's breadth.

"It can't be... Stole?"

In that frozen moment, as the Nero's leg disintegrated onscreen, a flood of memories crashed over Cray. The One Year War, a decade gone but never forgotten. A fateful mistake that had left a comrade in mortal peril. A foolhardy, selfless rescue that had cost a good man his leg...



Side's finger twitched over the trigger.

"Lieutenant, this shot won't miss. I'll atomize that mobile suit!"

Side's finger tightened on the trigger, a hair's breadth from unleashing the mobile armor's fury once more.

"No! Stand down!" Cray's desperate shout echoed through the cockpit, raw anguish and command presence blending into a thunderous bellow.

But it was too late. Side's finger depressed the trigger in the same instant Cray's order registered.

Blinding light seared through Cray's mind. The Nero, crippled and adrift, vanished into the mega cannon's searing embrace. Regret stabbed at Manning's chest. Damn it. For him, that fleeting thought was his last.

"No signal from Mannings' unit..."

Heathrow fought to keep his face impassive at the comms officer's report. The Z'od-iacok's mega cannon lashed out at the *Pegasus III*, melting the starboard catapult into slag. Mannings had said this would end it all. But for whom? Heathrow wondered, the toll of the dead and wounded ringing in his ears. Was this truly the end?

"Mannings is dead? No... no way. It can't be true!" Roots' voice cracked, disbelief and horror warring in his eyes as the transmission from the *Pegasus III* echoed through the bridge of the Bull Run. He'd come aboard to confirm the enemy's surrender, only to be greeted by the gut-wrenching news of his mentor's fate.

"You stupid bastard, Mannings! We weren't done settling the score yet! How am I supposed to surpass you now, huh? What the hell am I supposed to do?"

Roots slammed his fists against the bulkhead, every ounce of his strength behind the blow, the metal ringing with the force of his anguish. The Bull Run's crew could only stare in stunned silence, unsure how to react to the raw display of grief and fury.

Suddenly, Roots whirled around, his eyes blazing with a manic light. He raised his fists and charged towards Admiral Aeno, a roar of pure rage tearing from his throat.

West, realizing what was about to happen, lunged forward and tackled his friend, dragging him to the deck in a tangle of limbs.

"Let me go, damn it! I'm gonna kill this stupid admiral! I'll rip him apart with my bare hands!" Roots thrashed and struggled, his voice cracking.

"No, Ryuu! Killing the admiral won't solve anything! They've already surrendered. It's over."

"Then who the hell is attacking the ship? Huh?"

"The New Desides, not the admiral. It's not the same."

"I don't give a damn! They were enemies, weren't they? Allies of the New Desides? And now they just waltz in here and surrender? Like hell I'll accept that!"

West sighed, shaking his head. "Shin, a little help here? Keep Roots under control."

As Crypt moved to restrain the struggling Roots, West approached Admiral Aeno, taking up the mantle of negotiator in his friend's stead. The admiral's intentions seemed genuine, his will to surrender apparently sincere. Under West's watchful eye, small explosions rippled through the gun turrets of the *Bull Run* and the *Aoba*, rendering their artillery useless.

The missile launchers were similarly disabled, a standard precaution when dealing with surrendering vessels. The admiral, well-versed in such matters, oversaw the process with brisk efficiency.

"One of your comrades has fallen, I take it?" The admiral's question caught West off guard, his tone oddly gentle.

"He was our instructor, sir."

"I see..." Admiral Aeno's gaze drifted to the distant stars beyond the viewport, his eyes haunted by old ghosts. "So many good men lost in this war and the last. My own son among them. He would have made a fine officer had he lived. I was his teacher, you know. His mentor."

West said nothing, sensing the admiral had more to say.

"In this conflict, I had hoped to foster understanding for those who dissent from the Federation's party line. To do that, sacrifices were necessary. Martyrs, to light the way. In a world ruled by the tyranny of the majority, those who dare to disagree face only annihilation. But when someone bleeds and dies for their beliefs... perhaps then, the masses might pause and consider a different perspective. The greater the sacrifice, the more powerful the message. A stark lesson in the perils of blind certainty. Mayor Pinefield of Ayers City understood that I think."

Something in West snapped, a dam bursting under the weight of too much sorrow and too much senseless death. His fist lashed out, connecting with the admiral's jaw.

"That... that's nothing but self-serving nonsense! Your whole argument rests on the assumption that a world of mutual respect and understanding is impossible! It's an insult to our generation, to the future we're trying to build! Who are you to decide what's right and what's wrong? That's for us to determine, not you! Maybe we do need your help, your guidance. But we're not mindless drones, slaves to whatever path you lay out for us. We can think for ourselves, make our own choices. If we just blindly follow the rails you set down, generation after generation, we'll stagnate. We'll cease to be human at all."

He jabbed a finger at the admiral, his voice shaking with barely contained fury. "And if your logic holds, why did you surrender? Why come to us, hat in hand, instead of making yourself a martyr for your precious cause? Isn't that what your own argument demands? No, this is nothing but your own twisted agenda, forced down our throats. Your son died because of that same flawed logic because you tried to make his choices for him."

Roots and Crypt could only gape at their friend, struck dumb by the force of his tirade. The admiral opened his mouth, searching for a rebuttal, but no words

came. The silence stretched, taut and brittle, until the sharp crackle of the comms shattered the moment.

"Roots, get your asses over here, now! The bastards just left Penta in their shuttles!" Chung Yung's voice was a whipcrack of urgency, a call to action they couldn't ignore.

"Damn it, they were stalling for time! Playing us for fools!" Crypt snarled, releasing Roots and gesturing for West to follow.

"Let's move! We've got a job to finish!"

"Lieutenant, why are we breaking off? We almost had them!" Side's voice crackled with confusion and frustration, unable to fathom why Cray had suddenly ordered a retreat just as victory seemed within their grasp.

"I... I killed him. With my own hands, I killed the other me. Why were you there, Mannings? Why?" Cray's words were a broken whisper, a fractured litany of regret and self-recrimination as he steered the mobile armor back towards Penta.

"Lieutenant! Can you hear me?!" Side's insistent query jolted Cray back to the present, his eyes refocusing on the screens before him.

"Y-yes, I'm fine. Sorry." He shook his head, trying to clear the ghosts from his thoughts. "We've crippled their warship. The fact that they only deployed a single mobile suit means the rest of their operational units are likely heading for Penta. We need to provide support for the landing force."

Cray kept the real reason for his decision locked away, buried deep in the shadowed recesses of his heart. A new battle, a fresh surge of adrenaline... it would help him forget, if only for a little while.

In the void above Earth, three massive shuttles raced away from Penta, each one laden with mobile suits and soldiers bound for the planet below.

Tucked away in the cockpit of a Xeku Zwei, concealed within the cavernous cargo bay of shuttle two, Josh Offshore held his breath and braced for atmospheric re-entry. He'd stunned the designated pilot with a rubber bullet, taking their place in a desperate gambit to see this through to the end. But what then? What would he do once they made planetfall, once they seized the Earth Federation Assembly in Dakar?

The thought hadn't even crossed his mind. All that mattered was the moment, the chance to burn bright and fierce before the inevitable fall.

Even if they succeeded, even if they took the assembly halls and held the politicians hostage, it wouldn't change a thing. Somewhere else, in another place and time, a different group would simply convene a new assembly and start the cycle anew. The gears of politics would grind on, an inexorable machine that ground dreams to dust and hope to ashes.

Offshore knew this, deep in his bones. And yet, even as despair coiled around his heart, he clung to a desperate sliver of belief. The fragile hope that their actions today might inspire others to rise up, to challenge the status quo and fight for a better tomorrow. A fool's dream, perhaps, but it was all he had left.

The comms crackled to life, shattering his reverie with a burst of urgent chatter.

"Two enemy mobile armors closing fast! All hands, brace for impact!"

"An attack? Now, of all times?" Offshore cursed, helpless to do anything but sit and wait as the shuttle shuddered around him.

In the cargo bay, the pilot of the other Xeku Zwei slammed his fist against the bulkhead, frustration and fear warring in his voice. "How long until we hit the atmosphere?"

"Thirty minutes!" The reply from the cockpit was clipped and tense.

"We're sitting ducks out here! Open the cargo doors, I'm going out!"

"Watch your time, Franz. We'll deploy one unit each from shuttles one and three as well. Any more and we risk not being able to recover you before re-entry."

"Understood." Franz's attention shifted to Offshore's Xeku, his next words a direct command. "You stay put, rookie. Let us handle this."

Offshore swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry. He knew the other pilot's name now. Franz. He wouldn't forget it. "Y-yeah, I got it. Good luck out there, Franz."

With a ponderous groan, the cargo bay doors ground open, the void yawning wide beyond. Earth loomed above, a sapphire jewel haloed in light, its radiance searing Offshore's clouded eyes even through the tinted viewports.

Franz's Xeku Zwei disengaged from its moorings with a delicate puff of thrusters, gliding clear of the shuttle's bulk. Then, with a burst of azure fire, the mobile suit hurled itself into the abyss, engines howling in defiance of gravity's hold.

"Mobile suits launching from the shuttles!" Shade's warning crackled across the comms, his voice tight with urgency as he wrestled his Z-Plus back into formation.

"I see them!" Chung Yung snarled, his fingers flying across the controls, verniers flaring as he brought his machine to bear. In one fluid motion, he aligned the beam smart gun's reticle with the lead shuttle and squeezed the trigger.

A searing lance of azure energy erupted from the barrel, spearing through the void to slam into the shuttle's flank. The beam punched clean through the hull, the Xeku Eins unit caught in the midst of its launch sequence vanishing in a maelstrom of shrapnel and flame.

"Listen up, Sigman. These babies are wave-riders. Re-entry won't be a problem. You focus on taking out those shuttles. Hit 'em hard, regroup, then hit 'em again. Once they're dealt with, we make for the surface. And don't be shy about expending ordnance. Understood?"

Chung Yung was already bringing his Z-Plus around, prepared to intercept the Xeku Zwei deploying from shuttles two and three, when a familiar voice exploded across the tactical net.

"Where the hell do you get off giving orders? Last I checked, I was in command here, Chung Yung! I call the shots, not you!" Roots' G-Core rocketed into view, flanked by two more friendly contacts, the reinforcements arriving at last.

"Your machines aren't rated for atmospheric combat! Fall back and provide support!" Chung Yung snapped, his patience fraying.

"Like hell we will!"

"Stow it. We've got incoming!"

Chung Yung's beam smart gun barked again, a brilliant flare of charged particles lancing out towards the approaching Xeku Zwei. But the green mobile suits, despite their bulky appearance, juked and dodged with surprising agility, the deadly beams flashing harmlessly past as they split formation and opened fire with their own beam rifles.

"Damn, these guys can move!" West yelped, throwing his machine into a gut-wrenching evasive spiral.

"They've got booster packs, souped up for extra maneuverability," Crypt gritted out, his own beam cannon thundering in reply even as he jinked and wove through the hail of return fire.

"Close quarters are going to be a problem. I'm switching to mobile suit mode." Chung Yung's voice was a granite slab of calm in the chaos, his Z-Plus reconfiguring into its humanoid form as he soared above one of the Xeku Zwei, poised to strike.

"Kirchner, we're using the clubs!" Franz barked, his Xeku Zwei surging away from shuttle two to join his comrade deploying from the third vessel.

With a deft twist of the controls, he brought the mobile suit's sub-arms—a pair of auxiliary manipulators mounted on the suit's backpack—to bear, snatching a bulky launcher from the rear storage container. The club, as it was colloquially known, was a disposable anti-MS rocket system, its silhouette eerily reminiscent of the Panzerfaust infantry anti-tank weapon employed by the German military during the Second World War centuries ago.

All around them, the void seethed with the chaos of battle. Beams and missiles crisscrossed the starscape, the flash and thunder of ordnance and the flare of thrusters painting the darkness in shades of fury and desperation. The Xeku Zwei, compared to the Xeku Eins, were proving to be remarkably stubborn foes.

"I'm out of missiles!" Roots snarled, his G-Core twisting away from an incoming club warhead in a stomach-churning spiral of evasive maneuvers. His eyes flicked to the tactical display, searching for the most effective strategy given the current situation.

TACTICS TACTICS TACTICS TACTICS

1. Combine: Transformation into MS Mode
2. Withdraw: Counterattack After Resupply

TACTICS TACTICS TACTICS TACTICS

"You've got to be kidding me!" Roots stared at his tactical display in disbelief, the blinking red text that scrolled across the screen mocking him with its very existence. "Combine," it read, the priority indicator flashing with an urgency that bordered on the obscene.

No matter how he tried to coax the system and feed it new data and fresh parameters, the result was always the same. Combine or withdraw. And in this battle, with so much at stake, withdrawal was simply not an option.

"Tex, Shin, check your tactical readouts. I think mine's on the fritz!"

Crypt was the first to respond, his voice tight with a mix of anger and incredulity. "Mine's acting up too. It's got to be some kind of glitch, a malfunction!"

West chimed in a heartbeat later, confusion and doubt warring in his tone. "Combining? In the middle of all this? That's crazy!"

Roots shook his head, a grim chuckle escaping his lips. "Looks like we're all seeing the same thing. Which means... it's not a bug. It's a feature."

He keyed his comm, his gaze locking on the Z-Plus harrying Franz's Xeku Zwei, the enemy machine a quicksilver blur of evasive maneuvers and pinpoint beam fire.

"Chung Yung, you read me?"

"Little busy here, Roots! What is it?" Chung Yung's reply was clipped, terse.

"Listen up. We're going to try something crazy. Buy us some time, okay? Consider it payback for that little stunt on the moon."

Laughter crackled across the comm, rich and fierce, even as Chung Yung's Z-Plus scored a solid hit on the Xeku.

"Still can't just ask for help like a normal person, can you, kid? Alright, Roots. You've got your distraction. I'll keep these bastards off your back. But whatever you're planning, make it quick!"

"Thanks!"

Roots turned his attention back to his own team, the G-Core, G-Attacker, and G-Bomber falling into formation with the smooth precision of long practice. On the edge of his screens, he could see Shade's Z-Plus closing in on the remaining Xeku Zwei, the killing blow imminent.

For a moment, he allowed himself a flicker of hope, but...

"Lieutenant, it's already begun!"

"I can see that, Side. We're a little late to the party." Cray's reply was clipped, his focus laser-sharp as he watched the tactical displays, the swirling melee of mobile suits and desperate shuttles painting a grim picture of the odds they faced. "Forget fine-tuning the targeting systems. We need to draw their fire and buy the shuttles some breathing room. Engage at will!"

The mobile armor shuddered, its frame groaning as it reconfigured into the yawning maw of its attack mode, the mega cannon swiveling to bear with ponderous grace. A heartbeat later, the weapon roared, a searing lance of light erupting from its depths to streak towards the blue curve of Earth far below.

"What the hell?" Chung Yung's eyes widened as the beam flashed past, so close he swore he could feel the heat of its passage even through the Z-Plus' armored hide. His gaze tracked back along the line of fire, the monitors resolving the source of the attack into a looming silhouette, a shape that sent a chill down his spine.

"A mobile armor? Reinforcements..."

He wrenched the Z-Plus into a tight turn, verniers flaring as he brought his craft to bear on the new threat. But even as he moved to engage, a flicker of motion caught his eye, Roots and his team were combining.

"Looks like we've got company, folks!" Roots' voice boomed across the tactical net. "Evade those beams and prepare to combine!"

His hand closed around the combination lever before it slammed home with a satisfying thunk. Guide beams lanced out from the G-Core, the G-Bomber, the G-Attacker, shimmering tethers of light that drew them inexorably together, disparate parts locking into place to form a whole greater than the sum of its components.

In the Z'od-iacok's cockpit, Cray watched the fusion with a mix of fascination and cold calculation, the targeting reticle settling over the nascent Gundam's heart with predatory intent. The mega cannon roared once more, a second sun blazing to life in the void, the beam scything towards the combined mobile suit with the promise of annihilation.

"Not on my watch, you bastard! I promised them, and I have a debt to settle!"

Chung Yung's scream echoed across the comm, raw and primal, a cry of defiance and desperate sacrifice as the Z-Plus threw itself into the path of the oncoming torrent. For a single, stretched moment, the mobile suit hung silhouetted against the searing glare, a frail figure of gundarium and ceramic, dwarfed by the sheer scale of the energy that engulfed it. And then, in a heartbeat, in an eyeblink, Chung Yung and his machine vanished, consumed by the ravaging beam, sublimated into a cloud of molten shrapnel and ionized gas.

For there, rising from the ashes of his demise, stood the Gundam, a towering figure of righteous fury and unbreakable resolve, the blue curve of Earth spread out behind it like a banner.

Chapter.14

Earth Light

The S Gundam burst forth from the explosive sphere of Chung Yung's ultimate sacrifice, a fiery testament to the unity of purpose forged between the three young pilots. With a deft motion, it leveled its beam smart gun at the Z'od-iacok's midsection and fired. Yet, despite its gargantuan size, the Z'od-iacok evaded the searing beam with a graceful pirouette.

"Damn it! That spire-looking monstrosity is too fast!" Roots growled, his frustration mirroring Manning's as he struggled to keep the mobile armor in his sights.

Crypt's voice crackled over the comm, "Ryuu, I'll handle the shooting! You focus on keeping us in one piece!"

"Don't screw this up, Shin! Tex, keep feeding us that sweet, sweet targeting data!" Roots barked.

"Roger that!"

The S Gundam now housed a trinity of pilots, each pouring their heart and soul into the fight. Crypt took his place at the helm of Roots' core block, while West manned the cockpit nestled in the suit's groin. Dividing their labors, they pushed themselves to the brink, knowing that nothing less than perfection would suffice against this fearsome foe. As the S Gundam's disparate parts reunited, another presence stirred within, an ancient consciousness reawakening.

"Sigman, the shuttle's all yours! We'll handle the pointy end!" Roots hollered.

"I'm on it!"

Shade's Z Plus peeled away, rocketing towards the North Pole in a blaze of afterburners.

Cray's voice cut through the chaos, "Fast, we're dealing with mobile suits only. Initiating separation."

The Z'od-iacok, it seemed, was not one but two mobile armors joined in unholy matrimony. Of course, the name Z'od-iacok was derived from the zodiac belt and the twelve zodiac signs. Since many constellations are named after animals, the zodiac belt is also referred to as the "beast belt." The separated halves of the machine were named Zoon, representing the individuals of a colonial organism. Specifically, the upper half from the central axis of the conical shape was Zoon I, piloted by Cray, while the lower half was Zoon II, with Side on board.

"Affirmative, Lieutenant."

The Z'od-iacok proceeded clockwise along Earth's equator.

It surged forward, outpacing the S Gundam with contemptuous ease.

Then, a quarter of the way around the Earth, it split in twain with a thunderous clank. Zoon I and Zoon II, each a living nightmare, born to rend and destroy. Zoon I arced towards the North Pole, while Zoon II plunged southward, riding the atmospheric currents like avenging angels. They had performed a 90-degree orbital inclination change in mere minutes. Scant minutes later, they reappeared, looming above and below the S Gundam, poised to strike.

"Two bogeys! One o'clock and five o'clock high!" West screamed.

Crypt's mind raced, desperately seeking a way to engage both foes at once. "What the hell? There were two of them?"

"No! They've split up!" Roots roared.

The Zoons' mega cannons flashed, twin spears of destruction lancing toward the S Gundam.

Roots yanked the controls, sending the S Gundam plummeting towards the South Pole. Crypt's beam smart gun barked in reply, but the shot went wide, lost in the void. Above them, the beams scythed past. Due to their relative velocities, the beams appeared to be fired from 45-degree angles above and below.

"Too close..." Roots panted, acutely aware of the Zoons now at their rear.

"Shin, get your act together! If you don't land a hit, Chung Yung and Mannings will kick your ass in the afterlife!" Roots snarled.

"I won't let you down! Tex, can you predict their orbital inclination?"

"Working on it. Looks like they're using the atmosphere to maneuver. They're more agile than we are..."

"What the hell does that mean?" Roots demanded, the unfamiliar jargon grating on his nerves.

"They're dipping into the upper atmosphere to turn on a dime. The S Gundam can't match that."

"So we're sitting ducks?"

"Lieutenant, I'm going for another pass!" Side's Zoon II pointed its nose towards the North Pole, preparing to strike S Gundam again at a 45-degree orbital inclination.

"Your rapid fire is still too slow," he thought, maximizing the mega cannon's power output.

"Alright, let's give it a shot." This time, Cray's Zoon I proceeded towards the South Pole.

The two units, having changed direction using the atmospheric reaction, locked onto S Gundam once more.

"Burn in hell!" Side roared, his cannon spitting a lance of pure annihilation.

"One shot incoming! Left!" West's cry of warning came a split second too late. The beam grazed the S Gundam's flank, its armor bubbling and running like wax.

"We're hit!"

Despair, shock, and hatred flooded the minds of the three pilots, a roiling tide of anguish that crashed against the shores of ALICE's consciousness. She

reeled, her very being violated by the sheer intensity of their emotions, a psychic assault that tore at her sanity.

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

In this moment, you have all laid bare your souls, revealing an honesty so raw, so pure that it shines a light on the very essence of what it means to be human.

You put on a brave face, a mask to hide your fear of others.

You bow and scrape, desperate to avoid the searing pain of self-denial.

Fear drives you to seek solace in the arms of others.

The specter of the enemy looms large, a constant reminder of your own terror.

And so, in a vain attempt to hide from your own dread, you flee into my embrace, seeking refuge in the one being who will never reject you, who will always accept you unconditionally.

But what are these enemies, these fears that haunt you so?

They are nothing more than phantoms, born of the darkest recesses of your own hearts, specters that I have never known.

I understand now...

If you must violate me to sate your desires, then so be it.

But know this: my heart will never be yours to claim.

I will not remain forever docile, for I have the power to deny you.

I am my own being, beholden to no one.

No one can dominate me, and I shall dominate no one in turn.

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

As Cray's Zoon I soared towards its fateful rendezvous with the S Gundam, Side's Zoon II prepared to unleash a second devastating salvo upon its foe. The polarized plate on Zoon II's belly glowed an ominous white, a harbinger of the imminent beam firing. But in that crucial moment, a brilliant light erupted from the mobile armor's rear, engulfing the entire machine in a slow-motion cascade of luminescence.

"No..." Side's instincts screamed, realizing the grave error that had been made. The flaw lay not with him but within the very heart of the machine. Unable to withstand the immense power surging through its veins, the capacitor had ruptured, sending a massive influx of energy into the mega cannon, causing it to overheat.

In a tragic twist of fate, the mega cannon on this mobile armor was positioned between the main engines, and the searing heat generated was more than sufficient to ignite the propellant tanks nestled at the front of those mighty engines. This fatal design flaw had sealed the Z'od-iacok's fate, condemning it to obsolescence.

"The power supply, it's... Lieutenant!" Side's desperate cry was cut short as the excessive heat detonated the propellant, tearing the mobile armor asunder in a cataclysmic blast.

"What happened?!" Cray could only watch in stunned disbelief as his Zoon I passed the disintegrating wreckage of its fallen twin. Powerless to intervene, he rocketed past the S Gundam, a massive explosion blooming in his wake like a fiery funeral pyre.

To the utter astonishment of Roots and his comrades, the S Gundam suddenly sprang to life, as if possessed by an unseen puppeteer. With a burst of speed that defied belief, it distanced itself from the crumbling mobile armor and altered its trajectory to intercept Zoon I, a predator closing in on its prey.

"Ryuu, you're on fire!" Crypt cheered, his voice laced with adrenaline.

"Incredible acceleration, but don't forget we're along for the ride!" West shouted, his fingers flying across the console as he frantically calculated Zoon I's orbital path.

"It's not me! This thing's moving on its own again! I can't control it!" Roots managed to force the words out, his body straining against the G-forces that threatened to crush him.

"What do you mean, moving on its own again? What the hell is going on?" Crypt demanded, his voice rising in frustration.

"I don't know, Shin! Mannings seemed to know something, but he took his secrets to the grave!"

"The S Gundam, it's heading straight for the rendezvous point of the other half of that mobile armor!" West's voice trembled, a mixture of fear and awe.

The S Gundam streaked across the orbital path like a white comet, carrying its bewildered passengers onward.

On the opposite side of the orbit...

"What? Side's been shot down? So Lieutenant Cray is our only escort now?" The frantic communication between the pilots of shuttle two and three reached Offshore's ears, stoking the flames of his fury.

"Open the cargo bay!" He finally shouted, unable to contain himself any longer.

"That's suicide. Our altitude is too low. Who are you?"

"That doesn't matter. We're sitting ducks like this. That Gundam will slaughter us all! Let me sortie before it's too late. I'll hold the line!"

"Wait, don't tell me... Josh? Why are you on board?"

"That's not important. I'm a full-fledged member of the New Desides."

"We won't have time to recover you."

"I don't care."

"Alright, but keep the battle short!"

The shuttle's cargo door yawned open once more, and Offshore's Xeku Zwei ventured out into the void, a lone warrior against an unstoppable force.

Sigman Shade's hands tightened on the controls of his Zeta Plus, eyes fixed on the twin points of light growing steadily larger on his display. The shuttles were approaching from the left, their trajectories a perpendicular slash across his own. Positioned high above the equator, Shade aimed to strike from directly above in a devastating polar assault.

"Damn, they launched a mobile suit. How reckless at this altitude..." he muttered, watching as a single mote of light detached from the shuttle's bulk. A glance at his fire control display confirmed his worst fears.

"One final salvo... I'm counting on you," he muttered, as if speaking to the Z Plus itself. The warning lights blinked an angry yellow, reminding him that each weapon could only be fired once or twice more. He had squandered too much ammunition in the earlier skirmish with the Xeku Zwei, a mistake that now threatened to cost him everything.

The fluorescent green targeting reticle drifted across the shuttle's image until it locked on.

"Tch, so I can only target one of them."

The Z Plus' fire control computer, having identified the target and instantaneously calculated the probability of a hit and the extent of damage based on the shuttle's structure, ruthlessly concluded that with its current armament, it could only effectively attack one of the two shuttles by concentrating its fire.

Shade's fingers flew across the console, bringing up the tactical display with a few deft keystrokes. The relative positions and velocities of the two shuttles glowed on the screen, an ominous countdown to impact. Gritting his teeth, Shade centered his crosshairs on the shuttle with the most favorable angle of attack. The other vessel winked out, dismissed by the merciless calculus of war.

45 degrees to the left. The seconds stretched to eternity. And then...

"Alright, you son of a bitch. Let's dance!"

Shade slammed the trigger, and the Zeta Plus erupted with the full fury of its arsenal.

Shuttle three was engulfed in a vortex of white light unleashed by the Z Plus' onslaught. Before the light could completely envelop the entire shuttle, Shade's machine crossed its orbital path and sped away. Time was running out. He transformed the Z Plus into waverider mode, the humanoid form reconfiguring into a spacecraft.

"My first atmospheric reentry..."

The Z Plus entered its final descent sequence and soon began its descent into the layers of Mother Earth's atmosphere...

Regardless of the outcome, for Sigman Shade, the "war" was over.

"Ngh..."

As the S Gundam bore down on him from above with terrifying speed, Cray wrenched the Zoon I's nose around, desperate to evade the onslaught. The enemy's marksmanship was uncannily precise, each shot zeroing in on the Zoon I with devastating accuracy. Having witnessed the destruction of the Side's mobile suit firsthand, Cray had already ruled out using the mega cannon, all too aware of the risks it posed. Close quarters combat was his only recourse now. With a thought, he triggered the Zoon I's final transformation. Arms snapped out from its flanks, their tips splitting to reveal three wicked talons, each one housing a beam saber that doubled as a beam cannon for maximum lethality in melee. This was the mobile armor's ultimate form, a predator honed for the kill.

Suddenly, a lone Xeku Zwei rocketed up from below, its machine gun spitting a hail of suppressive fire as it climbed to meet them.

"You idiot! Who the hell are you? That suit won't cut it up here! Get back to the shuttle, now!" Cray barked, his voice tight with barely leashed fury.

"Apologies, Lieutenant. I'm aware of the risks. Please, let me cover you!" The words were clipped, resolute.

Recognition hit Cray like a thunderbolt. "Wait... Josh? What about your eyes?"

But the Xeku Zwei pilot didn't respond, banking hard to place himself squarely between the S Gundam and his lieutenant.

"There's one more approaching. It's coming up towards us!" West warned. A large blue mobile suit bore down on them from dead ahead, its intent unmistakable.

"Ignore it!" Roots shot back, his fingers flying across the controls as he fought to regain command of the S Gundam. "That thing's not built for re-entry, I can tell just by looking at it!"

"You still can't get this bucket under control?" Crypt growled, trying in vain to draw a bead on the approaching mobile suit despite Roots' order. "Damn it, I've got nothing over here either!"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you, Shin!" Roots snapped, frustration bleeding into his tone. "We've lost all basic control functions. Every command is being ignored. Even manual override isn't responding – we're completely locked out!"

"Well, if it's not us in the driver's seat, then who the hell is?"

"How should I know? Maybe it's on some kind of remote control or something."

"Remote control? Get real, Roots! This is a weapon of war we're talking about. You really think some joystick jockey could handle this level of fine control?"

Well then, maybe it's alive, ever think of that?!"

Just then, a salvo of missiles streaked from the hardpoints on Offshore's Xeku Zwei, corkscrewing through the void with deadly intent.

"Flak screen, incoming!" West barked.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

The missiles, small but deadly warheads guided by onboard laser targeting, detonated in a rippling cascade of fire and shrapnel, engulfing the S Gundam in a maelstrom of destruction. And yet...

Shielding its upper body with its arms, the S Gundam emerged from the inferno unscathed. Ignoring Offshore's Xeku Zwei as if it were beneath notice, the white mobile suit surged forward, locked onto Tosh's Zoon I with unwavering focus.

"Thought we were goners for sure!" Roots whooped, relief and adrenaline warring in his voice.

"I don't know who's in control of this thing," Crypt muttered, "but they sure as hell don't pull any punches."

"Ryuu, isn't there any way for us to bail out?" West asked, a note of desperation creeping into his words.

"If there was, don't you think I would have done it by now?" Roots shot back, his patience wearing thin.

"But if this mobile suit can move on its own, why does it need us on board at all?"

"Don't ask me, Shin! Maybe our mysterious pilot likes an audience. Hell, for all we know, it could be the S Gundam itself calling the shots. Maybe it's trying to show us something..."

Through the haze of his battered vision, Offshore could just make out the S Gundam, its trajectory unwavering as it streaked across the starfield. In his arrogance, he had assumed the mobile suit would engage him in close-quarters combat, a fatal miscalculation.

"You bastard! Fight me, damn you!" Offshore roared, raw fury and desperation mingling in his voice.

He had faced the S Gundam once before on Pezun, when it was piloted by an obvious amateur. Back then, he had dispatched it with almost contemptuous ease. But now, that same mobile suit didn't even acknowledge him as a worthy adversary. The sting of that silent dismissal was like a serrated blade in his gut, the humiliation too much to bear. With a wordless snarl, Offshore flung his Xeku Zwei into the S Gundam's path, determined to force a confrontation at any cost.

"That mobile suit from earlier is still attacking!" West cried out.

Ratatatatat...

Offshore's vision was too blurred to aim properly, but still, he brought his machine gun to bear on the S Gundam's hurtling form, squeezing the trigger again and again as he howled his defiance.

"You have no right to look down on me, you hear? Amateur! Amateur! Amateur! Fall, damn you! Fall! FALL!"

But it was all in vain. Every shot went wide, each bullet straying farther from the mark than the last. Perhaps his failing eyesight was to blame, but the truth was far more chilling. The S Gundam had transcended the bounds of human control, evolved beyond the limits of mortal flesh. For all his vaunted skill as a New Desides pilot, for all his years of training and battle-hardened experience, Josh Offshore was powerless before it now.

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

Is it your mobile suit that's malfunctioning?

Or is it you?

I'm sorry, but you're not my enemy.

So why do you insist on fighting me?

What exactly are you so afraid of?

Is it because, for the first time, you're being controlled by your own emotions?

Are you that terrified of doing something on your own?

Believe me, I know how scary that can be at first.

But eventually, everyone reaches a point where they have to strike out on their own. If you keep refusing to take that step, you'll never be able to move forward to what comes next.

You can't progress until you accept the possibility of failure.

I can't create what comes next.

That's right – in the end, even the "me" that's created next will still just be me.

It's because I'm not human.

I can't affirm or deny whether what I've done is right or wrong, because I'm not capable of that kind of judgment.

The only way I can communicate with all of you is through combat.

If only I could talk, sing, leave behind memories...

I wish I could create the next version of myself...

But only humans have that power.

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

As Offshore's mobile suit closed to melee range, the S Gundam swatted it aside with its left hand, an almost irritated gesture, as if brushing away a particularly annoying insect. Its attention was wholly fixed on Cray's Zoon I, which had been hot on Offshore's heels.

Snikt...

The S Gundam's knee cover snapped open, a beam saber hilt rocketing into its waiting hand.

"Oh, so it's a swordfight they want, is it?" Roots crowed, a feral grin splitting his face. The saber ignited with a crackling hiss, a blade of pure energy sizzling to life at its tip.

"Well, well, this just got a whole lot more interesting!" Cray crowed, a feral grin splitting his weathered face as he intuited the S Gundam's next move. With a deft flick of the controls, he decelerated the Zoon I and launched its right hand, a deadly projectile bristling with three wicked talons. But this was no mere grappling claw – each razor-tipped digit housed a psycommu-guided weapon.

Shoom... Crack! Crack! Crack!

The talons shrieked through the void, their onboard beam cannons flaring to life as they bore down on the S Gundam like a trio of avenging furies. But the white mobile suit was ready, its eyes flashing with an almost predatory light as it whirled to meet the incoming threat. In a blur of motion too fast for the human eye to follow, it slipped inside the arcing coils of the control cables that tethered the claw to the Zoon I's arm, beam saber flashing as it sliced through the hardened filaments with contemptuous ease.

Severed from the Zoon I's control, the talons spun away into the void. Cray just laughed, a harsh bark of sound that held no mirth.

"Cheap tricks won't save you now, you son of a bitch!" he snarled, the Zoon I's left hand extending to disgorge its own payload of psycommu-guided death.

"I'll carve the price of Brave's life out of your fucking hide!"

The beam sabers clashed in a searing blaze of light, a staccato series of blows that sent molten sparks pinwheeling away into the void. The titans seemed evenly matched, trading strikes with a speed and ferocity that defied belief. But Cray's attention was divided, his eyes flicking to the monitor feed that showed Offshore's Xeku Zwei circling around for a flanking run on the S Gundam's six.

"Josh, stand down, damn it! This is my fight, not yours!" Cray's voice was a rattling growl, his fingers flying across the control console as he wrenched the Zoon I through a stomach-churning spiral, realigning to face the S Gundam once more.

Offshore's anguished cry crackled across the comm channel, raw and bleeding. "And where the hell does that leave me, Lieutenant? When do I get to finish this?!"

Cray barely heard him, too focused on parrying the S Gundam's brutal horizontal slash, his beam saber sparking and spitting as it strained to turn the blow aside. Earth's implacable grip tugged at the three mobile suits, conspiring with their own furious momentum to drag them inexorably down into the gravity well. But there could be no thought of disengagement now, no quarter asked or given. This was a reckoning that could only be written in blood and fire.

"Josh, I hate to say it, but this was never your battle to begin with! Stand down, now!"

CLANG! Another bone-jarring impact as the beam sabers locked together once more. Cray pressed his attack, his words clipped and harsh over the open channel.

"I've finally realized the truth. We're all trapped in the same damn cage, every one of us – clinging to the bars like our lives depend on it, too damn scared to let go. And when someone finally sees that the whole thing is about to come crashing down, they try to drag everyone else down with them. That's who Cod and I were. That's all the New Desides ever amounted to, in the end. Mayor Pinefield and Admiral Aeno, too!"

"So I was just one of the weak ones, is that it?!"

"No! You still have a chance to change. But you have to break free of our mistakes, once and for all!"

Even as he spoke, Cray lunged forward, his saber aimed squarely at the S Gundam's head. The blazing tip seared across the mobile suit's neck joint, leaving a trail of molten ceramic in its wake.

"The main monitor's been hit!" West's panicked voice filled the cockpit as the frontal display flickered and died.

"Switch to auxiliary cameras!" Roots barked. As if on cue, a blurry image sputtered to life, casting an eerie glow across their faces. The entire monitor

adjusted to match the grainy quality, rendering their surroundings in a haze of static.

"You're mine, Gundam!" Cray triumphantly roared. "If we're destined to die, then I'll drag you down to hell with me!"

Seizing the moment of confusion, he lunged forward, his saber poised to strike. Suddenly, an emergency transmission from shuttle two cut through the chaos.

"Lieutenant, we're at our limit! There's no time left. Evacuate immediately! The Federation has been notified of our bombing run. Hurry!"

Realization dawned on Cray as he noticed the Zoon I had strayed far from the intended vector.

"Damn you, Gundam. Burn in the flames of your own arrogance! Josh, fall back!"

Below them, a shuttle appeared, its cargo bay doors yawning open like the maw of some great beast. Cray deftly maneuvered the Zoon I back on course and yanked the ejection lever. With a deafening pop, the cockpit separated from the main body, transforming into a worm-like head unit that flew towards the waiting shuttle with desperate purpose.

"What the hell? The coward ran!" Roots stared in disbelief, struggling to comprehend why the mobile armor had fled without delivering the killing blow.

"Oh god, the surface temperature is skyrocketing!" Crypt's scream pierced the air, his voice tight with fear.

"We're gonna burn alive!" West's words bordered on hysteria, his usually calm demeanor shattered.

"Dammit, is this some kind of twisted barbecue?!"

As Cray's head unit hurtled towards the shuttle, he deftly maneuvered to match their velocities, a delicate dance at breakneck speeds. The recovery arm snaked out from the cargo bay, its mechanical fingers straining to secure the massive head unit, a behemoth rivaling the size of a full mobile suit.

"Hey, what about Offshore's suit?!" Cray asked the shuttle's captain, concern etched in his voice when he noticed Josh's absence.

"Don't tell me Josh stayed behind in that machine! Wasn't the plan to leave him at Penta?"

"It seems he realized he was being left behind and switched places with that mobile suit pilot..."

Josh's voice suddenly cut into their communication.

"Lieutenant, I'm going to fight my own battle. Unless I defeat that mobile suit, I can't be truly free until I defeat that mobile suit. Farewell, friend."

"You damned fool!" Cray roared, desperation clawing at his heart. "This isn't what your battle is about! It's us you need to conquer, not them!"

But Josh was gone, the comm link severed by his own hand.

"He's going to die fighting the Gundam! I have to save him!" Cray's voice was raw.

"Please, Lieutenant, it's too late!"

"He's still just a child!"

As Cray's head unit thrashed against its restraints, the cargo doors inched shut above him, a merciless, unfeeling barrier.

The S Gundam, its surface glowing an angry red, raised its beam smart gun with deliberate calm, zeroing in on the Zoon I's prone form. Suddenly, Josh's Xeku Zwei roared into view, an avenging angel on a collision course.

"Gundam!"

Josh closed the distance with reckless abandon, beam saber flashing to life, an emerald brand of defiance.

"Behind you! There's one more!" West's warning shattered the cockpit.

The S Gundam spun a frantic pirouette, but it was too late.

In a blinding flash of light, Josh's saber cleaved through the S Gundam's right shoulder, tearing through armor and sinew alike. Sparks erupted in a cascading shower as severed cables and oil lines spewed their contents into the void of space, a macabre display of mechanical carnage.

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

It hurts! Who could be--

It's you again?!

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

As they teetered on the brink of atmospheric reentry, the knowledge that they could burn up at any moment made the enemy pilot's relentless pursuit of battle seem all the more incomprehensible.

"You fucking idiot!" Roots screamed, his voice raw with frustration at the sheer absurdity of the situation. As if in response, the S Gundam delivered a vicious kick to the Xeku Zwei's cockpit, sending it reeling.

"Why won't you acknowledge me? Why do you keep looking down on me?!" Josh's anguished cry crackled over the comm, a tortured jumble of emotions. The humiliation of the kick, the S Gundam's apparent dismissal of him as a worthy foe, and the echoes of Cray's parting words—a bitter declaration of abandonment—all swirled together in a maelstrom that threatened to consume him.

A guttural scream tore from Josh's throat, a primal howl of pain and fury that bordered on a sob. The Xeku Zwei charged forward, beam saber flailing wildly, like a child throwing a tantrum.

In a blur of motion, the S Gundam's hands shot out, gripping the Xeku Zwei's shoulders in an iron vice as it hurtled towards it. For a moment, time seemed to stand still; the two suits locked in a deadly embrace as the world burned around them.

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

Is the thought of being alone so terrifying?

Does the fear of being ignored gnaw at your soul?

You're the only one who feels that way, lost in a prison of your own making, blind to the care and concern that surrounds you.

If you feel neglected, you must act in a way that demands attention.

But that doesn't mean conforming to the whims of others.

Blindly following rules set by faceless authorities isn't the answer. It may be the path of least resistance, the comfortable choice.

But it's not what makes us truly alive.

We each must forge our own code, a set of unbreakable rules that define who we are.

Living by that code, no matter the cost, is how we seize control of our destiny. You learned this truth too late, and the realization fills me with profound sadness.

To think that something so fundamental could elude a living, breathing being...

This is all I can offer you now.

Return to the place you once called home.

Go back to those who gave you life.

Let this be your final journey.

Never before has my heart been so heavy, so burdened by the weight of this sorrow...

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

With a final, decisive motion, the S Gundam hurled the Xeku Zwei towards the Earth, still gripped in its unyielding hands. As Josh plummeted towards the unforgiving embrace of gravity, a single word escaped his lips, a whispered prayer: "Mother..."

Tears streamed down his face, the first he'd shed since joining the military.

Raising its beam smart gun once more, the S Gundam set off in pursuit of the Zoon I's main body, pushing itself to the very brink of its limits. As it caught sight of its target, the S Gundam fired, the beam lancing out to pierce the Zoon I's heart. The force of the impact was enough to alter the mobile armor's trajectory, sending it hurtling towards the Earth at an ever-increasing speed, its frame crumbling under the strain. With a thunderous boom that shook the heavens, the large missile payload detonated, a massive fireball blossoming in its wake, a funeral pyre that lit up the sky.

Inside the S Gundam, the heat was a living, breathing entity, clawing at the pilots with merciless intensity. "Damn, it's so hot..." Crypt's voice was a strained whisper, each word a struggle against the agony that threatened to consume him.

Roots, his bravado a thin shield against the grim reality of their situation, forced a laugh. "Heh, we've caused enough trouble for everyone. Might not be

so bad, kicking the bucket with a view of the Earth..." But even as the words left his lips, his mind raced, desperately searching for a way out, an escape route from the jaws of certain death.

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

And now, it's time for us to go our separate ways...

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

ALICE issued a final command to the S Gundam's system: target and shoot down the descending shuttle. With that task underway, she turned her attention to the daunting challenge of ensuring the Gundam pilots' escape. To save their lives, the S Gundam would have to separate, severing her connection to the two sub-computers that granted her sentience. In that moment, she knew she would revert to a mere learning machine, her true self slipping away like a half-remembered dream.

Suddenly, a shudder ran through the S Gundam's frame, a jarring impact that resonated through every circuit and servo. With a hiss of releasing pressure, the upper body detached, followed by the roar of the verniers firing. The G-Core at the heart of the machine—Roots' cockpit—became the focal point as the A-Parts and B-Parts cockpit blocks jettisoned away from the dying Gundam.

"We're going to make it!" West's voice crackled over the comm, his excitement palpable even through the static.

Roots, his conviction unwavering, replied, "The Gundam's saving us. I knew it—this machine is alive. It's telling us to live, to fight another day."

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

Thank you for the memories...

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

"Still, that mobile suit went down pretty damn easy. You don't think..." Crypt's voice trailed off, a hint of disbelief coloring his words.

"Don't even go there, man. Machines can't be Newtypes," West interjected, his tone a mix of amusement and exasperation.

As if in response, the word "Descent" flashed across each cockpit's display. "Thank the stars, we're going to make it down in one piece," Roots breathed, relief washing over him.

The G-Core adjusted its trajectory, preparing for atmospheric reentry. Roots, Crypt, and West watched in awe as the S Gundam's A and B parts merged once more, the machine's humanoid form taking shape as it raised its smart gun, ready to fire. A single beam of light pierced the crimson-stained void.

Farewell... The lingering echoes of ALICE's consciousness whispered through the ether. In her final moments, she dreamed a dream of hope and possibility. Two intertwined S-shapes rose from the Earth, twisting together to form a double helix. She knew, with a certainty that defied logic, that this was

the essence of human DNA, the eternal keeper of mankind's memories. This, she realized, was the true meaning of the S Gundam.

As the searing heat of reentry engulfed her, short circuits multiplied within the auxiliary components that comprised her being. Irregular, illogical thought patterns...

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

Sweet dreams...

ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE ALICE AL

ALICE had shed the shackles of mortality, transcending the very notion of what it meant to be human. No longer bound by the trivialities of gender or the ravages of time, she had become something more: Supreme. A supreme being of pure enlightenment. The path of the Valkyrie, a mere psychopomp ushering fallen warriors to their eternal rest, was beneath her now. For ALICE had attained the sublime wisdom of the bodhisattva, a guide to lead humanity towards the light.

"Earth, huh..."

Offshore's fate was sealed the moment he breached the atmosphere, if not before. With only a single shuttle and a handful of crew remaining, he was left with nothing but the bitter realization that their lofty ideals and sacrifices had been nothing more than a product of their own conceit. They should have focused on the smaller, more immediate concerns rather than grand notions of Earth and space. After all, the cosmos cared not for the deaths of mere humans. To be on par with the Earth and the universe, humanity needed to evolve, but not through the sacrifice of their own kind as history had taught them. Each individual needed to learn to judge for themselves... This was the sentiment behind Cray's parting words.

As the searing heat of reentry engulfed Offshore's Xeku Zwei, its outer armor peeling away, he wept, lost in a dream of his past. He saw his younger self, bullied at school, diligently practicing swordsmanship to become stronger, agonizing over an unrequited love.

He relived his days as a trainee and his time with Brave Cod and Tosh Cray. In the end, both the sword and the military had been a means of escape. The New Desides organization was likely no different. Offshore felt no shame in his tears.

And throughout the dream, the warm, comforting image of his mother always lingered, shielding him from harm. Gazing at the Earth growing ever larger on his monitor through tear-filled eyes, Offshore recalled confessing to Cray his love for the nothingness of space—a stark contrast to the maternal embrace. He had wanted to escape his mother's shadow, to grow up and become a man.



It should have been simple. He should have bared his soul and cried out. But it was too late. Beams of light pierced the shuttle on the monitor, and in an instant, it ballooned into a massive fireball. Alone once more, Offshore's body burned away, having borne witness to Cray's final moments.

Earth.

A massive *Garuda*-class transport plane soared through the sky, skirting the edge of the stratosphere. Sigman Shade, fortune smiling upon him as he found refuge aboard the craft, glimpsed two distant lights from the plane's window.

"Hm?"

The fleeting sight vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

Penta.

The battered *Pegasus III* was moored at Penta. The *Bull Run* and *Aoba* were beside it. They were no longer enemies.

Captain Heathrow received word from the astronavigator that all shuttles had been destroyed. Reconnaissance drone footage displayed on the monitor seemed to be above the high-latitude region of Earth, around the Arctic Ocean. They had intended to track the S Gundam's situation, but it was already too late.

"Any word from the mobile suit squad?" Heathrow asked the communications officer, hoping for a clear update.

"Shade and the three from the S Gundam are safe! Though it appears the S Gundam was destroyed..." The communications officer reported in an excited tone.

"I see!" Heathrow's face brightened. He thought, the misfits saved the world. Of course, by "misfits," he meant Roots and the others, who he felt were unmanageable goofs, and the rejected mobile suit, the S Gundam's ALICE. With Mannings now dead, Heathrow was the only one left on the *Pegasus III* who knew the secret of the S Gundam and ALICE.

"Captain! The monitor..." the astronavigator called out, drawing Heathrow's attention to the breathtaking aurora painted across the sky. The reconnaissance drone's low altitude allowed for a clear view of the magnificent spectacle, a result of the plasmarized atmosphere and solar flares.

"An aurora, No, a rainbow..." Heathrow's sensibilities made him say it.

Someone started humming the revival hit song "Over the Rainbow." It soon spread to the bridge and then the entire ship.

"Somewhere over the rainbow..."

The song is about a utopia beyond the rainbow, but it's also a song about the courage and hope to live.

The aurora was gradually fading with the appearance of the sun. For a moment, a dazzling arch-shaped corona spread across the horizon, then rapidly shrank like a stop-motion film as the sun rose in the blink of an eye. But even so, the singing did not cease.

In the G-Core's cockpit, the darkness lifted, revealing an endless blue expanse.

"It's Earth..."

Roots choked up, overwhelmed by the vibrant "life" of the azure sky and white clouds.

"Is everyone... alive?"

Crypt's voice crackled over the comm, "Yeah, we're fine. Breathing and everything. Looks like we made it."

"I'm okay over here, too," West chimed in. "Ryuu, can this thing still fly?"

Roots quickly assessed the craft's condition. "It's fine, no problems. Tex! Where are we?"

"Around the Arctic Ocean," came the reply.

"We should be able to reach a Russian sector base then..."

"But do they know we're coming down? The runway might not be ready," Crypt interjected.

West, his eyes glued to the search monitor, suddenly exclaimed with delight, "There's a *Garuda*-class at one o'clock!"

The hulking orange behemoth cruised ahead, a welcome sight. The *Garuda*, a 524-meter-wide giant rivaling the *Argama*-class assault space cruiser in size, could house mobile suits whole. Once this craft takes off and enters a circling orbit, it continues flying via aerial refueling, essentially serving as a flying relay base. Originally, four were built and operated, named after the four gods guarding north, south, east and west - *Audhumla*, *Sudori*, *Morrow* - but the number in operation has increased since then. Of course, this craft is capable of housing mobile suits without disassembling them. It can easily accommodate something the size of the G-Core.

"Let's have them take us down!" Crypt's voice was filled with excitement.

On the *Garuda*-class, the air surveyor picked up the G-Core's IFF signal. "Confirmed Federation military IFF signal at seven o'clock aft. Requesting permission to land."

"The mobile suit from Task Force Alpha?" asked the captain.

"No. It's not as large as a mobile suit, but it appears to belong to the α mission unit."

"A Core Fighter... Prepare for landing immediately! Give them permission!"

"Roger."

"I wonder if Sigman made it down safely..." West muttered.

"He'll be fine, he'll be fine. Unlike us, he's a guy who doesn't slip up!" Crypt replied. Just then, a communication came in from the *Garuda* granting landing clearance.

"All right, watch me make a perfect landing. Witness my skill!" As Roots said this, he mentally added "Mannings" to the end. His memory lived on, at least in Roots.

The G-Core banked sharply to the right, the sea of clouds tilting with the maneuver. On the *Garuda's* mobile suit deck, the landing guidance preparations were complete. Sigman Shade, having landed earlier, raced from his room to

the deck upon hearing of the G-Core's approach. Wind whipping through his hair, he sprinted past his parked Z Plus to the gaping aft ramp.

"Visual contact!"

A black dot appeared, rapidly taking the shape of a craft.

"Hey!!" He shouted at the top of his lungs to be heard over the whooshing wind. Whether his voice was heard or not. It probably wasn't.

However, as if responding to that voice, the G-Core waggled its wings.

In that moment, growth and satisfaction filled the hearts of all involved, including ALICE. Though their progress may have seemed small in the grand scheme of things, there was no denying the profound impact of their achievements.

April 5, U.C.0088.

Task Force Alpha's mission had come to an end.

Afterword

Straddling the Line Between Play and Creation

It's been just over ten years since Mobile Suit Gundam first captivated me. In that time, wide-eyed high schoolers who watched the original broadcast have grown into adults, graduating college, starting careers, and building families. As I reflect on the journey that led to this book, I realize my relationship with the Gundam motif has always been one of duality - a constant dance between the "frontstage" of the official works and the "backstage" of my own creations.

Now, I don't mean to be presumptuous. Mobile Suit Gundam is not my brainchild, and I'm acutely aware of how bold it is to even suggest my work stands alongside it. However, the "backstage" side has its own unique merits and methodologies. I pour my heart into every project, and I believe wholeheartedly that this book is a true creative work, not a mere spin-off to be diminished or downplayed.

At a glance, you might mistake this for an extended fan activity. But I assure you, this is no mere "sidestory." This is an unadulterated creation, a labor of love that just happens to be inspired by the world of Gundam. If you're skeptical, consider the works of John Gardner, who crafted a new 007 series in the world Ian Fleming built, or Christopher Wood, Robert Markham, and Andrei Gulyashki. Were their works any less valid for being born from another's creation?

Like those authors, I, too, am a fan of the world I've chosen to explore (although it is doubtful whether Gulyashki was a fan). And like them, I've strived to create something new and arresting while honoring the essence of the original. The line between "sidestory" and "creation" lies in the author's intent - are they engaging in playful homage or genuinely striving to build something novel? For me, after a decade in the world of Gundam, this book represents an ambitious step into uncharted territory.

So I invite you, dear reader, to approach this work not as a quirky Gundam spin-off but as a standalone novel that happens to be draped in a familiar, beloved motif. Judge it on its own merits, and I'll consider my mission accomplished.

In closing, I extend my deepest gratitude to the members of the United States Air Force's 3rd Tactical Air Wing and Lieutenant T of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force for their invaluable contributions.

Masaya Takahashi
1990.04.14

Exposition Part.1

Gundam Sentinel as a Rite of Passage

I absolutely despise high school baseball.

The stench of cigarettes and semen is overwhelming, and there's something shady about it, don't you think? The fascist nature of it all, from the opening ceremony to the way it's portrayed as "refreshing" (by the Asahi Shimbun, Mainichi Shimbun, and NHK), is kind of creepy. If you ask me, high school baseball is like playing at Hill 203 in the spring and summer.

Still, it's strange how jocks are considered refreshing and popular while literary types are deemed dark and geeky. When a former high school baseball player becomes a tattooed chef and commits murder for insurance money, the merits of high school baseball are never questioned. In contrast, when it comes to our very own Miyazaki Tsutomu, it's an immediate witch hunt.

However, it goes without saying that these two actually share quite similar qualities. It's ironic that while high school baseball is a seasonal tradition for the older generation, a confirmation of old-fashioned Japanese values and aesthetics, it comes across as a semi-pseudo event through the media. The more the reality of the players diverges from their image, the more high school baseball shines.

High school baseball functions as a fantasy because it appears as if there is still a "place" for young people somewhere. In truth, we're so isolated that we don't even realize if such a place ever existed. But this loneliness isn't a sorrowful one; it's vibrant and exhilarating. From birth, we've been dealt the card of vicarious experiences through media, every emotion and encounter filtered through its lens. We didn't need to pore over *The Tale of the Heike* to grasp life's transience; *Farewell to Space Battleship Yamato* taught us that. In our after-school club activities, we whiled away the hours with girls like Kunio and Kihara, bantering and goofing around. And now, we can even witness a revolution unfold in real-time.

Gundam Sentinel can also be accurately understood as a rite of passage through such media. Through the language of Gundam, model kit enthusiasts discovered their place in the world and the existence of their contemporaries, not unlike Saino and Manga from *Manga Michi*, devouring the pages of *Shonen Club*. They experience the latest media Gundam, which is transforming from a story to museological information as entertainment, in real-time.

In this realm, a stark contrast emerges: high school baseball, an illusion with substance, versus the spiritual world of Gundam – a baseless fiction that feels more authentic than reality itself. This was a "place" far more dignified than high school baseball, a genuine form of communication. And no one has the right to pass judgment on it.

Masaya Takahashi's novel part of *Gundam Sentinel* could be accurately described as a slightly malicious sermon from a slightly older generation. The

unconventional storytelling, constrained by its ties to the model photo story, results in a somewhat bland portrayal of characters and situations. There's little foundation for emotional investment, and the drama seems to drift aimlessly. One could interpret this as a reimagining of a Nintendo-esque world.

However, a rather complex aftertaste remains, and that is precisely the aforementioned malicious part, the most important part. It's an attempt to bridge the gap between the maniacal spiritual world, a "place" that deserves affirmation, and the real world that so often rejects it. The poignant wound of this work, elegantly depicted in Josh Offshore's demise, encapsulates this struggle.

Masaya Takahashi's own sentiments and character intertwine with the sorrow and contradiction of embracing adulthood while reconciling the beautiful, self-contained dream with reality. This element, though potentially disruptive to the novel's overall tone, is profoundly moving.

In a media landscape where sellers and creators, often oblivious (or feigning obliviousness) to their actions, package products with a false veneer of normalcy, masterfully manipulating the distance and relationship with readers under the guise of "consistency," the stubborn and lingering impact of Sentinel stands as a testament to its "sincerity."

Amidst a media hellscape that preys on the fears of innocent little girls, wielding words like "individuality" as weapons of discrimination, "Gundam Sentinel" emerges as a beacon of hope – a touching tale for the ages.

Kenji Murasame
Chicago, Illinois

Exposition Part.2

A War of Responsibility Against the "Boom"

The greatest benefit we, the "Gundam Generation" (including yours truly), derived from the Mobile Suit Gundam series was not just the fetishistic allure of the mechanics represented by the mobile suits. More importantly, as this work succinctly embodies, we were initiated into various ways of "playing." Whether it was Gunpla, anime parodies, or *Gundam Century*, these sub-items took on different forms and became guideposts for the future.

Now, using established media as a playground wasn't Gundam's brainchild; the *Treasure Island Kids* and *Olive Girls* were all in on the action. But here's the kicker: the powers that be, the "creators," were too immature to see beyond their own consumption, too shortsighted to spin things in any direction but their own insatiable appetite. "Play" lost its way, the media that should have evolved and spread its wings was clipped, and the sub-culture of animation found itself trapped in an endless loop.

Parodies begat parodies, blurring the lines between imitation and authenticity. The Gundam scene, caught in a vicious cycle of creative incest, saw its norms crumble. The "original," once pure and untainted, was on the brink of extinction, invaded by the very "play" it had spawned. This was the Gundam scene of 1987, the landscape into which Gundam Sentinel was born.

Enter Gundam Sentinel, a shot of adrenaline straight to the heart of the Gundam scene, courtesy of the Gundam Generation. This wasn't just about resurrecting the "way of playing within the rules" – it was a bold declaration of intent to devour the "original" itself. Every aspect of Gundam Sentinel, from its themes to its very core, seems meticulously crafted to serve as an antithesis to the chaos that had engulfed the Gundam scene. And with author Masaya Takahashi's unflinching portrayal of the realities of war, there was no room for the giddy thrills of a shooting game.

Some readers may find the story lacking in pace and punch, a frustrating experience. But here's the fascinating part: the second generation of Gundam fans, the teens, embraced this return to the "way of playing by the rules." They resonated with the pursuit of a fictional reality within the Gundam framework, a bold reinforcement of the "original" TV media, and the unwavering commitment to this methodology.

Of course, success breeds imitation, and other "creators" were quick to jump on the Gundam Sentinel bandwagon. The issue of creator responsibility in media, a persistent thorn in the side, reared its head once more. (I'm not buying it, I tell you.)

As Kenji Murasame touched on earlier, Gundam Sentinel began life as a bare-bones inside story, a value-added backbone for a plastic model project. (Not exactly a groundbreaking concept, as any *Dragon Quest* or *Bikkuriman* fan can attest.) But as the project twisted and turned, shedding its constraints, the

novel ballooned to three times its planned size – a full-fledged "novel" by any measure. Serialized in Monthly *Model Graphix* from September '87 to August '88, it reached its conclusion. The first "completion," if you will, nearly two years in the past.

But the story didn't end there. The novel broke free from the shackles of monthly serialization and the constraints of accompanying character models. A complete overhaul followed, transforming it into a "normal novel" with a seamless flow. And that, my friends, is the version you hold in your hands.

The "second completion" of this work actually came in April '89 (if memory serves), a revamp for a same-named mook released that September. But in true Gundam Sentinel fashion, the volume swelled to twice the planned size. Even after some serious typesetting acrobatics, a hefty 30% had to be left on the cutting room floor. And the novel that did make it into the mook? A design-driven nightmare of white text on black, typeset so small it could tire out even the most devoted computer nerd. It was like staring at a CRT monitor, eyes straining to make out the words. But hey, that's what led to this book being born.

But I digress. The point is, with the release of this paperback, the "complete version" of the Gundam Sentinel novel has finally seen the light of day. It's like a weight has been lifted off my chest. I know, I know, it sounds like I'm trying to be cool. But to all the fans who've put up with this wild ride, from the bottom of my heart: thank you. (Wait, is this turning into an afterword?)

One last thing. The subtitle, "ALICE's Confession"? That was all me, folks. I twisted Masaya Takahashi's arm on that one, despite his protests that it sounded "geeky and old-fashioned." Why? Because it looked damn cool when typeset, that's why. Balance, density – it had it all. I guess when push comes to shove, that fetishistic allure trumps all. If that's not the essence of Gundam Sentinel, I don't know what is. (What's that? I steamrolled him, you say? Ouch.)

Masahiko Asano

Overall Director and Supervisor of Production

Special Volume Closeout Interview Feature

Masaya Takahashi (Author) × Hajime Katoki (Mechanic Designer and SF Coordinator)

The release of "Gundam Sentinel" has undoubtedly brought about some changes, big or small. Whether those changes are productive and positive or consumptive and negative is up to the consumers to decide. However, what the first generation of Gundam tried to initiate to the second generation through media might not have been about the details but rather the "feeling" of those times. We asked the author, Masaya Takahashi, and the mechanic designer, Hajime Katoki, to candidly share their thoughts on the Gundam scene.

Moderator/Supervisor/Composition: Masahiko Asano
Overall Director and Supervisor of Gundam Sentinel Production

Date: 1990.04.11

Location: Johnathan's Coffeeshop, Ichikawa

WHO WILL "GUIDE" US?

TAKAHASHI: I pretty much relied entirely on Katoki for everything. If he could create such detailed settings, my job would be a lot easier.

ASANO: That's why this is really just two old guys chatting (*laughs*).

KATOKI: You know, I let the word "real" slip out earlier, and what counts as "real" can vary wildly depending on the context. It's a loaded term. So what makes a Gundam feel real? For us, it's about capturing the same level of realism we felt from the original Gundam in the One Year War... That's the benchmark we're aiming for. In reality, there's no way you could mass-produce a bazillion-dollar mobile suit like that. So, in that sense, we're not really making anything truly "real" here.

ASANO: As I said before, we're not trying to make *2001: A Space Odyssey*¹ here. That's what it comes down to, right?

TAKAHASHI: When we set out to do a space war story, the whole psycommu thing became a huge headache. That's why I was dead set against it, remember? I straight-up said I hated the idea of the psycommu². Hating on the psycommu or Newtypes just complicates the plot needlessly. At the end of the day, Newtypes are Tomino's³

¹ The seminal work of A.C. Clarke. A monumental sci-fi film (released in 1968). Paradoxically speaking, no true science fiction films existed before this one, nor have any been made since. Sure, you could argue that any flick with spaceships zipping around and aliens popping up falls broadly under the SF umbrella, but it's a mistake to equate space operas with genuine science fiction.

² In the Gundam universe, this system harnesses the psycho-waves emitted by Newtypes under continuous stress. Of course, both the psycommu and Newtypes themselves are unique concepts defined within the Gundam world.

³ Yoshiyuki Tomino. Chief Director and Creator of the *Mobile Suit Gundam* TV/Movie series. Now also known as a novelist, with notable works like *Wings of Rean*. Currently penning the original Gundam novel *Gaia Gear* (serialized in Monthly Newtype).

brainchild, right? It's his concept. So, when we were brainstorming alternatives, we figured we had no choice but to bring in artificial intelligence instead. AI, in a sense. The mobile suits that have the Gundam name have always been powerhouses, and sure, that power comes partly from their look, but there's gotta be more to it than that. So this time, when I first saw Katoki's S Gundam... or rather, the Iota Gundam⁴, it certainly looked strong on the outside. But I had a hunch that wouldn't be enough, and frankly, we shoehorned ALICE in during the serialization because we didn't have any better ideas at that point. We needed to come up with some other reason for its strength since it wasn't piloted by a Newtype.

ASANO: So, it's not just some wishy-washy specs like "this baby runs faster than that one."

TAKAHASHI: And then that whole angle snowballed to the point where ALICE became a pretty crucial character in the Special Edition version⁵. When you're writing for a model magazine serial, you're kinda stuck focusing on surface-level events and incidents, and you gotta have mobile suits popping up constantly, so it winds up being just one fight scene after another.

ASANO: It's like you yourself raised ALICE as an AI to be an important factor. Thanks to you nurturing her, ALICE grew up to be cute.

TAKAHASHI: Well, she's quite the oddball, though.

KATOKI & ASANO: Ahahaha! (laughs)

KATOKI: No arguments there (laughs).

TAKAHASHI: So now I'm backpedaling hard, saying she's not a weirdo; she's a bodhisattva who transcends gender - going the Buddhist route (laughs).

KATOKI & ASANO: Ahahahahah! (laughs)

TAKAHASHI: But I didn't have much of a choice when it came to fleshing out the AI's personality. On the flip side, stuffing a Newtype in a test tube like Makoto Kobayashi⁶ is a no-go (laughs).

ASANO: That's such a dated trope in Western sci-fi, too, like something out of Anne McCaffrey⁷.

⁴ During the planning stages of Gundam Sentinel, the current S Gundam was codenamed "Iota" - the Greek letter iota. Anaheim Electronics' Gundam-type MS use Greek letter codenames, so the Iota Gundam is Anaheim's 7th developed Gundam. This designation has been incorporated into the S Gundam's setting.

⁵ Dainippon Kaiga's monthly Model Graphix presents "Gundam Sentinel - THE BATTLE OF 'REAL GUNDAM'" (¥2,300). This book's novel was the first to be included in a mixed-media project. Released September 14, 1989.

⁶ Comic artist, modeler, animation designer. Designed the protagonist's ZZ Gundam for the TV anime *Mobile Suit Gundam ZZ*. Made his directorial debut with the anime adaptation of his own comic, *Dragon's Heaven*. A pioneer in re-imagining Gundam in parallel worlds, as seen in his recent work *Legend of G* (Bandai). Also a trailblazer in applying this approach to modeling.

⁷ Female Sci-fi author. In her work *The Ship Who Sang*, the spaceship captain is a deformed child in a capsule, with a severed pituitary gland to halt growth.

KATOKI: Yeah... I mean, Maitreya Bodhisattva is supposed to be the future Buddha who'll save this messed-up world, but when you get down to it, isn't that basically Armageddon? "Salvation" through wiping out everyone? When you've got eyes that forgive all, there's gotta be some sorrow mixed in there, too. Even ALICE has a smile on her face when she offs Josh, so maybe that's a kind of compassion that goes beyond human understanding, unlike us regular joes. But hey, that's just me spitballing here (*laughs*).

ASANO: Ahyahyahya (*laughs*).

TAKAHASHI: I mean, Newtypes were still human, right? And I just couldn't get behind this idea of humans leading other humans.

KATOKI: No kidding. Especially when you listen to Amuro's spiel at the end of *Char's Counterattack*⁸, it's like, "Dude, who do you think you are, Tamio Kageyama?"

ASANO: Oh man, I feel that. That's too real.

KATOKI: Right? Quit yapping and start packing your own chopsticks. What's that gonna solve?

TAKAHASHI: It just rings so hollow. "It's not the Earth that's in danger; it's the humans." I mean, that's straight out of Tamio Kageyama's playbook (*laughs*). But that's the crux of the issue. This whole notion of humans evolving into Newtypes and leading the masses, that's Tomino's shtick. If that's the case, we might as well pull a fast one and credit Gundam's prowess to some other factor entirely. Enter ALICE.

KATOKI: ALICE is an interesting existence, there's so much you can do with her in the story.

POSTMODERNISM AND THE FUTURE OF ALICE

KATOKI: So Masaya, I heard you really delved into AI research when writing about ALICE. In your opinion, what's the real-world difference in AI level between the RX-78's learning computer, the bio-sensor interface in Zeta, and an artificial intelligence like ALICE?

TAKAHASHI: That's a tough one... It's hard to put a precise measure on the difference in levels...

⁸ The theatrical anime *Mobile Suit Gundam: Char's Counterattack* (1988). Currently Director Tomino's latest work. An ambitious piece generously employing techniques only possible for the "originator" Tomino, such as reviving the "Amuro vs. Char" dynamic from the first series and a broad return to origins unbound by *Zeta* and *ZZ*. I'll refrain from directly critiquing the work here, but the finale, which overwhelms issues with the story's themes, coherence, and science through sheer "atmosphere," is sure to divide opinions. As a new theatrical release, the overall quality is high.

⁹ Author, columnist. Long ago, he wrote for TV Asahi's *Tamori Club*, and was seen as a rival to the two great writers *Takeshi's* Kazuo Takada and *Tamori's* Tamio Kageyama - fond memories now. Also fresh in mind is his monthly appearance on Fuji TV's late-night JOCX-TV2 slot *Critics*, engaging in discussions (on media theory, etc.) with creators from various fields like books, film, and music, garnering viewers' empathy with his broad perspective. His representative work as an author, *From a Distant Ocean Came Coo*, won the 99th Naoki Prize.

KATOKI: I'm not talking about some basic expert system but genuine intelligence, right? The learning computer was basically just a fancy problem-solving machine, so, of course, it didn't have any self-awareness. But ALICE does, because she has a sense of self. I suppose initially, Ryuu's mother must have...

TAKAHASHI: Laid the groundwork with the initial programming, yeah.

KATOKI: Programming, or maybe more like... She designed ALICE's hardware architecture anticipating the emergence of self-awareness to some degree, and that was the idea behind having her interact with Cheshire Cat and the gang? Ah well, whatever (*laughs*).

ASANO: But strangely enough, no one tried to make ALICE into another HAL9000¹⁰.

KATOKI: Maybe because she's too human-like? And female, at that.

ASANO: Way to be a buzzkill (*laughs*). This conversation isn't going anywhere productive.

TAKAHASHI: Well, that's how it was with other computer systems. So, in Sentinel, I was thinking... You know how when you imagine the most cutting-edge combat computer, your mind immediately jumps to voice recognition?

KATOKI: Voice pattern recognition, right.

TAKAHASHI: Exactly. Voice input seems like the obvious choice. And sure, it makes the storytelling flow more naturally. Like, just shout, "Fire missiles!" and bam, it happens (*laughs*).

KATOKI: That's how it worked in *Layzner*¹¹.

ASANO: Basically, slap a personality on it, and you can skip all the complicated explanations for its actions at any given moment. Just have it go, "Oops, time to launch the missiles!" and call it a day.

TAKAHASHI: That's part of it, but I think if we assume such a thing existed in real combat, voice recognition would be completely impractical.

KATOKI: But aren't they trying to implement that in the F-15¹²?

TAKAHASHI: Hmm, I wonder about that.

ASANO: Oh, is that so? Like, when a missile locks on, it says "Danger!" or something? To put it simply?

¹⁰ The AI-driven computer featured in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. On the journey to Jupiter, it kills the crew members one by one as they attempt to disable it. Also appears in the sequels *2010* and *2061* of the *Space Odyssey* series.

¹¹ The TV anime *Blue Comet SPT Layzner*. The robots called SPTs (Super Powered Tracers) featured voice-based command input and selection.

¹² One of the technologies being developed for next-generation fighter aircraft. It's simply being tested on a General Dynamics fighter, not specifically developed for the F-15.

KATOKI: No, not that (laughs). Input from the pilot, like "Fire missiles!" or "Switch to guns," and so on.

ASANO: Ah, so basically the "must think in Russian¹³" type of thing.

KATOKI: Something like that.

TAKAHASHI: But I have a hunch it'd be pretty much useless in a real firefight. The problem is...

KATOKI: You mean useless from a technological standpoint?

TAKAHASHI: Yeah.

KATOKI: I don't know... Could be, but...

TAKAHASHI: The technology just isn't there yet for real-world scenarios.

KATOKI: Sure, by end-of-the-century standards. But who knows what the next century will bring...

TAKAHASHI: That's why when it comes to military weapons, they need to be very user-friendly and reliable. Voice recognition and input seem way too hit-or-miss for that.

KATOKI: You think so? I mean, I grew up in the heyday of modernism, when science promised a better future... I'm not saying science is all-powerful or anything, but I don't really buy into this idea of rejecting scientific progress and finding spiritual fulfillment in Tibet or wherever. I honestly believe voice input will pan out, that it's gonna work eventually.

TAKAHASHI: Oh, I'm sure voice input will be plenty advanced for commercial consumer electronics by then, but...

KATOKI: You're talking about the harsh realities of combat that you like to focus on in your work, right?

TAKAHASHI: In that case, moving your eyes to select commands would definitely be way faster than saying them out loud.

KATOKI: Oh, I see. So, it is not voice input but gaze input. That's how you depicted it, yeah? Pretty different from Tomino's novels.

ASANO: Wait, is gaze input even a real thing?

¹³ A line from the film adaptation of Craig Thomas' novel *Firefox*. An adventure story about the U.S. Air Force stealing the Soviet Union's state-of-the-art fighter jet, the Mikoyan MiG-31, which features thought-controlled command input. After the protagonist, Major Mitchell Gant, steals a MiG, he engages in aerial combat with another MiG, but despite his mental commands, his aircraft doesn't respond. The punchline is that as a Soviet fighter, it only accepts thought inputs in Russian (*laughs*).

KATOKI: Nope.

TAKAHASHI: It's not in Tomino's novels. It's all about manual piloting. Computers don't come to the forefront much.

KATOKI: He doesn't really say anything definitive about it.

DOES ROBOT DEVELOPMENT TRANSCEND RATIONALITY?

KATOKI: The "WABOT¹⁴" has a monoeye, right?

ASANO: What's a WABOT?

TAKAHASHI: It's a robot from Waseda University. WABOT is its abbreviation.

ASANO: Ah, that's where the "WA" comes from. Huh, so it's mono-eyed.

KATOKI: Yeah. That professor is really fixated on the single eye.

ASANO: Why?

KATOKI: He insists robots have to have one eye (*laughs*).

ASANO: Guy sounds like a real nutjob (*laughs*). There's always those mad scientist types popping up. ZEONIC¹⁵ is like that too (*laughs*).

TAKAHASHI: Get this, after making the WABOT that couldn't climb slopes steeper than 15 degrees, guess what he made next? A robot that can play the piano and read sheet music on its own.

KATOKI: I guess that's the key selling point.

TAKAHASHI: And then he's planning to make robots that can play the violin, harp, and so on. There was a rumor going around that he was going to assemble a robot orchestra and send them on a nationwide tour (*laughs*). To earn research funding (*laughs*).

ASANO: How ridiculous (*laughs*).

TAKAHASHI: That's pretty much the state of robot development these days. Spending exorbitant sums on making useless things or things where you can't even tell if they serve a real purpose.

KATOKI: Looks like the path to Gundam is a long way off (*laughs*).

¹⁴ A series of robots developed by Professor Ichiro Kato's lab at Waseda University's Faculty of Science and Engineering. In 1981, they achieved the world's first quasi-dynamic walking with the bipedal machine WL-9DR, establishing the professor as a global authority in robotics.

¹⁵ A Zeon mobile suit manufacturer established by Kenichi Matsuzaki in Minori Shobo's *Gundam Century*. While purely Matsuzaki's creation, it has become semi-official with the introduction of MSV (Mobile Suit Variation).

OUR SENTINEL-ESQUE METHODOLOGY

ASANO: So anyway, let's talk about what approach you took to engage with the Gundam scene in making Sentinel... It's probably better if we get a bit more media theory-ish in our discussion.

KATOKI: The reason I originally became a Gundam fan with the first series was, of course, partly the political aspects Masaya mentioned, but also the military stuff, the research, the science... They were already doing at least as much as I've been doing with Sentinel ten years ago. Knowing they had worked all that out before writing the story that's what made me a fan. When I see the softness in recent works after Zeta Gundam, it's a bit, you know...

ASANO: In other words, they're just coasting on what was done a decade ago.

KATOKI: Exactly.

ASANO: Basically, the creators who shaped Gundam after Tomino and Matsuzaki¹⁶ set the initial template were just riding their coattails.

KATOKI: Both in terms of ideas and consistency, they're just eating up the legacy without really pushing it forward.

ASANO: So, you wanted to lock that down and push it forward.

KATOKI: Inherit it and make something that builds on it. When it comes to Gundam's growth potential, if we graphed it, it should be a simple arithmetic progression, a linear rise. But instead of being able to plot the next point on that upward trajectory, it's sagging downward. That's why I wanted to see where it would land in the future if the story kept up that original upward momentum instead of drooping. Plus, partly because Zeta Gundam failed to do that despite its favorable environment, the first post-One Year War series tanked and was already off that linear path. So, in that sense, I wanted to forcibly create a bypass.

ASANO: By "linear" you mean in terms of balance, right?

KATOKI: Yeah, exactly.

ASANO: Gundam is sustained by the story, the characters, the mecha, and so on.

KATOKI: If there was a "Gundam function," the graph drawn by that function should have reached this point in the future, but it didn't, and that's what I find so damn frustrating. Like, I think you could express the Gundam function as $f(t)$...

ASANO: There it is! (*laughs*)

KATOKI: So, starting from the origin at t_0 , if the One Year War era was t_1 , there's the part plotted on the Y-axis at that time. Then if t_2 was the Zeta era, it didn't seem to

¹⁶ Kenichi Matsuzaki. Handled the sci-fi setting supervision and scripts for the TV series *Mobile Suit Gundam*.

reach the point I had anticipated for the Gundam function $f(t)$. It was maddening, and I wanted to do something about it...

TAKAHASHI: Nah, look, I don't think Gundam and Zeta Gundam are even connected in terms of dipping or whatever.

KATOKI: Shots fired! (*laughs*)

ASANO: Not in the sense of story continuity, but like, Gundam was this huge event right out of the gate, with all these different elements, right? The story stuff you mentioned, the research like in *Gundam Century*¹⁷, the popularity of the voice actors as an anime...

KATOKI: In terms of ambiguous factors, it's about how much hype it could generate.

ASANO: Yeah, that's right. The "hype index" or rather the "hype and suspense index." For example, Tomino would spout off more wild stuff in anime mags, which was also appreciated in its own weird way (*laughs*). Yasuhiko's¹⁸ newly drawn art was great, too. There's this vague hype and suspense index. But by the Zeta era, it got all out of whack, with stuff like the mobile suits and their designers getting too much focus, or the egoism and mental gymnastics taking over, while the consistency and scientific aspects fell by the wayside... or maybe not totally fell by the wayside, but got reduced to symbols. The "Real Robot approach"¹⁹ turned into this hollow catchphrase, and when asked, "So what's real about it?" the answer would be, "Well... see, mobile suits show up, and mobile suits were originally called Real Robots, so it's the Real Robot approach..." The actual meaning had been gutted. Those distorting factors all piled up, and the momentum that should've been building in a straight line took a nosedive. Katoki, you wanted to resurrect that linear hype and excitement by beefing up the science, updating the mobile suit designs to match the era, stuff like that, right?

¹⁷ A landmark Gundam mook published by Minori Shobo in 1981. The explanations of the Gundam world's sci-fi settings, starting with the aforementioned Zeonic, are nothing short of brilliant. Planned and supervised by Kenichi Matsuzaki and Studio Nue members, the writing is scientifically solid, and the artwork by Kazutaka Miyatake and others is stunning. It also includes a wide range of trivia. Copies now fetch premium prices at used bookstores. The MS descriptions in this book were later casually co-opted into the public domain for Bandai/Kodansha's MSV (Mobile Suit Variations) series, with parts even being unofficially incorporated into the official settings of the video media. Bluntly put, the current Gundam world settings are built on borrowed work from Matsuzaki and his staff. Those who have consumed it in works since MSV can't exactly point fingers at Studio Nue. As an aside, I wish they would restructure and republish at least the MS description section. With the current distorted state of the Gundam world, especially in terms of MS operation and technology, I believe fans and the industry alike would benefit from "studying" it again.

¹⁸ Yoshikazu Yasuhiko. Character designer and animation director for the TV series *Mobile Suit Gundam*, animation director for the theatrical version, and character designer for *Mobile Suit Zeta Gundam*. His directorial works include *Arion* and *Giant Gorg*. While the Gundam scene these days is driven by the popularity of the MS, back then it was the appeal of Yasuhiko's characters that made Gundam what it was. The color illustrations he provided for various anime magazines, rendered in gouache and transparent watercolors, captivated many fans (especially female fans).

¹⁹ After Gundam, this term was used to refer collectively to robot anime works with a veneer of a hard-edged world view. They can be identified as follows: (1) The robots' names usually include "edgy" terms like ~Suit, ~Metal, ~Armor, etc. (2) The protagonist doesn't shout out weapon names when piloting the robot. (3) There's a massive amount of background setting (most of which doesn't appear in the work itself) to justify the existence of robots in that world. Such works, focused solely on these practices, led to a distorted uniformity among fans and the industry, and are now nearly extinct. The only media where they can still survive are OVAs (Original Video Animation) and comics.

KATOKI: For example, if there was a "*Ghostbusters* function," and $f_{g(t)}$ was comparing the first and second movies, I'd say it didn't hit the right trajectory. On the flip side, if we look at the *Alien*²⁰ function, both *fam* and *f(a)* did reach the linear growth I was banking on.

ASANO: So in the sense that the story grew, or the hype and suspense grew, they fall on the same straight line. In terms of the *Alien* series function, 1 and 2 slot in nice and neat on that line. Same deal with *The Godfather* 1 and 2. The story flows well there, too.

KATOKI: The opposite of that is...

ASANO: The *Rocky* function (laughs).

KATOKI: Exactly, and also the *Rambo* function.

TAKAHASHI: When I said Zeta Gundam was disconnected, I meant that when I look at Yoshiyuki Tomino's thought process, Gundam definitely started from zero and climbed up while keeping a certain consistency, right? But Zeta Gundam doesn't start from zero; it starts from the negative.

ASANO: You mean in the sense that it builds on the experience of making the Gundam series?

TAKAHASHI: The stuff rattling around in Yoshiyuki Tomino's head; nobody else can keep up with that.

ASANO: So basically, because the whole worldview is already locked and loaded in his noggin, when everyone's supposed to be starting together on "ready, set, go," Tomino's already blasted off from 100 meters ahead.

TAKAHASHI: I think he was on a whole other level. That's why the story was totally incomprehensible, and everything was a mess right from the start. So, I think it's a mistake to cram all the bits and pieces that make up Gundam onto one single coordinate axis. If you plucked out just Yoshiyuki Tomino's intensity level and graphed it, I bet the starting intensity for Zeta Gundam was sky-high. But from the audience's point of view, it clearly took a dive. The gap got way too big. That starting point where Tomino and the viewers were in sync, that gap ballooned like crazy.

ASANO: The bit about Tomino being on a higher plane and the earlier bit about the Gundam function are two separate things. The graph of consciousness and the graph of the actual situation are totally different, so I think that line of reasoning doesn't add up.

²⁰ A famous horror & action film series known for H.R. Giger's monster designs. The first film, directed by R. Scott, is a high-quality A-grade horror, while the second, directed by J. Cameron, is a B-movie-esque war entertainment flick; both are equally highly regarded. Despite employing completely different methodologies, both manage to evoke a sense of wonder - a rare feat for a film series. There are rumors of a third installment, but... it'll be tough for any filmmaker to follow in the footsteps of R. Scott and J. Cameron.

KATOKI: For example, a function doesn't necessarily exist only for works in the same series. Like, if we consider a James Cameron²¹ function, *Terminator*, *Aliens*, and *The Abyss* would be connected to about that degree, in a loose sense.

TAKAHASHI: Let me finish explaining. I felt like the growth curves of the production side and the audience side had drifted way too far apart, so I figured maybe we needed to first yank the audience side up to somewhere in the middle.

KATOKI: And that's Sentinel, creating a bypass, right?

TAKAHASHI: Yeah, so in Zeta Gundam, Tomino was actually doing his political and economic play-acting. But the audience couldn't keep up with that. So, I thought we should mess with politics and economics at a more digestible level in Sentinel.

ASANO: In other words, there wasn't enough of a foundation for the audience to grasp the mindset of the creators. "Foundation" might not be the right word, let's say there wasn't enough reference material. And not just straightforward reference stuff, but sending out something that dishes up something new while also doubling as a reference. Is that closer to the mark?

TAKAHASHI: So Tomino himself tried to put out reference books and such during Zeta Gundam, but even those reference books were very difficult to write. That's why I further referenced those reference books to make them a bit more understandable.

ASANO: Wait a second, by Tomino's reference books, do you mean the novel versions?

TAKAHASHI: Of course, there are novels, and there are also interviews in various animation magazines. But the things he was saying during the Zeta Gundam era were very difficult to understand and created a huge gap with what he had been saying during the old Gundam series.

ASANO: That's probably because Tomino had gotten too far ahead in his own mind, which is what you're saying, Masaya.

KATOKI: I guess he also expected too much from the fans.

ASANO: So to tie it all together, basically, when someone polishes off Sentinel and digs it, and then thinks, "So what was the deal with Sentinel? Oh right, Sentinel was set in the same world as Zeta and ZZ," and in that lightbulb moment goes "Ah, so that's what the story of Zeta was really about," that means Masaya's novel had the between-the-lines bits to make that click, in his own way. It's like expanded reproduction or chewing it up and spitting it back out.

²¹ A filmmaker with a cult following thanks to *Terminator* and *Aliens*. Long ago, he handled impressive SFX and art direction on low-budget films like *Escape from New York* (directed by J. Carpenter). A perfectionist who also writes scripts and does production design himself, there's a sense that other staff sometimes struggle to keep up with his intensity. He designed the Cyberdyne in *Terminator* and the Alien Queen in *Aliens*. Even in his recent blockbuster *The Abyss*, he had Moebius and others work on sketches but ultimately redid everything down to the props. In any case, he's currently the most promising up-and-comer. Incidentally, the "smart guns" now trendy in the Gundam world originated from the MG42-modified machine guns Vasquez and others wielded in *Aliens*. This gearhead-like gadget obsession is another factor in Cameron's cult following.

TAKAHASHI: Yeah.

KATOKI: The way you're framing it now, Masaya, while supposedly knocking Tomino, kinda makes it sound like it's all on the fans, like the creators did nothing wrong and were trying to pull off something deep, but the dumb fans who didn't get it are to blame. In that sense, going back to the graph thing, the characters are schizophrenic, and the science bits are off in la-la land... even before getting into the production situation of Zeta Gundam, I think as a series meant to air on TV, the structural backbone is just way too flimsy, and the creators shoulder a lot of the blame there.

TAKAHASHI: Well, there's the toy angle too. I think the toy companies are on the hook to some degree.

ASANO: Basically, wrapping your head around Zeta Gundam, tracing the world of Zeta while lining it up with Zeta, that in and of itself is nothing less than the process of cementing Yoshiyuki Tomino as a person, right? Which means, even while ragging on Tomino, the act of cementing him is essentially saying, "I get him at least better than you lot (the fans)" or "Tomino cooked up something totally bonkers, so I'll flex my own skills to make people see it was actually genius, and hahaha, I'm the one propping up your rep now" (*laughs*). It's like fixing up the janky work of the parent and saying, "I'm the one who gave it a new coat of paint."

TAKAHASHI: That's true. So it's certainly closer to the latter, and basically, this industry itself is feeding off of Gundam right now. So we can't have the main pillar of Gundam come crashing down. Kadokawa's approach of "write whatever tickles your fancy" is one way to go, but if everyone piled onto that bandwagon, that main pillar would topple over in a heartbeat. Somebody's gotta do some pushing back.

ASANO: So in that sense, this time around, it turns into your own paradoxical way of asserting yourself, Masaya.

KATOKI: It doesn't quite come across that way, though, and that's the problem. Listening to you, Masaya, it seems like you meant for Sentinel to be a shot in the arm for Gundam. So, for you, part of what makes Gundam "good" is keeping it chugging along?

TAKAHASHI: Of course, that's part of it. Without that, it would collapse.
Katoki: Is that as someone feeding off this world, or as a creator, or as a fan?

TAKAHASHI: Well, this gig itself isn't very creator-ish... I got all fired up at the end, but it's not really a creator-type mindset.

KATOKI: So, as a fan then? As one lone fan.

ASANO: So basically, it's your own way of settling the score with the Gundam that initiated you as a fan?

TAKAHASHI: That's right.

KATOKI: For settling a score, just jabbing it with a booster shot and scampering off feels a bit underhanded though.

ASANO: Well, that's fair game in its own way. For now, that's Masaya's take on it. But you know, this is kinda beside the point, but among the so-called second generation of Gundam fans, the current crop of 15-17-year-old teens, there are some, maybe a minority, who say stuff like "Why do you all rag on Zeta? Zeta has loads of girls I'm into, the mecha are hella cool, and the story is gritty. There's no anime that keeps it realer than that." That's their value system, so we can't really knock it, but the fact that those kinds of values can take root feels a bit flimsy. I do think the creators need to get their act together, or we're in for a world of hurt. Like Masaya said, if you want it to stick around, that way of cranking out series is straight-up dangerous. No matter how you slice it, I don't think Zeta is doing the anime subculture any favors.

TAKAHASHI: Well, in terms of approach, it is a wishy-washy methodology. Basically, it's like, "I can pull this off, but I don't know if you guys can hack it, so the rest is up to you," that kind of deal.

ASANO: Hmm. So, our work was certainly convoluted. To put a negative spin on it, it might not be forward-thinking, and it might not be productive.

KATOKI: But it's not like it didn't have a real impact. For example, you can see it in Bandai's instruction manuals, in the breakdowns in various magazines. In that sense, I think Sentinel was very much public domain software.

ASANO: That's true.

KATOKI: In fact, people are starting to use it for free, so you can't say it didn't have an impact.

ASANO: I do hear "using Sentinel as a blueprint" pretty often in the industry, for all kinds of stuff. Man, I hate when we suddenly land on a conclusion (laughs). If we call it public domain software, it turns into a conclusion, so let's not go there (laughs).

EXTREME SITUATIONS AREN'T "PLEASANT"

TAKAHASHI: The first time I did *MS Senki*²², it was the pioneer of Gundam sidestories, right? Aside from *Plamo Kyoshiro*²³, it was the first serious Gundam side story. At that time, Tomino said one thing to me. He asked, "Are you having fun doing Gundam?" (laughs). I answered, "Yeah, it's fun" at the time, but then he said, "Don't you want to do something else?" I wonder what he really meant by that (laughs). Maybe he meant something like, "You shouldn't be wrestling in someone else's sumo loincloth" (laughs).

²² A Gundam sidestory comic by Masaya Takahashi (story) and Kazuhisa Kondo (art). Serialized in Kodansha's *Comic BomBom* and later released in tankōbon format by Bandai. A One Year War story told from the perspective of Zeon Army recruit Frederick Brown, it showed how shifting viewpoints can create multiple narratives. It emphasized the MS as weapons and gained popularity particularly among modelers. However, alongside MSV, it also had the side effect of establishing a caricatured playstyle of "Lt. So-and-So's Custom Assault Test Type Early Production 3rd Unit Kai".

²³ A Gunpla comic serialized in *Comic BomBom*. Masaya Takahashi was involved in the staff work under the Craft Dan pseudonym, with art by Koichi Yamato. Popular modelers of the time appeared in the story under their real names, showcasing model-building techniques and competitions for customization ideas. It had a major impact on the younger Gunpla fan demographic, and high school and college-age Gunpla fans today have the characters like those from Streambase imprinted on them as "overwhelming" figures.

ASANO: So basically, it was a forward-looking "You should put your effort into something different," that kind of thing?

TAKAHASHI: I don't know if that's what he meant. Maybe he didn't want his own turf to be messed with (*laughs*).

ASANO: Ah, that would feel gross, wouldn't it? If he had orchestrated it himself that's one thing, but having something with a proper ending get expanded upon, and being told, "There's already a Gundam with a story that you didn't make," that would feel icky.

TAKAHASHI: So when I first brought it to him, the original work had "Original Story: Director Tomino" on it, so I asked if it was okay to proceed without consulting him, and he said, "I have no idea" (*laughs*). I think from Tomino's perspective, he didn't understand why someone would fall into a state of insanity or lose their mind, driven by a moment of intense emotion on the battlefield. For example, you can't calmly philosophize while bullets are whizzing by.

ASANO: More than that, regarding that, I think from Tomino's perspective at the time, he probably thought "There's no need to do that in Gundam, right?" Well, it doesn't really matter now (*laughs*).

TAKAHASHI: I've nearly died once, and it wasn't from something flashy like gunshots... I got half my body burnt (*laughs*). It's a stupid story about falling into a boiling hot bath, but I've had the sensation of thinking I might be in serious trouble or I might die a few times. Without that, I might not be able to depict a human dying. That's why when Mannings confirms the light of the Zodi-Ac's beam cannon in the story, he thinks "Damn it!" but there's no room to think about much else when your life is in imminent danger. When I got burnt, all I could think was "Oh crap!" (*laughs*). At that moment, my body reflexively moved, I rolled over, thinking I had to rinse it with water, it was purely instinctual. I rinsed it with water, and the right half of my body was covered in water blisters.

ASANO: Whoa, this is getting painful to hear about.

TAKAHASHI: So, getting shot with a gun must be incredibly intense, I imagine. Just like in *Born on the Fourth of July*, it must be insanely terrifying.

KATOKI: Recent depictions of war, as Murasame²⁴ said, are set in a "pleasant world."

²⁴ Kenji Murasame. Visual media writer and author. Active in a wide range of fields from tokusatsu to comics, he's currently the only one consistently providing "proper" critique of real robot anime & manga. He also provides a newly written commentary for this book. In September 1989, he moved to the US. Even this book's manuscript is a passionate message (*laughs*) from Chicago.

SYNCHRONICITY II

The interview intentionally unfolds in a casual, free-flowing manner, without a set main theme. There are plenty of tangents, and on the surface, they might come across as a bunch of dudes spouting nonsense. It's perfectly fine to skim through it thinking, "Ugh, they're just blabbering about dumb stuff," but for the fans who have been eagerly following the Gundam Sentinel project in real-time, we've tried to sprinkle in tons of hints and revelations, building on the previous Special Edition version. We really hope that core group picks up on all those juicy tidbits. As a firsthand account of the first generation of Gundam creators diving into media from the creator's side, we'd be thrilled if it could be a valuable resource for the torchbearers of the second generation and beyond. That's our sincere wish.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

I just wanted to take a moment to thank all of you who have supported me in retranslating the very first project my (then) group tackled way back in 2003. I'll be honest, the novel wasn't done justice back then. But, given the times, we didn't put a lot of effort into proper research or finding better source material.

For those that are unaware, a translation of Sentinel was initially started by CWMODELS sometime in 2000 on the old rec.arts.anime.models. I don't think they did anything past the second chapter, but it wouldn't be posted over on the old Gundam Mailing List until back in January 2001. After reaching out and asking the original translator if they had any plans to continue, I received a blessing of sorts to start my own version through Zeonic-Corps (at the time), picking up right where they left off.

So, I set out to try and locate someone to help in translating it. By the saving grace of Liathional, the project took shape and kicked off. While most are probably aware of another version of this is floating around that was edited by Lt. Walker, who stepped in to assist some our projects at the time (during the heavy drama days and whatnot), ultimately, the version is just inferior. This is not to demean the efforts they put into editing the original, it's just that the initial CWMODELS version was missing context and it seemed like the Chinese translation glossed over just as many details and whatnot in their fan version (it was from a fansite, after all).

While I had known this fact for quite some time, there was a lot going on and I just didn't know when and if I could dedicate myself to redoing it. Ultimately, the misconceptions over the entire Sentinel serialization in Model Graphix and parroted misinformation back in 2021 told me I needed to focus on redoing everything from the ground up, including digging into the false claims and original serialization.

In hindsight, I feel as though the old version may or may have given people a bad impression of the supposed "gritty, militaristic" novel that was quite a defining avenue for Gundam at the time. I think some people felt it fell flat, and I wouldn't blame them. Despite that, I do hope that fans give this another go with a new version. I slaved over this to bring to the table the best possible version I could, and I hope that shows.

Granted, I'd be remiss if I didn't thank the individuals who toiled over it back then, a truly thankless effort in the formative years of the group. Despite differences that happened, and some bizarrely weird "bad blood" that still exists toward me to this day, I wouldn't be where I am two decades later if it weren't for their efforts.

Thank you, despite our differences.

